

Psalm 29
John 3:1-7

“The Capricious, Purposeful Wind”

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It’s funny, but I know less about preaching now than I think I did when I started 39 years ago. I figure I have written and preached about 1800 sermons over the course of my years of ordained ministry. But I have never been able to figure something out: Why does a sermon work, when in my opinion, it has nothing working for it? And conversely, why does a sermon NOT work, when, to me at least, it is well constructed and has a meaningful message? - I just don’t get it.

I’m in the middle of a sermon. It’s a good sermon in terms of structure and content, according to all the measures of hermeneutics I have been taught – it’s one that has fallen together well, and one that I have worked at length. But there I am preaching, and I look out at you, the congregation ... and nothing! Your faces don’t register a thing: dead-pan. O yeah, I can see you.... I begin to wonder, WHY did I want to preach this sermon? ... WHY did I think it was so good? WHAT did I have in mind? WHY did I think it would hit the mark?

Based on your responses (you know, of course that I rate my sermons on what I call the ‘nod scale’) ... based on your attention, or lack thereof, sometimes sermons backfire, roll over and play dead. They kind of limp off into obscurity, when they miss their mark. BUT WHAT IS WORSE – is when they DO work – AND I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY!

I get one of those extra-busy weeks: an unplanned funeral, a meeting at the presbytery office, extra meetings in the evening, an emergency or two at the hospital, and the sermon gets put on the back burner. I intended to get to the sermon earlier and put more work on it, but there just wasn’t enough time.

So late Friday, or Saturday morning I throw together a few weak points and add a couple of trite illustrations: ‘tie a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree,’ ‘he ain’t heavy he’s my brother,’ ‘Christ has no hands but our hands.’ As I preach it, at the weaker points, I preach a little louder and faster, ‘cause I’ve fooled myself into thinking, if it’s a weak sermon, at least be loud, and they will think it is powerful. Then I limp toward the conclusion, offer a quick benediction, run off to the Fellowship Hall, promising God and myself to give it a better try next week. I’ve even been known to tell Glenn, and now Chili, just before a service, “I hope the music is good today, ‘cause you’re going to have to carry me!”

Then the service is mercifully over. I’m standing at the door to shake hands, getting ready to say, “Hey, even Tiger Woods has off-days too.” Or, “Even the best

hitters only bat 300.” Then Sam lam grabs my hand with tears in his eyes: “Preacher, uh, uh ... just thank you, thank you, thank you...” And Penelope Pumpnickel says, “Preacher, your words were perfect. I’m facing surgery tomorrow, and because of what you said, I’m at ease and ready.”

Like ... what happened here? It worked? That sermon worked? Wait a minute Sam and Penelope. Come back here! What did you hear, that I didn’t think I said? So I go back over my manuscript ... Nope ... nothing there. So what happened? It’s difficult to invest yourself in an activity that you don’t understand, you can’t predict and you certainly can’t control. . . . I’ll bet you didn’t know all that was going on ‘behind the scenes,’ did you? Was that too much information??

Late one night there was this church official who came to Jesus. His name was Nick – or more formally Nicodemus. “Teacher,” he began, “we’ve seen you do some impressive things, like turning water into wine at that wedding (even though, ahem... it was a violation of church rules about alcohol in the Fellowship Hall.) “Still, teacher, HOW DO you get into the kingdom of God?” “What do you have to do to get whatever it is that you have?”

Jesus replied, “I have three things I want to say about that:” “Point one: You have to be born from above to see the kingdom.” “Point two: You have got to get the Spirit.” “Point three: The wind blows where it will.”

That was Jesus. . . . Ask him a simple, straightforward question, like, ‘What have I got to do to get what you have,’ and he answers either by asking a rhetorical question in return, or with parables involving birth, Spirit and wind. Nicodemus comes in from the dark – the original ‘Nick at night’, I guess – and he comes seeking light.

What have I got to do? How is it possible? And Jesus answers with surprising images: birth, Spirit and wind.

You want to get into the kingdom? Simple. Just be born from above. “Well, how can you do that? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Can you squeeze back into your mother’s womb to be born a second time? Jesus says, “You can squeeze through your mother’s womb about as easily as you can squeeze yourself into the kingdom. You must be born – NOT AGAIN – but FROM ABOVE.”

The Greek word is *anōthen* which means “from above” or “from the top down.” As an aside, it is the same word used on Good Friday when it is said that the veil of the temple was torn in two *anōthen* –from top to bottom. “So Nicodemus, you have got to be born from above - from top down, from top to bottom.” But as so often happens in John’s Gospel, somebody hears, but doesn’t hear. When Jesus first said born from “above” Nick thought he had heard him say “again.” How can

you be born a second time? No, Jesus says, “Listen carefully – “I said born ‘from above.’” *Anothen*.

