

Where It Chooses

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

© Copyright 2011
James F. McIntire
All rights reserved.

Text:
John 3:1-17

March 20, 2011
Lent 2



Hope United Methodist Church
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA
Phone: 610-446-3351
Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org
Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net
Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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."³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'⁸ 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 who is born of the Spirit."⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.



"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

Our Bible opens with that wonderful piece of poetry, the beginning of a creation story developed by the ancient Hebrews, a creation story which we have claimed as our own. But some of the beauty and the strength of the story has been lost in our English translation. When we read that "a wind swept over the face of the waters," we don't hear quite what those who wrote it intended. The Hebrew word that we translate "wind" is *ruah* which is in the feminine and means not only wind but also means spirit. The word which we translate as "swept over" carries a literal translation of "brooding." So, when our faith ancestors heard this passage they heard something more like, "the Spirit of God was brooding over the face of the deep." The Spirit was brooding over creation.

It's a wonderful word, "brooding". I wish we could better claim it in our understanding of the Spirit's presence in our lives. Brooding. It's one of those words that actually feels like what it is. "Brooding" a wonderful word full of texture and color and depth. Listen to it – feel it. Brooding

It brings to mind the image of a mother bird sitting on her nest incubating an egg, anticipating its birth, waiting for new life to emerge from the warmth created by the process. Or it brings up the image of a father bird hovering overhead, looming above waiting quietly and thoughtfully for something to happen.

The first picture that flashes into my head when I hear this Hebrew imagery is one that I will unashamedly give you. When I first discovered this brooding bird image, I immediately thought of the Flintstones cartoon. (Now maybe you're beginning to understand how my mind operates!) In those cartoons, there was always a large bird that acted as an airplane, seats mounted on its back, passengers strapped in the seats, the pilot mounted up on the head with reins down to the bird's mouth so he could steer it. Remember that? The bird is huge and always very awkward because of its size. That's what flashed into my mind, this large, winged, awkward animal brooding over her nest waiting for an egg to hatch or looming overhead patiently waiting for something to happen.

I'm not sure why that's the first image to come to mind. Maybe I've spent too much time in front of the TV, maybe it's symptomatic of something lost in my childhood. Who knows, but hey, you go with these things when they happen. Never ignore a good image because in fact it just might play itself out somehow.

So here in Genesis, we have the Spirit of God brooding, hovering, looming over creation and participating directly in it. And my Flintstones image might not be so bizarre when we realize that the Hebrew creation story is much like those of other ancient peoples, with creation being the defeat of chaos by a stronger presence, that presence being Yahweh for the Hebrews. Chaos was often depicted as a dragon or a sea monster in many ancient traditions, including the Hebrew traditions reflected by Isaiah who wrote, "Was it not [YHWH] who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?" (51:9) and the Psalmist who created his or her own creation story, "[YHWH] broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. [YHWH] crushed the heads of Leviathan." (Psalm 74:13-14). So in the Hebrew creation account, it might not be so incorrect to picture God in the form of this bird brooding, hovering, looming over creation as the sea dragon, chaos, is defeated.

But when we reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit most of us probably don't immediately think of the Flintstones. Probably we begin our search for the Spirit with Pentecost, that time when the Church as we know it began to take shape. And we read the passage from Acts where the reality of that Pentecost event is expressed. "And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:4).

Yet throughout our faith history there has been a clear indication of the Spirit's presence; with Abraham and Sarah as they journeyed out into the unknown, with Moses as he led the Israelites out of slavery into freedom, with the judges like Gideon and Samson and Saul where consistently the stories in scripture tell us that "the spirit of the Lord came upon" them. Down through our history the Spirit has interacted in many different ways with many different

people, even into our present we can see the Spirit of God at work around us, the **ruah**, the wind or Spirit, of God.

The Spirit has been there in many different ways right from the very beginning so the question is not whether or not the Spirit exists but what happens once the Spirit's presence enters our lives.

