

Sermon: The Wind Blows where it Chooses  
2 Lent, Year A  
John 3:1-17

Shelby Ochs Owen  
Emmanuel, Staunton  
March 12, 2017

“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.” (please be seated)

You may wonder why I have come to the back of the church this morning! If you are able to turn toward me without too much difficulty, please do. If not, feel free to sit or stand in a way that is comfortable to you. The sermon is being given from the back of the church because sometimes we need re-orienting to see God in our midst. Since we are Episcopalians and in worship our physical stance, such as standing, kneeling or sitting, is an outward expression of an inward disposition, today we will look backward to consider one way of experiencing God.

In John’s Gospel, we read of an encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and as a leader of the Jews, he should know a great deal about God, and yet, Nicodemus senses there is more to learn, sees perhaps that he has been on the sidelines and that there is more to the life of God than he has known. Notice he comes to Jesus “by night;” he must not have wanted others to see him going to see Jesus but he goes anyway. And Jesus has some fun with him. Nicodemus tells Jesus he sees that Jesus has come from God. For no one can do the things Jesus has done apart from God’s presence. And Jesus tells him no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Wuh! Nicodemus says. What ARE you talking about? How can a person be born after having grown old? Jesus is inviting him into a deeper relationship with God.

Nicodemus can keep checking off the boxes, he can keep following the rules, he can keep watching from afar or he can dive deep into the life of God, the life of the Spirit, the life of love. Jesus is encouraging Nicodemus to get closer to 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. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Jesus is saying this wind, the Holy Spirit has blown upon Nicodemus, which is what has brought him to Jesus in the first place! That is how the Holy Spirit rolls! Blowing us always toward connection with God and connection with one another.

Why do we come to church? Is it simply something we see as a duty, the right thing to do, a rule to follow, a box that we can check off? Or is there more to it? Is an encounter with God something that is reserved for “other” people, people who seem a little or a lot holier than ourselves? Is the action of the Divine something we watch only from the sidelines, keeping God at a safe distance? Or is the wind or Holy Spirit up to something else? Perhaps we come to church because there is some inner stirring, sometimes barely detectible but it is there all the same, some inner yearning or knowing that God is calling us closer to Godself and to other people?

The Spirit is at work around us and in us all the time. Have you noticed as you go through life, that you can’t always understand some of the why’s until time has passed? In fact

often some of our most painful moments can be seen much later through God's grace as offering something good, something that allowed us to grow in ways that we wouldn't have grown had that event not occurred.

Speaking of looking backward, I want to share with you an old practice that is forever new. It is called the Daily Examen. It is something that originated with Ignatius of Loyola back in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. It is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern his direction for us. The Examen is an ancient practice in the Church that can help us see God's hand at work in our whole life experience.

The method presented here is adapted from a technique described by St. Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius thought that the Examen was a gift that came directly from God, and that God wanted it to be shared as widely as possible. One of the few rules of prayer that Ignatius made for the Jesuit order was the requirement that Jesuits practice the Examen twice daily—at noon and at the end of the day. It's a habit that Jesuits, and many other Christians, practice to this day.

This is a version of the five-step Daily Examen that St. Ignatius practiced.

1. **Become aware of God's presence.**
2. **Review the day with gratitude. (would you be willing to share one thing that has already been a part of your day? Able to get out of bed, hot shower, coffee, argument with wife, drove to church)**
3. **Pay attention to your emotions. (disturbed by your argument, happy about your steaming cup of coffee, annoyed by the email you read, amazed you slept straight through the night)**
4. **Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.**
5. **Look toward tomorrow.**

As we consider that God has been faithfully present in our day that has passed, we can be more mindful and confident that God is not remote and is present at dinner, in our errands, in our conversations, in our texting, in our work and in our play. We begin to see that if God was with us in the past then we become more confident that God is also in the present moment and then we can be more hopeful that God will be with us tomorrow. We may find that in this regular practice of the Daily Examen, we move from the sidelines of knowing *about* God to an active, richer relationship *with* God.

God is not all that interested in being a box that is checked off. God wants to be a central part of your life. If you are tempted to stick to the sidelines of faith, consider stepping closer towards the heart of God. May the wind blow where it chooses. And may we be ready, like Nicodemus, to move with the Spirit into a deeper and richer life with God.

Amen.