

The Landscape of Lent: WIND

Sermon delivered at Princeton United Methodist Church by Catherine Williams on March 16, 2014

I had only been in his chair less than two minutes before my hair stylist abruptly stopped what he was doing, looked me in the eye with grave concern and asked, “Where is the plane?” I looked at him startled and confused. “Where is the plane?” he repeated more earnestly, “I want to know where it went.” It dawned on me that he was actually half expecting me to come up with an answer about the missing Malaysian Airlines flight 370, and while I was trying to compose my response he continued, “And what the hell is going on with this crazy weather anyway? I thought you had connections?” He was referring, of course, to my role as a religious professional. I have to tell you he has known me, and my hair, for the last 23 years, so this was, in part, an invitation to some friendly banter. But in part, and more seriously, I also recognized it as an expression of a deep-seated human need to know, to make sense out of nonsense, to lay claim to some measure of control over our circumstances.

“Where are you going dressed like that and who will you be with?” “How are we going to improve on last week’s sales?” “What is the diagnosis and how are you going to treat my condition?” These are basic, normal questions that a parent, supervisor, or patient might ask because they need information, they want the facts; they’re also looking for some measure of control over the situation. So we can empathize with Nicodemus when he asks Jesus what we would deem reasonable questions. But in response, Jesus isn’t really trying to be crystal clear, and by the time he’s finished with Nick, we’re *all* confused. And much of our discombobulation is due to a large degree of vagueness or double meaning in Jesus’ discourse, particularly concerning the wind, or the spirit – we get to decide which he meant.

We can no more do without the wind than we can do without the wilderness in the landscape of Lent. It’s a critical part of the backdrop to our discipleship as

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we follow Jesus. It's one of the elements that characterizes Lent as a time of cleansing and healing, a time of uprooting and destroying, and yes, a time of acquiring energy and power as we move into the Easter reminder of our baptism by the Spirit. Spirit and wind are translated from the same Hebrew word in the Old Testament and the same Greek word in the New Testament. "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." Jesus might as well have been saying, "the Spirit breathes where the Spirit chooses, and you have no idea whether it's coming or going." This is not where Nick had intended the conversation to go at all. He had approached Jesus under the cover of night to find out a few things for himself. He started off very nicely...with a compliment...the way you might approach any famous person, "Rabbi, *we know* that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." But without so much as a 'thank you that's nice of you,' Jesus launches into a didactic response about the kingdom of God and being born from above, or born again - both of which mean the same thing if you're Jesus. But if you're Nicodemus, or Catherine, or any human inclined to think dualistically, you feel like you have to choose one interpretation over the other. The wind - or the spirit - is already blowing over this conversation, and Nicodemus is perplexed. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus responds to this clarifying question with an even more confusing answer. This is beginning to look like an enacted parable. If this is a lesson on the nature and function of the wind - I mean the Spirit, I really mean both - then this dialogue sounds pretty windblown to me - going all over the place and getting nowhere. As I read this passage repeatedly I could actually feel Nicodemus's growing frustration. Some of you who are go-with-the-flow people are probably

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wondering what's the problem here? But others of us who are the manager type, who keep lists and records, who plan the music and the sermons six months in advance, we are not comfortable with this windy, Spirit talk. It's unsettling. We want to know stuff. We need a sense of control for our mental and emotional stability. So the questions I hear coming out of this Scripture go something like: *How can God and chaos be related? How can I trust in the ways of God when they make no sense to me?*

Have you ever heard someone say that about the Christian faith? About faith in general? But I do believe that as humans we actually have more of a capacity to believe in things we don't understand than we realize. It's why we flip electrical switches when we enter a room, with absolutely no idea about electromagnetic theory or electrical engineering. It's why we take the medicine prescribed for us without so much as a glance at the information sheet provided by the pharmacist. It's why we purchase gadget after gadget, tool after tool, app after app, because we trust that if the thing exists, somebody knows the rationale behind it; we don't really need to know.

But, you say, trusting God is *another* matter. He's supposed to be good, and all powerful, and loving and all of that, but look at the mess in our world? When I hear arguments like those, I am reminded of how little we really do know of all there is to be known. Nicodemus begins his question with the words "we know..." What follows is really an assumption or a shared opinion. Twice he responds to Jesus' words with confusion that resulted from flawed assumptions. **We know** modern science will find a cure for every disease once we keep at it long and hard enough. **We know** that those who govern and administer justice have some ethical foundation for the decisions they make. **We know** that church trials are the way to respond to conflicts between our institutional policies and clergy practices. We

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know...we know? One of the things this encounter with Jesus shows us is the limitations and the finiteness of human knowledge. Intellectual honesty says there are some realities we are just not wired to comprehend.