Once in our presence, is the Spirit like a Flintstones character awkwardly brooding over us either hatching its newest creation or waiting for something to happen? Is it like the wind coming and going invisibly and mysteriously? Does the Spirit just fall on us or is there something else to be done to plan for the event?

Nicodemus came to Jesus one night and began to talk with him about these very same kinds of questions. "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," Nicodemus says, "for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." No one can understand God's reign without being born from above, Jesus responds. No one can enter into God's reign without being born of water and wind; human birth through the flesh, spiritual birth through the water of baptism.

Once again there is a dualism in this Spirit conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus just as there is in the Genesis creation story and throughout scripture. **Pneuma** in Greek has the dual meaning of "wind" and "spirit" just like **ruah** in Hebrew. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is spirit ... 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 who is born of the Spirit." The Spirit is mysterious just as God is mysterious and no simile is going to explain precisely the character of this mystery, but rather this spirit/wind connection allows us to understand that despite its mysterious nature the Spirit's action is clearly a reality. Although we cannot see the wind, we can see the effects of the wind around us. So also we can never see the Spirit, but we can see the effects of the Spirit in those born from above, followers of Jesus, without seeing when or how that birth takes place.

For the ancients, the wind had a divine quality to it representing the breath of God which carried the very essence of life. At the creation of humanity in the Hebrew story, "God breathed into our nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7); at a person's death, God takes back that breath (Genesis 6:3). Spiritual life occurs when God breathes the spirit into us and spiritual life dies when God takes back that spiritual breath. We cannot see the wind or the spirit but we can see their effects and we can see if the wind or spirit is present or absent.

In the modern world, the wind is an explainable, meteorological event that can be defined by use of scientific language. For us, the breath that we breathe is created by those anatomical parts of our bodies that are designed to keep our lungs inflated and deflated. The end of life occurs when those parts no longer function properly. But yet we are not so cynical as to think that the wind/spirit simile has no significance. We can define the wind, but we still cannot define the Spirit. We can define breath, but we still cannot define the breath of God.

We can now predict with some certainty when a wind will happen and from what direction it comes and how strong it will blow and we can then harness that wind for any number of reasons. I'm not so sure it's the same with the Spirit. We cannot know when it comes or how strong it will be and though we cannot actually harness it we can transfer its effect to someone else.

What it comes down to for me is that there is not going to be any evidence of the Spirit's presence coming out of someone unless there is first evidence that the Spirit has come into that person. The wind blows into a sail and it fills up and takes a very different shape than it previously had. While the wind blows freely and hits you whether you want it to or not, the Spirit does not enter into your life unless you are open to it. But like the wind billowing out a sail and changing its shape for the rest of the trip, once you have absorbed the Spirit, it also changes the shape of your life and your inclination is then going to be to share it with others. Evidence that the Spirit is in precedes the Spirit coming out. Spirit in, Spirit out. The Spirit does not come out unless it has first come in.

When my son was about 7 or 8 years old he and I were at a local field one Saturday when a men's rugby team was practicing. I'll be the first to admit that I don't know much about the game of rugby but I tried desperately to figure out what they were doing besides looking pretty big and scruffy and cold in their shorts. The team lined up horizontally across the field and the man on the end had an over-inflated football. They started to jog toward the opposite end of the field, the one with the ball slightly in front of the man next to him who was slightly in front of the man next to him, and so on down the line, like one-half of a flock of geese flying in a V-formation. The man with the ball would pass it to the man next to and slightly behind him, and it would go on down the line as they jogged down the field until the coach would yell "Switch" and then that first man would run across field and end up at the other end of the line where he would once again get the ball and the others would follow. It seemed to me like that was how they moved the ball forward toward the goal and since this was practice and there was no opposing team, it seemed pretty easy although I could tell by the mud and grass stains on their shorts and shirts that an actual game involves much more physical contact.

