

Wild Child

By Glenn Brumbaugh

When you're outside on a windy day, have you ever thought about the travels of the wind you feel blowing against your face? Where it came from, or where it's going? Can we ever definitively say we know exactly where that wind came from, or where it will end up?

Of all the weather phenomena we experience, individual gusts of wind are probably the most unpredictable. We can certainly predict the general direction of the wind at different altitudes, based on weather fronts, temperature, etc. But that puff that stimulates the nerve endings on your skin, can be a gust from any direction, can't it? We can guess which way it will probably be blowing, but it can still surprise us, can't it, especially when we are participating in wind-affected activities like washing the car. Despite my best efforts at the car wash, the wind always seems to make sure some of the spray comes right back at me.

Sometimes when the wind is particularly strong, it can influence how we move from place to place. I've had the opportunity to go sailing on a number of occasions and the wind plays a huge factor in that activity. You aren't going anywhere without it, and you are limited in how fast or far you are going in any particular direction based on how hard and in which direction the wind is blowing. If you've ever been in extreme weather-wind such as a hurricane, you realize that the wind can indeed literally stop you dead in your tracks.

The wind drives the weather in our world and influences ocean currents. Wind spreads pollen and seeds, and it can knock out power and trees.

It's a safe bet to say the wind has a significant influence on our lives. So much so, that Jesus uses the wind as a metaphor for the Spirit in today's gospel reading from John. He stresses how the wind blows where it chooses, and you know it's there, but you do not know where it's going. In our own journeys of faith, is that how the Spirit plays out for us? Jesus tells us that those who are born of the Spirit are like the wind. I think we all have the understanding that once we make the decision to follow Jesus, to join the faith, that the Spirit is to have a role in our lives.

Last week we celebrated Pentecost, which remembers the Spirit coming into the lives of the first apostles as a tongue of flame, arriving in a rush of wind. This week let's consider what role that Spirit plays for us.

In our gospel lesson today, we have Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, seeking to understand the message Jesus was proclaiming. As a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus would be well-versed in Hebrew scriptures and the dogma and rules of the Judaic religious thought of the day. He would have spent years studying the Torah and other sacred texts, and would have engaged in robust debate about their meaning and application with the other scholars of his day. Yet he couldn't grasp this wild card, this gift from above, that Jesus said was crucial to our life's journey with the Almighty, the Spirit that is sent to guide us. He looked at Christ's teachings with a very literal lens, coming from a legalistic tradition and couldn't understand the metaphysical flavor of that message. To be born again makes no sense from that perspective, as one cannot be physically reborn from the same womb again. But he was missing the

point, wasn't he? He was stuck in fleshly thinking, in seeing only the physical world and its rules and reality.

Paul tells us in our reading from Romans that we are to be led by the Spirit of God, as children of God, children who have put to death the previous life in the flesh, or a worldly-focused life. But is that so easy to do?

While we can criticize Nicodemus for his lack of understanding and perspective, we also need to take a look at our own lives. We talk a lot about our struggles to discern the leadings and guidance of the Spirit in our own lives, but do we let that "wind" blow us in a different direction than we are headed?

Like Nicodemus, it can be difficult for us to understand what it means to truly be born again of the Spirit and shed the fleshly life based in the physical world.

After all, that is what we know, that is what makes "sense", and "fits in" with what our understanding is of how things work. There is logic in that way of life; things make sense when we look at life through the lens of this world. We live our lives like everyone around us and follow the norms that are expected of us. As a result, when we see events or people bucking those norms, those rules of normality all around us, our natural response is to resist that challenge to what we consider "normal," or "right." But what if that aberration is being blown in by the Spirit? What if the Spirit is trying to blow us towards that exception, instead of giving in to our natural response to avoid or shun what is different?

The news is full of people and events that we need to shun, things that challenge our worldly sense of what is "normal." Things like illegal immigrants, people of color protesting in unpopular ways, Muslims, people living very different lifestyles

and identities, to name a few, are things that we inclined to should shun and avoid. Yet at the same time we have things like racial biases, never-ending war, gun violence and school shootings, oppression of whole groups of people, that we are told to accept as normal.

Where do you think the Spirit is in all of this? When immigrant children are intentionally separated from their parents the minute they get to the border to claim asylum? When our only concern when people protest systemic racism is the honor of the symbol of the country that allows the racism to continue? I guess it boils down to the relationship we seek with Jesus and the Almighty. Do we act like Nicodemus, seeking Jesus when the light of day fade, when nobody else will see us? As a respected member of his community, at night he could have a relationship with Jesus without having to make any real changes. He could talk to Jesus at night and quietly make a decision in his heart to believe in Jesus; that way it wouldn't disrupt his comfortable and established life.

However, through water and spirit we are adopted by the Spirit into this holy family. We are made heirs with Christ, but we also share in his suffering. Not just the suffering of carrying our own crosses, but the suffering of testifying and living a life that is often at odds with the ways of the world; the world of the flesh that is usually at odds with the world of the Spirit.

There is no way to follow Jesus without him interfering with your life. Following Jesus entails cost. When the Spirit blows truth and conviction in your direction, how do you respond?

There's a story of a couple looking at buying a new home in tornado country in the Midwest. As they toured a potential house, they discovered a "safe room," or more accurately, a "safe closet." A closet, which served as a coat closet near the front door, was built with steel walls and a steel door in addition to the wooden one. The purpose was that in case of a sudden tornado you could run and squeeze in and protect yourself from the effects of the wind.

How many of us have spiritual "safe rooms," places where we can retreat to our same old arguments, or beliefs or attitudes when the Spirit blows truth and conviction our direction, or tries to blow us into the fray when truth is being denied? The walls and door of such a closet are often made of ridicule or criticism, and those doors can slam shut almost automatically. We all have a choice: to be the nice obedient children of the flesh, children who follow the world's norms and rules, in our windless safe rooms, or to be the wild children of the Spirit, blown to and fro in the direction of God's truth and justice.

I pray we always seek the windy way. Amen.

Hymn - God of Grace and God of Glory 366

Benediction:

Go forth today as God's children -

Children of Water and Spirit

Children of Wind and Flame

Riding the Spirit wind that blows through your life, Wherever it leads.

Amen.