Isn't it interesting, when people talk about the passage for today, making it the very hallmark of the Christian faith, the one and necessary path to the kingdom, they often still speak of this the way Nicodemus misunderstood it, rather than the way Jesus explained it. They still say, “You must be born again.” Like they have to be born a second time or something. But no! Jesus said, “You must be born from above. Flesh is flesh. But Spirit is spirit.” What God wants to do with you is a renovation involving an attic-to-basement overhaul: top to bottom. *Anothen*.

“Well how?” asks Nicodemus. “You do it the same way you got born,” says Jesus. What did you do when you got born, Nick?” “Well, I was just floating along in comfort, and then I got pushed out...” “Right! Getting into the kingdom is like that only more so; top to bottom. *Anothen*.”

“Well how?” “ Well, like the wind,” says Jesus. “The wind blows where it will – capricious, yet somehow purposeful.” “You don't know from whence it comes; you don't know where it goes.” “You can't control it, predict it, force it.” Getting into the kingdom is a lot like that, only more so; *pneuma*.”

“Ah, Jesus is that *pneuma* in the ordinary sense of ‘wind’ – or *pneuma* in the theological sense of ‘spirit’?” asks Nick. To which Jesus replies, “Yes.”

Do you too find it interesting that when Nicodemus asked “how,” Jesus responded by citing two of the most mysterious, uncontrollable events in life: birth and wind? How? What did you do to get born? If it were a matter of HOW – a technique, a method – Jesus wouldn't have called it birth; he wouldn't have named it wind.

How? God so loved the world that God gave his only Son ... gave, mind you. Can you say *charis*? Can you say “gift” Nicodemus?” “Ah, did you say *charis* in the ordinary sense of gift – or is it *charis* in the more theologically sophisticated sense of “grace”? To which Jesus replies, “Yes.”

After all these centuries most theological words have become shopworn with usage. But not so much with the word “grace,” for some reason. Mysteriously, even related words like “gracious” and “graceful” still have some of the shine left. Grace is something you can never get, but can only be given. There is no way to earn grace, or deserve grace. There is no way you can earn it, or deserve it, or force it, any more than you can earn good looks, or bring about your own birth.

Writes Fredrick Buechner, “A good sleep is grace, and so are sweet dreams. Most tears are grace, and the smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace; you loving somebody else is grace. . . .” “A crucial assertion of the Christian faith

is that people are saved BY GRACE. That means there is nothing YOU have to do. There is nothing you HAVE to do. There is nothing you have to DO.”

“The grace of God means something like this: Here is your life. You might never have been – but you are because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen, but don’t be afraid. God is with us, and nothing can ever separate us from God and God’s love. There is only one catch: Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be ours ONLY if we reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.” (Based on Fredrick Buechner’s, *Listening to Your Life*.)

OK. So now we have *charis* – gift and grace; *pneuma* - wind and Spirit; *anōthen* - birth from ABOVE. “I don’t understand,” complained Nicodemus. And Jesus says, “Now you’re catching on.” “You must be born from above...” (By the way, the “you” that Jesus uses here is in the plural. So if Jesus was from Georgia, it would translate as, “Ya’ll must be born from above.”)

And we are.... That’s what is so confusing to us. We are such high-achievers, do-it-yourselfers, pragmatic, programmatic. What do we have to do? Is there a particular technique? Is there an instructional video? Can we find something on U-Tube about being “born from above?” Can we read a book about it? Are there any illustrated directions?

That’s kind of the image I have of us as we gather sometimes on a Sunday morning. We come with our little notepads or I-pads ready, to receive our assignment for the week. “Now this week, church, we need to work on our racism and materialism or consumerism; and be sure to come back next week so we can work on something else.”

When I was 10 our family moved from Pittsburgh to Charlotte, North Carolina - the South. Most houses in our neighborhood had air conditioning, but my dad was too cheap to have it installed in the house, or our car. So at the end of a hot, humid summer’s day, after dinner, we would gather on the screened-in porch to talk about our day’s activities, and attempt to escape the heat. Sometimes the pines would rustle and the talk would cease for a moment. We would sit back and take a moment to feel the breeze – the gift of the breeze: *pneuma and charis*. We didn’t know where it came from, or where it was going, but it sure did refresh and restore us.

No, I don’t know as much about preaching as I thought I once knew. But I have come to understand this: Preaching appears to be fragile, unpredictable, capricious ... but that is because, at its best, it is *pneumatic*: it is wind or Spirit-driven. And it blows where it will.

A sermon is a kind of an offering ... at best, it is a gift ... it has potential grace. Faith is a gift; it is a gift from above. So it often surprises us. It comes on those too rare, but delicious Sundays, when a cool breeze ripples through the congregation and choose to blow on you, or me this week. Something wonderful happens, and we sense the grace given from above.

We lay down our plans and projects. We cease our eternal posturing. And we simply enjoy the breeze as we take that deep breath of renewal. It's mysterious; it's amazing. It is the capricious, yet purposeful ... wind. Amen.