



“Catch the Wind Part 2”

May 30, 2021

John 3:1-8

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The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus to learn the source of his power, Jesus spoke to him of the Holy Spirit. He compared the movement of the Spirit to the wind – it blows where it will; we can hear it and we can feel it, but its source and direction are a mystery to us. Jesus said we must be born of water and the Spirit to experience the kingdom of God. He described having the indwelling presence of the Spirit as being “born anew” or “born again.” We are familiar with that language in the modern Christian tradition, but it was understandably enigmatic to Nicodemus. “How can a man be born when he is old?”

Jesus was speaking in spiritual terms; Nicodemus was thinking in literal terms. Jesus went on to explain that he was speaking of rebirth by water and the Spirit – the Spirit does the inward action; the water is the outward sign. “That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The movement of the Spirit is our subject today.

A week ago, I began a two-part message on the Holy Spirit as the wind that moves and guides us, using lessons learned from sailing. I’ve been helped in shaping this message by experienced sailors in our congregation who’ve graciously shared their knowledge and stories.

Where does the wind come from? Where does it go? Steve Merriam describes the wind as an “unseen power, a gift and a threat. And always humbling.” Sometimes, the wind is relatively predictable, allowing for a planned outing or setting a course for a race. Other times, not so much. Diana Merriam shared her general observations of the wind on Lake Erie based on the direction it is blowing:

- Winds from the NW, N, and NE are steady, pleasant, great for sailing
- Winds from the E and SE are often light and variable in direction, less desirable. Sometimes the wind will die completely and then shift 180 degrees.
- Winds from the S, SW, and W are unpredictable because they blow over Cleveland and navigate around the city buildings before reaching us. Sometimes they are pleasant and steady, when all of a sudden a big gust of wind comes out of nowhere. These puffs are often a shift in direction. I’m talking big shifts - like 45 - 90 degrees. These kinds of shifts can cause your boat to auto-tack or auto-jibe (the boom comes swinging over, so watch your head!) Often, winds from the W bring thunderstorms with them on hot summer days.

One suspects that when Nicodemus approached Jesus, he was seeking simple answers to his questions. *How does Jesus harness this power? How can I get it, too? Tell me the secret, Jesus. What’s the formula? How does it work?* But it’s not that simple. The difference between the flesh and the spirit is that we can’t follow a formula. The Spirit is more like the wind than formulas or human plans. When it comes to the Spirit, we’re not in control. And for human beings, that is hard to accept.

Diana attended sailing camp every summer at Edgewater. As a teenager, she was in the advanced group. They learned to sail in all conditions except for lightning. One very windy day, Diana and her partner were sailing in a 420, a small sailboat about 14’ long. The water was being whipped into jagged, white-capped waves, and they had their hands full. They turned downwind, put up the spinnaker, and ran with the wind. The speed was incredible and exhilarating. On that boat, you keep the jib in place when flying the spinnaker, so they had three sails gathering as much wind as they could. The boat began to plane, gliding on the very surface of the water, almost leaping from the top of one wave to the next. But as their speed increased, they got out of sync with the water and outsailed a wave. The nose of the boat turned down, plowing into the wave ahead of them. Their momentum from the high speed caused the back of the boat to flip up into the air – what sailors call “pitch-poling.” Diana was in the front of the boat, so she sort of just floated off the boat and into the water, but her partner in the back was catapulted off the boat landing yards ahead in the choppy

waves. Luckily, they were both experienced and emerged unharmed. Righting the boat took some time and strength, but they got it up. Of course, the wind hadn't stopped just because they did. As soon as the sails caught the wind again, the boat shot ahead and they had to hang on. They trimmed the sails and got the boat back under control, with quite an adventure to remember.

Chris Bartel points out that when you're on a boat and the wind becomes really strong, you have to deal with it. Quick action is needed. Sail area needs to be reduced so the boat isn't overpowered. There are many things you can do – “reef” the mainsail (fold or roll the canvas upon itself), take down the foresail, adjust the lines. When there is strong pressure on the sails, the boat “heels” or leans to the side in the water. “A little heeling on a sailboat is normal but too much and the boat goes more sideways than forward.”

A few years ago, Diana went out after work for a race. It was around this time of year. The winds in the late spring and early summer can be particularly tricky because the water temperature is so much colder than the air temperature. She remembers the wind that evening being out of the south or southwest. But suddenly, a tremendous gust came up from a different direction. Her crew made quick adjustments – everyone reacted accordingly and did their part as the boat heeled over in the sudden shift of wind. They made it across the finish line safely. But no sooner had they finished than a distress call came over the radio. One of the other boats hadn't been so lucky. When their boom swung wildly across the boat, one of the crew members was caught off guard, struck in the head, and thrown into the water. He died on impact. Diana reminds us: Never underestimate the power of the wind.

Diana's mother Linda is a highly experienced sailor, but she almost gave it up before she ever got started. One summer when she was about four years old, Linda's family had traveled from Catawba and Put-in-Bay. As the day wore on, bad weather started to develop. Her father watched carefully, but determined that the storm had passed by sufficiently to make the return journey safely. What he hadn't seen was that another storm was developing from a different direction. By the time they realized it, there was nothing they could do except hunker down. Linda was only four, but she was not the youngest on board; she had cousins closer to two. They all made it back safely, but Linda was so traumatized by the experience that she refused to go back on the water until she was 13. And then only reluctantly.

