

## ***“Where the Wind Chooses to Blow”***

Rev. David Gregory

January 5, 2020

Christmas 2



### **First Reading**

*John 3:8 (NRSV)*

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.

### **Second Reading**

from *The Four Elements* by John O’Donohue

One of the terrible deficiencies of most fundamentalism is that the actuality and spontaneity become frozen. The flow and risk of life get totally managed and programmed into categories. Jesus, the young stonemason, came into this atrophied territory and deconstructed it from the inside. He did not undertake this in any deliberate or programmatic way. But any place he appeared, his presence became a challenge. In terms of the etymology of the word “crisis,” he forced them to make decisions either for or against him. For minds caught in this heavy, deadening world of legalism, he made a clearance. “The Spirit blows where it will” is a kind of hymn to spontaneity.

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It is good to be back with you this morning after a little break. On the first Sunday after Christmas, or the first Sunday after Easter for that matter, you’ll rarely find me here. It’s the nature of the beast. Over the years I have discovered that my energy is like a bank account. This was as true when I was young as it is now, but I just didn’t know it back then. In this energy bank, after times of large expenditure, it is helpful for me and ultimately for you if I step back and make some deposits in that account for a while. The great thing about it this time is that we did not travel, and for the first time since our move to Novato, I got to actually experience the place that I live. Specifically, I was able to discover the surprising number of hiking trails that are within ten minutes of our place. Beyond that, there were a couple of jaunts to Point Reyes, and on New Year’s Day a breezy walk on Limantour Beach, where I have to say that I experienced a raising of Celtic Consciousness within me, out there where there was little else but the four elements—those interwoven qualities of the Divine that you cannot find until you spend some time in the natural world.

There was this earth beneath our feet as we trudged through the sand, staring out at the vastness of a watery horizon, listening to the waves crashing their way to shore. There were families with children celebrating the new year around small fires along the beach, the lovely aroma of wood smoke trailing along with us as we walked. And then there is the fourth element—air—*ruach* in the Hebrew, *pneuma* in the Greek, in English: wind, breath, spirit—invisible and yet evident, present and yet intangible. In the mysterious words of John’s Gospel,

*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.*

A prominent Pharisee named Nicodemus had come to Jesus in the dark of night for a secret meeting where he could discuss his own questions in a safe environment. Like most of us, he was carrying the big questions of life, questions that did not seem to be answerable in his own legalistic religious system.

Jesus startled Nicodemus by saying that he needed a new birth. Nicodemus’s response was literal and linear. You’re born once and that is it. Once you spring forth from the womb, you stay sprung. But he was missing the central metaphor. There is a birth which is tangible and visible, like water is tangible and visible. You are born of water. But there is another birth, and this one is a birth of wind. One that you cannot see, but you know it’s there. You see its effects.

This was something of an epiphany for this Jewish leader, steeped in the prescriptions of the law and the tangible practices of the sacrificial system. He keeps asking Jesus, “But, what am I supposed to do?” When you are born, it is not something YOU do. Something else is birthing you. Nicodemus, it’s not about what you’re supposed to do. It’s what you’re supposed to *be*. Be born. Born of water, born of spirit. Sounds a little New Age-y to me, and for a Pharisee who is used to seeing all of life in a binary way, it must have seemed preposterous. The whole exchange is an example of Jesus coming into “atrophied territory” in the words of John O’Donohue, and deconstructing it from the inside.

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He made a clearance in a “heavy, deadening world of legalism.” In other words, in a very quiet and compassionate way, he told Nicodemus to let go of his literal, linear way of thinking and open himself to something deeper.

As mainline Protestants, we often (and not so covertly) congratulate ourselves for getting the metaphors. We look dismissively at fundamentalism’s insistence on a single interpretation of the words “You must be born again,” and excuse our own tendencies toward binary thinking. Progressive Christians can often “out-fundamental the fundamentalists.” We can easily have just as many “either/ors” —they’re just different ones. Nowhere is this more prominently displayed than when we engage in political conversations. *Well, that’s different. For them, it’s a political issue. For me it’s a moral one.*

Don't get me wrong, it is always a moral issue. There were times when Jesus came flat up against the hypocrisy of binary thinking, and he called it out in no uncertain terms. But it wasn't a strategy that he had. This deconstruction was not done in any deliberate or programmatic way. He just showed up, and it was his presence that caused people to make decisions one way or another.

In the last few days I have been listening to total strangers talk about the new year. From my observation, there is general agreement that 2019 receives a fond *adieu*. Optimism for 2020 generally runs high. I can in no way predict anything that's going to happen. Our world has become irredeemably unpredictable. And in times of unpredictability we have been taught to plan, to categorize, to organize, and to produce. Rarely have we been encouraged to quiet ourselves and wait for the spontaneous.

It seems to me that the call of this new year is a call to spontaneity, to show up in a world that needs us to break the inhuman chain of predictability, and rather be "born of spirit," carried by the wind, letting the unseen forces happen. To live this way involves a whole lot of trust. It involves holding life with an open hand. Some would call it faith.

