

John 3:1-8
Genesis 1:1-2; 2:4b-7
Text: John 3:8

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THE BREATH OF GOD

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. *John 3:6*

“The wind blows where it chooses,” said Jesus, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” If that sounds familiar it's perhaps because we pick up on a theme from last week's sermon on the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God in Christ.

Among the languages of earth are a host of names for wind. Winds that burn like a blast from a furnace, winds that refrigerate the bones, desert winds that can sand blast the finish off a car, and honeysuckle breezes that beg for a hammock to sling under them. They take names like typhoon, sirocco, chinook, nor'easter, simoom, mistral, and levanter.

Of the ancient constructs of the universe wind is the most ubiquitous with its constant tidal flows above earth and sea. Sometimes awful in its power, often as gentle as an infant's breathing, wind is a living, moving vastness, everywhere evidenced in swirling eddies and dancing leaves, in winnowing wheat, and filling sails—but never, never seen. It fills the lungs and gives the breath of life; a most mysterious presence, evident to nose and ear and skin, yet always absent to the eye. No wonder, then, that wind is the most universal metaphor for God's presence, the Spirit of God or Holy Spirit—they are the same. The Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament each use just one word for all three entities: wind, breath, and spirit. They are *ruach* in Hebrew, and *pneuma* in Greek, hence “pneumatic,” something filled with or driven by air. Both words in the Bible speak of the active, living, moving, measureless spirit of God. In Latin the word is *spiritus*, originally meaning “breath”—from which we get “respiration,” “aspirate,” and “expire.” Breath, *spirit*, is what you have when you are alive, a gift that comes to you from elsewhere, and it's what you're missing when you're dead. Can you see why religion made this breath/wind connection with the spirit of God. In Genesis, as we heard, it is this breath/spirit animating force that God breathes into the lips of Adam, newly formed, a limp, clay thing in the hand of God, man brought to life with an intimate divine kiss.

The Holy Spirit, this breath of God, is one who stands at our side and invites us to attend to a word of good counsel. In Congress, as I understand, the Speaker of the House has a parliamentary assistant who stands by the speaker's chair constantly. He or she anticipates the business before the House, and the parliamentary procedure to be followed. The parliamentarian is ever ready to give counsel, sometimes even before it is needed. This assistant is the spirit of guidance, the breath of good counsel, and therefore—and this is the chief meaning in John—the Speaker's comforter, especially in time of need. It is so for us, too.

In his *Prison Meditations*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the courageous German pastor who stood with many others against Hitler's hideous regime (and was executed for his resistance), wrote:

I recall vividly that night [of torture] in the Lehrterstrasse and how I prayed to God that he might send death to deliver me because of the helplessness and pain I felt I could no longer endure, and the violence and hatred to which I was no longer equal. How I wrestled with God that night and finally in my great need crept to him, weeping. Not until morning did a great peace come to me, a blissful awareness of light, strength, and warmth, bringing with it the conviction that I *must* see this thing through and at the same time the blessed assurance that I *should* see this thing through. Solace in woe. This is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. This is the kind of creative dialogue he conducts with mankind. These are the secret blessings he dispenses which enable a man to live and endure

The comforter who enables us to live and endure. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' fulfilled promise to us that God will never leave us or forsake us, the one who "proceeded" as Christ receded at his ascension. It's the way a friend or loved one keeps a discrete presence within the house when you are sick or grieving. They bring those little, so welcome evidences of compassion and caring: the soft sounds of a meal being set out, the subdued conversations drifting upstairs, the gentle hushing of the children when you need to rest, or the wordless embrace that simply holds you. This is the way of the Holy Spirit.

Some years ago Dr. Ernest Fremont Tuttle was the pastor of First Methodist Church, Evanston, Illinois. One of his young parishioners lost his wife, the mother of their small children. Dazed and wracked with grief, his eyes red with tears, the young man left his busy home, teeming with friends and family, and seeing him leave, Dr. Tuttle followed a dozen or so paces behind. For hours the man walked the Chicago streets, dazed with grief. Sometimes he stepped off the curb to the honk of passing cars. He walked for miles along Lake Michigan on Lakeshore Drive, with the moon steadily crossing the sky overhead. All the time, his beloved pastor stayed just a few yards behind, never drawing closer, never saying a word.

Finally the sun broke across the morning sky and with the light the man

came slowly to his senses. He looked up at a street sign to see where he was, and then glanced around and saw his pastor. Only then did the good pastor walk up and put a hand on his shoulder. “Come,” he said, “let’s go home.” He let him go through shock, the emotion and despair seeping out of him over the miles, and simply walked with him. It is a faithful image of the way of the Holy Spirit in times of trial.

How does one come to experience this Holy Spirit? Principally by engaging the sacred: by cultivating the company of God in prayer, in inward conversation, talking as easily as to a friend; by reading Scripture and devotional materials; by searching out the company of fellow seekers in study programs of the church; by allowing the mind to linger with the thoughts and sentiments of God’s teaching; even by embracing the doubts that the heart must wrestle with. I say doubts because God’s ways are not our ways, and there is, as a consequence, often a journey between the soul’s unrest and faith, what the head hears and the heart embraces. Simply put, it is the discovery of a new friendship—though far more!

I suspect we would all find it ludicrous to imagine cultivating a friendship with someone without ever trying to engage their presence, or meet with or talk with them, or without discovering each other, or trusting oneself into another’s care and confidence. It is the same with the felt companionship of the spirit.

It is to a rebirth that we are invited, a new relationship with God—like the first breath of a newborn, that sudden gasping inhalation of life, the breath of God, from the giver of life. This is not a casual thing to which we are invited, the way one follows an interest for a while, or a hobby. Life is too sacred. To live moment by moment is to breathe the *breath* of God. Remember how breath and spirit are the same. Can you imagine a deeper intimacy?

Amen.