Later, when she was in high school, Linda sailed out of Edgewater one afternoon with her father in his Highlander, a 20' sailboat. As they were preparing the boat in the marina, they noticed a single dark cloud in the north. It looked odd to her – just one small, dark cloud. She mentioned it to her father, who assured her that, in his experience, a cloud in the north was nothing to worry about. Storms always approached that time of year from the southwest or west. They set off and everything seemed fine. Several others were out on the water and all was normal. They were beating into the wind when Don suddenly gave a firm command to take down the mainsail and the jib: *right now*. He had seen boats ahead of him caught by a sudden gust of wind and knew they were next. Linda remembers the wind hitting so hard that she slammed against the boom while she was taking down the sail. She was okay, and within five minutes everything had returned to normal. They learned later that sudden gust measured 76 miles an hour. Several boats that didn't react as quickly capsized. No one out on the water that day could ever remember the weather behaving that way, and Linda's never seen it do so since.

Wind is unpredictable. If you think you can't be surprised by it, you're fooling yourself. Bad weather comes, sometimes when we least expect it. I asked Linn Raney about how to handle adverse conditions. He said the best way to deal with bad weather is to avoid it as much as possible. Another trick, particularly for long journeys, is to stay close to the shoreline. That way, when unpredictable storms arise, you're never far from a safe harbor. Linn has gained a healthy respect for the weather and seen his share of what it can do. On a sailing expedition in the Adriatic off the coast of Croatia, a sudden bolt of lightning brought a thunderclap that echoed off the surrounding coves and mountains that he described as sounding like “a machine gun burst of biblical proportions.” He recalls another adventure of crossing the Gulf Stream in the Caribbean where the swells of waves were well above the top of the boat, an experience he says was “interesting.” I'm not sure that's the expression I'd choose.

When I asked Chris about his experience with bad weather, he offered this reflection:

When heavy wind and big waves are surrounding you, initial thoughts are 'I wish I could just get into a harbor now and stop this!' That will take time, though. Once the boat is prepared for the new heavy wind condition, the boat starts acting right and things look up! After 20-30 minutes of dealing successfully, you begin to feel a new calmness and settle into sailing with the new conditions. After all, the boat is built to take heavy weather. It just needs to be prepared correctly at the time.

I don't know if that's what Jesus had in mind when he compared the Holy Spirit to the wind, though he certainly had his share of experience with bad weather on the Sea of Galilee. And though I've never weathered a storm on board a sailboat, I think being born of the Spirit can sometimes feel like the stories these mariners shared with me. The Spirit can take us to places we couldn't imagine, if we have the courage to set sail and let it take us. But we should be warned: the Spirit isn't tame. In fact, it's quite wild. Many people have attempted to domesticate the Holy Spirit throughout time, from Jonah's avoidance of his call to go to Ninevah, to false apostles attempting to use Jesus's name to enrich themselves in the book of Acts, to religious powers that insisting they alone are arbiters of the Holy Spirit. But time and time again, the Spirit makes it clear that it blows how and where and when it will. From the Day of Pentecost to the toppling of empires, from the Reformers to camp meetings, from Aldersgate Street to Azusa Street, the Holy Spirit has a way of showing up and messing up the carefully crafted plans of both the godless and the religious. And it can be a beautiful thing.

God's Spirit isn't always safe, but it isn't reckless, either. Jesus instructed Nicodemus that the Spirit was motivated by God's great love: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Then he added that God didn't send him into the world to condemn it, but to save it. The Holy Spirit, while unpredictable, is not a force that destroys, but a presence that strengthens us, encourages us, and brings out the best God has planted in us. Opening ourselves to the Spirit involves risk, but it may be just the risk we need to take.

In the Disney-Pixar animated film *Finding Nemo*, an overly protective clown fish named Marlin sets off to find his lost son who was captured by a snorkeler on the reef. Along the way, he encounters a forgetful blue tang named Dory, who companions him on his quest. Dory is always up for adventure, but Marlin prefers to play it safe and stick to the plan. Near the film's climax, Marlin and Dory find themselves in the latest of a series of predicaments. In keeping with her character, Dory willingly embraces taking a risk to get out of it, but Marlin is reluctant. "How do you know something bad isn't going to happen?" he desperately calls out.

Dory replies, "I don't!"

As much as we want to be in control of our lives, that isn't how the Spirit works. It can bring us stunning vistas of sparkling water on a clear day or lead us into deep water out of sight of the shoreline. It may carry us far from home or lead us back to the harbor. But whatever the Spirit asks of us, we remember that God doesn't call us to play it safe. We were made for more. We may face heavy waves or rapidly changing conditions. We may need to trim our sails or adjust our course. But we have a source of power that is greater than we realize. A ship in the harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for.

As we make our way through the days ahead – reinvesting in community, emerging from isolation, casting new vision – I pray that we will not be content to stick to safe harbors, but will pay attention to where the Spirit is calling us to go. Let's not be afraid of risk, but watch for the Spirit and step out in faith. Let this reemergence be a time of new awakening to faith, a time to go deeper in being the people God made us to be, a time for stepping out in faith to live more like Jesus. What is born of the flesh is flesh, but we have been born by the Spirit. It's time to catch the wind. Amen.