

“Blowin’ in the Wind”
February 17, 2008

Genesis 12:1-4a
John 3:1-9

How many of you got up this morning, started your day, and, when you were awake enough to think about it, figured you had a pretty good idea of what the day ahead would hold for you? You know the drill. You wake up, remember what day it is, decide whether you can go back to sleep for a little while longer. Then, a little later, you end your internal debate about whether or not you’re going to come to church, and, after that, you know more or less what your morning’s going to be like. You’ll come to church, you’ll hear some music (perhaps less music than you anticipated, though, with no choir this morning), you’ll hear a bunch of words and say a few of them yourself, you’ll sing a few hymns, you’ll have a few goodies in Burlingame Hall, and then you’ll move on to the next part of your day.

And maybe you have the rest of your day pretty well planned out, too. A hike, a bicycle ride, a walk, or perhaps a nap. Lunch or dinner with family and friends, maybe a little shopping here and there or a movie. You may think you know what the rest of the day will bring – *I* may think I know what I’ll be doing this afternoon and evening – but we would do well to remember the words of a certain bumper sticker: “Don’t believe everything you think.” We may think we know what the rest of our day will look like, but there may be untold surprises ahead.

What would you do if one of those surprises landed in your lap this afternoon? What would you do if you were minding your own business, listening to the radio or listening to tunes on your iPod or your iPhone, and then, out of the blue, God starts talking to you the way God started talking to Abram. What would you do if God spoke to you through your ear buds and said, “OK, honey. It’s time to leave all you think you know behind. It’s time to leave the home you’ve known, most of your family, your friends, and the rhythm of daily life that you’ve come to depend on. I’ll let you take a few familiar people and things with you, but, otherwise, it’s ‘so long’ to everything and everyone. Oh ... and one more thing: I’m not going to tell you where you’re going as you leave all that behind. You’ll just have to trust me.”

Leave what you know and move toward you don’t know where. This isn’t something we humanfolk do very well. We tend to cling to what we think we know; we tend to cling to what’s comfortable and familiar. We all too easily fall into believing that safety and security come from what we’ve created, whether our creation is a heavily-armed nation, secure borders, a gated community, a well-funded retirement account, or simply a particular sense of identity, of who we are.

But the safety and security of armed guards or of a well-financed retirement are illusions. Nothing external can protect us from a broken heart, a betrayed trust, a sense of meaninglessness, or the despair of loneliness. And a carefully constructed sense of who we are doesn’t offer any real protection, either. Who we’ve been is not who we are now, and who we are now is not who we’ll be in the future. This is true of us as individuals, and it’s true of us as a community. With the recent deaths in this congregation of so many people who were, to use that glorious phrase, “pillars of the church,” we’ve been

reminded, perhaps a little too often, that the only truly reliable things in life are the constancy of change, the inevitability of loss, and the presence of God in the midst of it all.

The inevitable changes and losses in our lives can come as gentle breezes that are hard to detect, or they can come as whirlwinds that are impossible to ignore. But whatever their intensity, the surprises, changes, and losses are all invitations to place our trust in the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us. They are invitations to trust the God made known to us in a vulnerable infant in Bethlehem and in a dying man on a cross, whose last words included forgiving love. They are invitations to open our hearts to the sacred, loving heart of the cosmos and to trust the power of what Buddhists call loving-kindness.

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye describes this invitation in her poem, "Kindness."

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in the white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he was someone
who journeyed throughout the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

“Before you really know what kindness is, you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go” ... all this must go, so that you – and I – can come to know the healing power of kindness, the healing power of the love of God.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is offering the same kind of invitation to Nicodemus, inviting him to open himself to loss and change and the newness of life they make possible. No one, Jesus says, can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above. No one can experience the fullness of God’s gift of life without being born of the spirit. Reasonably enough, Nicodemus asks, “What in the world are you talking about? How can anyone be born after having grown old?” And Jesus, being Jesus, gives what lawyers would call a non-responsive answer: “The wind [and the spirit] blow where they choose, and you hear the sound of them, but you do not know where they come from or where they are going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Jesus is inviting Nicodemus (and us) to open ourselves to the uncontrollable and unpredictable Spirit of God. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus (and us) to let go of the illusions that our lives will unfold in ways we can predict or control. Jesus is inviting us to let the wind of the Spirit take us into new places and new ways of being.

I heard a very similar teaching many years ago in an AA meeting. Someone said, “When you come to the edge of all you know, when you come to the end of your ability to figure your life out, when you’re standing at the edge of that cliff, you can fall into the abyss *or you can learn how to fly*.”

The wind and the spirit blow where they will. God is always calling us to surrender to that windy Spirit of life, to allow ourselves to be born from above, and to learn how to fly with a heart full of love and arms stretched wide. And I’m convinced that God is calling this church to do the same thing – to accept that our vision of the future is limited, to realize that God is constantly seeking to renew us, and to be ready to receive the wind of the Spirit that’s ready to teach us to fly only God knows where.

Perhaps the time has already come for you, when God has called you out into the unfamiliar, without telling you where you’re going, and has taught you to fly. The time may have already come when you have lived the truth of Jesus’ words from the Gospel of John, that the wind and the spirit blow where they choose, so that we don’t get to know where they come from or where they and we are going. The time may have already come for you, and it may come again -- today, tomorrow, or a year or two from now.

But perhaps the time has not yet come for you when you’ve reached the end of all you know. Maybe the time hasn’t yet come, when God calls you into the reality and truth of what Pema Chodron and other Buddhists call *groundlessness*. But don’t doubt that the time *will* come. It may come this afternoon, when something unexpected happens that

will push you to the edge of knowing and trusting. It may come through the death of a beloved family member. It may come through the sudden end of your job or of the good health you've taken for granted. Or it may simply come all on its own, through the voice of God unexpectedly whispering into your ear or your heart, "Leave who you are behind to become the person I will call you to be." When that time comes and you're called beyond what you already know and who you've already been, when you're called beyond what you believe you can do, jump off that cliff in faith and hope, and then, with the grace of God swirling around you in an uncontrollable wind, learn to fly. Trust God's blowing, unpredictable grace, and learn to fly.

Amen.

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