

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, June 7, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE WIND BLOWS WHERE IT CHOOSES"

John 3:1-17 (esp. v. 8)

Who has seen the wind? Well, no one. But we feel it and see its effects. The wind can be a gentle breeze, a howling gale, or in-between. The first I'd ever really heard the wind howl was when I lived in Nova Scotia, near the ocean. Winds can be hot or cold, warm or cool, refreshing or stifling. The wind cleanses, dries, brings storms and takes them away. The wind can change the landscape. It blows from any direction. The wind is mysterious, unpredictable, uncontrollable. But life on earth depends on the moving winds.

Now for Jews, it was natural to compare the Spirit of God with the wind. For in Hebrew the same word *ruach* was used for both. It meant the hot desert wind, tearing across the land. It meant the Spirit of God, moving over the face of the waters at creation, sweeping across the ages, bursting into history and taking possession of humans. It also meant breath, the breath of life.

One night a Jewish Jew, Nicodemus, found Jesus alone on a Jerusalem rooftop. He came respectfully. "Rabbi, we know you a teacher who has come from God. No one could do what you are doing apart from God." Jesus ignored the flattery and got right to the point. "Truly I tell you no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus thought Jesus was speaking of a second physical birth. But Jesus was speaking of spiritual birth. "You must be born from above, Nicodemus. You control much in your life, Nicodemus, but you can't control this spiritual birth. It's like the wind you are feeling and hearing up on this roof-top - mysterious, unpredictable...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." (John 3:8)

Yes, God's Holy Spirit is like the wind, thankfully. You may think, "This spiritual birth is for others, but not for me". But you and I are not excluded. Like the wind, the Spirit of God blows where it chooses. And at some point the Spirit chooses to blow our way.

Now Jesus says that we need spiritual birth. He is clear that we must be brought alive in Spirit. Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." Our physical life

is God's gift, but it is not enough. We need to be born anew, born again, born from above, born spiritually in order to see and to enter God's Kingdom.

There was an ad on TV a few years ago having to do with buying concert tickets on-line. Two teenage friends order tickets to a rock music concert, while a retired couple order tickets to the opera. But somehow the tickets get mixed up. The elderly couple winds up at the rock concert, and the teenagers at the opera. None of them can stand it. They're covering their ears and looking for the exit sign. None had learned to appreciate that particular music they were hearing and all they could think of was getting out as soon as possible.

Some people say, "God would never send anyone to hell." I agree. But people may still wind up there. If a person has never been born again to the reality of the living God, if they've never touched the hem of Jesus' garment and received his love and grace and righteousness, then how they possibly live where all these are in full abundance? If you've only cared for earthly things, how could you live in the presence of heavenly things? If you've never learned to appreciate heaven's music, you wouldn't even want to enter the place. God won't have to send you away. And if you did happen to slip in the back door, you'd be miserable and seek a way out. Jesus says that we need spiritual birth, we need to learn to appreciate heaven's music if we are going to enter God's Kingdom and not perish and blow away like an autumn leaf.

But even we who once came alive spiritually may sometimes feel a need for spiritual rebirth. We may feel dry spiritually, far away from God. The heavenly music seems very faint.

I wonder if that's why Nicodemus sought out Jesus. He was a good man, this Pharisee, who kept God's laws scrupulously. But did he secretly long for a deeper, more intimate connection with God? There was a cultural chasm between Nicodemus and this itinerant rabbi from Nazareth. But did Nicodemus sense that Jesus might clear away the dead leaves and the debris in his life and give him what he desired?

We can go through times of spiritual emptiness, when our fears and sins and doubts seem so great, when our hearts feel heavy, when we lack spiritual energy, when God is an abstract idea, rather than a living presence and power who dwells with us and within us. We may have come alive spiritually in the past. But the fizz has gone. There is little peace and no joy. Prayer and worship seem like stale ritual. God's word doesn't speak to us. Perhaps some of us feel this way right now, just like the Hebrew exiles in Babylon, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." It can even happen to the

church. Some of us here today may need spiritual birth, perhaps for the first time, or perhaps for the second or third or fourth time.