I thought I had done a fair bit of investigative work and had gathered enough detail to understand this event a little better. That is until I talked to my boy about it.

He had not been watching the action and so on our way off the field Tim looked briefly at the men and succinctly summarized the rules of the game. While it took me a long time to figure out what they were doing, he quickly came to his conclusion – "Hey look, they're playing 'keep-away'." I began to explain to him what it was that I thought was happening and what I know about the sport and its origin, and its similarities to soccer and football but then I decided that he was probably more on target. It did look very much like a classic game of "keep-away". So I just left it at that.

Maybe the action of God's Spirit is something like a big game of "keep-away" where those that have already received it try their best to keep it away from those that have not. Or is it more like the

rugby practice as I saw it – one person receives it and then passes it off to the next person in line and so on down the line until it eventually comes back to the first and starts over again? Eventually, the line discovers that it has moved farther down the field and the Spirit has been carried along with it and is now in a very different place from where it started.

The wind we can harness to fly our kites or sail our boats or generate electricity. The Spirit we cannot harness for our own use but we can only pass it along to the scruffy person next to us in grass stained shorts and shirt until together we reach the goal, the kingdom of God. Until that first person in line receives the Spirit and begins to pass it along it will not happen.

Nicodemus heard that message from Jesus that night he sought him out – the Spirit was passed to him that night. We don't know if he dropped the ball once passed to him but tradition has it that he became a defender of Jesus among the religious elite. Years later, for the followers of Jesus organized as "The Church", that initial receipt of the Spirit came during Pentecost 50 days after the beginning of Passover. The Spirit of God, **pneuma**, came upon the followers of Jesus and the Church was born from above. From then on the Church has tried to pass along that Spirit on down the line.

At times it has been like a game of keep-away with those that have it trying to be selective about who it gets to next, but more often the Spirit has been passed along to the next in line. The Spirit that Jesus passed to Nicodemus, the Spirit that came upon the Church at Pentecost, was not a new Spirit but the very same Spirit that has been brooding throughout creation. It came into us then and it comes out of us now.

One of my favorite places as an adult is one of our church camps called Camp Innabah in Spring City, PA. In 1969 I spent my first week away from home without either of my parents at Camp Innabah – my cousin and I cried a good bit of that week away as home sickness took over our lives. Yet as an adult I've been back there many, many time with my own children, with adult retreats,

as a volunteer counselor. When I first started taking my kids there my stomach would drop and my home sickness experience would try to resurface but being persistent about overcoming this childhood trauma, I pushed on through and soon discovered the wonder of being someplace familiar and comfortable and relaxing. Innabah has become a haven where God's Spirit fills me.

And so it should be. I have discovered that the word "Innabah" is a Navajo name given to a missionary who worked for many years in their nation and it means, "the Spirit be with you." This missionary took the Spirit with her in her work among the Navajo, it obviously came out while she was there, they gave the Spirit back to her in this name, she carried it home and passed it on to this piece of land dedicated to the Spirit, and for years it has passed along that Spirit to those who have been there. That is what I have consistently experienced when I have been there, Spirit in, and what I have taken with me as I leave, Spirit out. Spirit in, Spirit out. Like the wind which blows where it chooses, the Spirit blows into and out of each of our lives.

For you that experience is not going to be the same as mine. For me it was different than for Nicodemus. But somewhere there is a place or a time or a space or an event where the Spirit has come into your life. It has been an experience that has changed the shape of your life in some significant way, changed your personality like the wind changes the shape of a sail, and an experience that has caused the Spirit to then come out of you in some other significant way.

Today God's Spirit is upon us as we gather here in worship. Today God's Spirit is where it chooses to be – in the water of baptism – in the past and present of this family at Hope. The wind – God's breath – blows among us today and opens us to the presence of God's Spirit. The Spirit of God continues to brood over us. The Spirit comes in, the Spirit goes out.

Amen.