Right here in this story Nicodemus is struggling with one Greek word ‘another’ which can either mean from above, or again, or anew. There is this conflation of things earthly and heavenly which boggles his mind and ours, but which finds its fullest expression in Jesus himself who was both fully heavenly and fully earthly. This kind of tension or ambiguity presents an intellectual challenge. The winds of the Lenten landscape blow across our minds and scramble our assumptions and our knowledge base, disturbing the neat little categories, and throwing our little lined-up ducks into disarray. How can we be born of both flesh and spirit? How can the crucifixion of the Son of Man be equivalent to his exaltation? And how can one have eternal life even while one is yet alive? So much for heavenly things, how about some existential issues? How is it that I have done everything I could to be a good Christian and still have not been able to find a job? How is it I prayed so hard and that baby still died? And where for God’s sake is that plane? Why have so many innocent people disappeared into thin air? It doesn’t appear like anyone is in control of anything.

Cathie Capp found herself yesterday sitting on a bench at the nearby Grounds for Sculpture. It was windy yesterday, and there she sat amidst leaves flying everywhere, her hair whipping around her face, staring at a scene of nature’s chaos. When it occurred to her that if we sit back and know that God is in it, the disruption can become a direct encounter with the divine. She sent me a text, since she knew that earlier last week my mind was in a similar state of disruption as I tried to wrap it around today’s sermon. I found Debbie Meola here in the chancel last week trying her best to put together a visual for this morning – “Wind is hard”

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she said shaking her head. “I know,” I commiserated, “why not just let everything go all over the place, that’s what my sermon will probably sound like and that’s okay, because that’s how wind behaves.” “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.”

Are you a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus, and yet you do not understand these things? I tell you, it is not for human understanding to grasp everything there is to know. Nor is it the domain of the human intellect to figure out the problems of this world. No, Nicodemus, it isn’t about knowing everything, or controlling everything, it’s about faith. Faith in the spirit who is Emmanuel – God with us. Faith in the one who knows the terrain of the wilderness – the one who is THE WAY. Faith in the one whose presence gathers up all of my misunderstandings and my ignorance – faith in the one who is THE TRUTH. And ultimately, whether I know when or how this body will ultimately expire, the spirit gives me the capacity to trust in the one who has given me eternal life, the one who is the resurrection and THE LIFE, the one who said to his friend Martha, “Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.” Then he asked Martha Do you believe this? Not do you know this, or can you explain this to someone else, but do you **believe** this?

We can believe things that baffle the intellect because we are more than simply intellectual or physical beings. We have a spiritual component to us that cannot necessarily be explained in intellectually comprehensible terms, hence all this spirit talk we hear in the New Testament. The Spirit of God bears witness with our spirit, says Paul to the Romans, that we are the children of God. It is the Spirit of the book of Acts that gives us the capacity to believe in Jesus and his mission, and the power to live out that mission in the world. It is the breath of God that

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often leads us into the wilderness experiences of our lives and that may even bring us out again with a strength that was not ours before. Some of God's *best* work happens in the midst of chaos and ambiguity. I was never more aware of that than in my clinical pastoral exposure in the chaos of emergency rooms, in the ambiguity of the psychiatric floor, or in the limbo of the intensive care unit and its waiting rooms. As a terrified chaplain-in-training, despite my predilection for order and control, I discovered that some of God's best work takes place in the midst of life's disruptions.

May those of us today who are trying to live through situations of ambiguity and uncertainty allow the wind of God's spirit to fill us with peace. Often in this place of peace we encounter God's wisdom, God's knowledge, God's understanding, God's perspective of the situation that simply had not occurred to us before, nor would ever have, had we not placed our trust in God.

So come Holy Spirit, blow upon our hearts this day. Blow your healing breath where there is pain and sadness. Blow like a gale where there is complacency and inertia. Blow, wind of God, blow over our trampled, broken dreams and bring them to life. Blow over our callous hearts and soften them for your compassionate use. Blow over our broken families and breathe forgiveness into places of disillusion. Blow over frail and dysfunctional bodies and cause a rush of healing life to flow within them. Blow over our failed systems of justice and overturn the rampant corruption and fraud that oppress your people. Blow over city streets filled with violence and crime; let your reign of peace exert a leavening influence in our families and schools so our children learn to love peace and hate war. Come holy spirit, breath of God, may this Lenten season give way to the Easter of our lives where we are reborn and renewed from above...in the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the blessed Holy Spirit, Amen.