

“When the Wind Blows”

John 3:1-17

A composer living in Singapore developed and shared a tune with an author and friend in New Zealand to see what text it might inspire. This is what the author wrote, “As the wind song through the trees, as the stirring of the breeze, so it is with the Spirit of God, as the heart made strangely warm, as the voice within the storm, so it is with the Spirit of God. Never seen, ever known where this wind has blown bringing life, bringing power to the world, as the dancing tongues of fire, as the soul’s most deep desire, so it is with the Spirit of God.” (Glory to God, Hymn # 292)

And Jesus said, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8) Twenty centuries later, from Jesus to Singapore to New Zealand to a Presbyterian hymnbook, the church sings, “So it is with the Spirit of God, never seen, ever known, where this wind has blown bringing life, bringing power, as the soul’s most deep desire, so it is with the Spirit of God.”

The third chapter in the gospel of John contains the most well-known story recorded in all of the Bible. A man by the name of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish community, comes to Jesus in the darkness of night to engage this upstart rabbi in a conversation about faith and salvation, and one’s recognition and participation in the kingdom of God. According to Jesus, the gift of eternal life comes by faith in Jesus Christ and faith is given birth by the Spirit.

Nicodemus finds himself in a moment of personal and spiritual crisis. He has been educated and trained in the tradition of the Torah, and the religious rites and rituals of Judaism. Jesus takes the opportunity to challenge Nicodemus and his conventional way of thinking. With respect to life and faith, Nicodemus took the theological approach that God enjoys a very special relationship with a selective group of people, those who honor the ancient covenant between God and Abraham. The crisis is created by Jesus who broadens the scope of God’s love. If Nicodemus has heard Jesus correctly, it would appear that God also loves people who live outside the tent of Abraham. The ultimate act of reconciliation between God and the human creation is realized when one believes and accepts God’s Son. By way of faith in Christ, one receives the gifts of salvation and forgiveness, and the gift of eternal life.

I would suggest this morning that the crisis experienced by Nicodemus is also our crisis. It is a crisis that invites consideration of how we look and understand this person of Jesus, and it is a crisis that influences who we are, what we believe, and how we live. This is the very place where we must come to grips with the mystery of faith. And Jesus teaches we cannot manipulate our faith much less control it. It is like the wind that blows where it wills, bringing life and bringing power. It is unpredictable, never seen, ever known.

Once upon a time, as a Navy Chaplain I walked the deck of Navy warship cruising in the middle of the Red Sea. One afternoon, a newly commissioned Ensign approached me with the request to meet with me in my office. Sensing that the need to visit was rather urgent I was careful not to delay so I invited the young officer to follow me.

As we took our seats, my friend revealed with a big smile on his face that he was engaged to a beautiful woman living in Columbia, SC. I immediately offered my congratulations. The young man continued the conversation by sharing that his fiancée was a bright and engaging person, and a practicing Christian. Roman Catholic by tradition, he explained that his future wife regularly attended Mass, frequently read the Bible, and offered daily prayer. And then he added, “From a spiritual standpoint, my fiancée knows who she is.”

His countenance visibly changed when he began to talk about his parents. His father, unfortunately, was a non-practicing Jew. The young man had no memory of his father reading from the Torah, attending services at the synagogue, or offering prayers. Even on special days of commemoration, there were no prayers said and no rituals practiced in the home.

He continued, “My mother is a non-practicing Christian. She does not attend worship services on Sunday mornings. She does not read the Bible and she declines to offer grace at the table. My mother and father love me. They have worked hard to take care of me, to provide the best educational opportunities, to open doors for a bright future.” At that particular moment, he leaned forward with a very serious look on his face and he said, “Padre, I am a college graduate with a promising career ahead of me and yet, as opposed to the woman I love who knows who she is, I do not know who I am.” It was easy to see that his soul was not at rest.

The world in which we live teaches us that we are defined by where we live, where we go to school, and where we work. We are defined by vocation and profession, by accomplishments and failures, by what we wear and what we drive. And we are defined by the friends whose company we enjoy and our enemies with whom we maintain a healthy and safe distance.

This, I believe, is the ultimate crisis of our present age. There are people who are unaware of the wind, the Spirit of God that blows where it wills bringing life and bringing power. When a friend or acquaintance asks, “Steve, what do you believe?” I respond in the following manner, “I have made a decision of faith: a decision to follow Jesus and to trust his message, to commit myself to his cause and to follow the Jesus Way.” (Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, page 551) This decision and affirmation of faith influences how I live as a husband and father, grandfather and friend, pastor and disciple of Jesus.

The wind and the Spirit of God blows where it wills. As the Spirit calls us to believe and follow Jesus the Son, I share with you an entry Savannah native Flannery O’Connor made in a personal journal sometime between 1946 and 1947: “I do not want to be doomed to mediocrity in my feeling for Christ. I want to feel. I want to love. Take me, dear Lord, and set me in the direction I am to go.” (Flannery O’Connor, *A Prayer Journal*, page IX) Amen.