Thankfully, such spiritual birth is possible for us, and for the church. It is the work and the gift of God's Spirit. When or where or how, we don't know. For, "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 now blows this way, now that way. It blows towards this one and then toward that one, toward this church and now toward another. And at some point the Spirit chooses to blow our way.

Indeed, the Spirit has already blown toward most of us here at some point and given us a spiritual birth. I know that because most of us are believers. The first thing the Spirit does when he blows our way is to convict us of sin, turn us toward Jesus and lead us to put our faith in Him. Every true Christian believer has been born again by the Spirit of God. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:14-16) How did we hear that message? Why did you put your trust in Jesus Christ, lifted up on a Cross for our sins, risen from the dead, the Saviour of the world, the Saviour of your soul and mine? It happened because at some point the Spirit chose to blow your way, and found you ready and open to receive his work. You and I and believe in Jesus because the Spirit blew our way and raised us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

I believe that at some point the Spirit chooses to blow towards every human being, hoping to find an open heart. Of course, not all will be open, but the Spirit is free and unconstrained. At some point he may choose to blow towards that person again. And if you are not a believer in Jesus, perhaps this very day the Spirit has chosen to blow your way. Maybe this is the day when you open your heart and say "Yes" to Jesus. Maybe this is your day of salvation.

And if you are a believer who feels the need for a spiritual re-birth, be sure that God has not forgotten you. If your heart is heavy, if your faith and service seem more of a burden than a blessing, don't despair. At some point the Spirit will blow your way, giving you spiritual re-birth, renewing your faith in Jesus, lifting your burden and filling you again with the joy of God's salvation. You and I can't control the Spirit's movement anymore than we can control the wind. But you can pray for it, and open a door for its coming by your reading of Scripture, your service, your worship, your faithful reception of this sacrament. At some point the Spirit chooses to blow our way and give us spiritual re-birth. It may be happening for someone here today. And at some point the Spirit may choose to

blow toward the church and bring the church alive again. It happens, you know.

"We're sending you to this church", the bishop told the young minister. "It used to be a thriving church, but the neighbourhood has changed."

Sure enough, at her first service she saw mostly white-haired folk. In her first sermon she told them how she was called by God into the ministry, and felt a special calling to work with young families and children. Someone told her afterwards, "I'm afraid you'll be disappointed here. We haven't had Sunday School for twenty years."

But the pastor asked God to show her a way. There were no children in church, but each afternoon she saw lots of children trooping down the sidewalk past the church on the way home from school to a nearby housing development.

One day she was visiting a member of the congregation who lived close to the church. The woman told her that she had been quite a pianist in her day, playing professionally. Then from on high, an idea hit the young pastor. "Mable, can you still play the piano?"

"Sure", she said, "if I had some time to work up my hands, sure, I can play."

"Meet me at the church at three this Tuesday afternoon," said the pastor.

On Tuesday a team of six began making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. At 3:20 they rolled the old upright piano out on to the porch of the church hall, next to the sidewalk. Mable sat down at the piano and began to play. At 3:30 as the children marched up the sidewalk, they were greeted by the sight and sound of Mable playing everything from golden oldies to "Jesus Loves Me." The pastor appeared and taught the song to the children. She served them sandwiches and juice. "If you like this, we'll be here every Tuesday and Thursday," she announced, much to the surprise of the pianist and sandwich makers.

But soon the church was host to 50 children, twice a week. Those children had parents. They brought them to church on Sundays. The church's attendance doubled in six months. The place came alive with new energy. The older members loved it.

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 who is born of the Spirit." And at some point the Spirit chooses to blow our way. So let's hoist the sail of faith and catch be ready to catch the Spirit when He comes.