

Date: June 11, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Trinity

**SERMON: Blowing in the Wind**

Text(s): Romans 8:9-17; John 3:1-17

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Most of us are probably aware of the controversy surrounding many of the proposals to build wind farms as sources of alternative energy. The plan a few years ago to put a large windfarm out in Long Island Sound is more or less permanently on hold because a lot of boaters and waterfront homeowners didn't want their seascape cluttered up with giant windmills.

Just this week, I read an article that claims that the issue of wind energy is actually creating a major division within the environmental movement. At issue is whether there should be a chain of wind turbines placed along the crest of ridges all down the spine of the Appalachians from New England to Virginia. Some environmentalists are saying the windfarms should be placed on the open prairies in North Dakota where they won't disturb the scenic beauty or the recreational setting of the much-more heavily visited and used mountains in the East. Others say that the Appalachians are the perfect spot, and that people have to choose between cheaper non-fossil energy and their desire for unspoiled scenery. Both groups support deriving energy from wind; whose backyard the wind turbines are in is the divisive question.

There is a lot of energy in wind, isn't there? That energy can be harnessed and turned into electricity to light homes and factories or it can be a force of great destruction.

Wind has always been a source of fascination and mystery. It's so intangible and yet so palpable. We can't see the wind, but we can see what it does, we can measure it, sometimes predict its arrival before it gets here, and devise some ways to harness its energy and turn it to positive ends. But we can't see it. And we certainly can't control it. It's invisible and

powerful, and therein lies much of its mystery.

Perhaps that's why many of our biblical writers use the wind as a significant symbol for the power and presence of God. In our gospel lesson today, we have a story where this connection is made.

This story, like all stories in John's Gospel, is at once very simple, and yet tantalizingly mysterious and complex. The great biblical scholar of the last century, B. F. Westcott once likened the Gospel of John to "a pool in which a child can wade or an elephant swim." And this story has both qualities.

Nicodemus, a leader of the sect of the Pharisees comes to Jesus by night, and the setting in the night is highly appropriate, as the story unfolds. For Nicodemus is not only literally, but personally "in the dark" about Jesus and what he is teaching. He claims knowledge, but shows himself ignorant. He says, "*We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*" But in the dialogue that follows, Nicodemus shows that he really has little if any understanding about what that fine-sounding statement means.

Jesus' response to this statement of Nicodemus seems almost like a non-sequitur. It doesn't follow. Jesus doesn't say, "Yes, I'm glad you realize that I have come from God, Nicodemus." He doesn't say, "Well, it's about time you recognize what's in front of your eyes, Nicodemus." Rather, he says, rather mysteriously, and with great authority, "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*"

Nicodemus now shows that his knowledge of what constitutes God's presence and activity is not nearly as profound as he would like to think. For he doesn't get what Jesus is saying.

"*What!*" he exclaims. "*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*"

Poor Nicodemus. He thought he had God all neatly tied up into the little theological box that he had made to keep God in. He's quite willing to see God's presence in the spectacular signs or miracles which Jesus performs. Human beings can't do those sorts of things, so obviously if someone is doing them, then God must be involved. Like some of us, Nicodemus's god is a god of the gaps. Whatever we can explain by other means, we do, and whatever we can't explain within the framework of our knowledge we assign to God. It's like the insurance companies that insure us against fire or flood or "other acts of God," meaning things that no one can predict or control. The problem with a god of the gaps is that the gaps are continually being closed. Each new scientific discovery closes another gap in our knowledge, and so our god keeps shrinking too. Fewer and fewer of life's experiences need God as an explanation. From viruses to quarks, including the newly discovered "top quark," if we can weigh it, measure it, quantify it, or create an equation to demonstrate its probability, we don't need God. Or if we do, we wall God off into a separate compartment in our minds, confined to Sunday mornings in a service of worship where we are always in control, and where we can safely, and sometimes even beautifully, manage God in our liturgy.

But Jesus blows Nicodemus's respectable middle-class theology out the window. With a clever play on words, the word which can be translated either "wind" or "spirit," he says, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. Do not be astonished that I told you, you must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

God won't be confined to your neat little theological box, Nicodemus. God is free like the wind. God is potent. God is all around you and above you and within you. God is wind. God is

holy breath. God is spirit. The divine wind or Spirit blows where it chooses. You'd better batten down the hatches, Nicodemus, because this wind will either sweep you away or it will blow you straight into the Kingdom of God. But you won't control the wind. It will control you.

And poor old Nicodemus, befuddled and bewildered at having his neat theology turned on its head, exclaims, *"But how can these things be?"*

How indeed? It's important to keep that image of the invisible, mysterious, yet powerful wind very much in the forefront of our minds when we're trying to think about God as we are on this day the church calls the Feast of the Holy Trinity. The Harvard philosopher and metaphysician Alfred North Whitehead regarded the church's doctrine of the Trinity as perhaps the most towering intellectual achievement of the Western philosophical tradition. I'd guess that many of us more frequently feel like the hard-headed old pragmatist who sat in church one Sunday, listening to his new young minister, fresh out of his systematic theology courses in seminary, expounding on the old trinitarian creed of St. Athanasius, part of which says, "the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Spirit incomprehensible." Whereupon the old fellow muttered, not altogether under his breath, "the whole damn thing incomprehensible." While I can appreciate Whitehead's view of the intellectual achievement represented by the doctrine of the Trinity, I rather prefer the description of the renowned spiritual director Martin Thornton, when he calls the doctrine of the Trinity "just about the most practical idea that the Church has ever come up with." I find that a refreshing way to put it. Thornton's point in calling the doctrine of the Trinity a practical idea is simply that it was a doctrine developed in response to what the church experienced and learned about God in living encounters with God. The doctrine of the Trinity was never meant to be an intellectual construction or a solution to a

philosophical problem, even though it was framed and articulated in the philosophical categories of the day.

Rather, it was, and is, a doctrine that grows out of transforming human encounters with God in the concrete realities of everyday life. Nicodemus came to Jesus secretly by night with an agenda. He wanted to find out whether his theology about God was able to encompass and manage what Jesus proclaimed and did. He wanted to manage God, like we all do. But God will not be managed. As C. S. Lewis was fond of reminding us, God is not a tame deity. We can no more manage God than we can manage the wind. We can harness the wind's power and energy, but we cannot manage or control it.

What Nicodemus was forced to contend with was not God as some far-off, holy being, or some impersonal force, or even the power behind the miraculous works of Jesus, but Jesus himself, Jesus a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood person who engaged Nicodemus personally and disturbingly. Moreover, Nicodemus had to contend with the possibility that in this man Jesus, he was in fact, confronting the living God in a way that he had never dreamed of, in a way that he could not manage or control, in a way that simply demanded from him a choice, a decision. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever trusts in him should not perish, but have eternal life."* Do you believe this, Nicodemus? Will you stake your life on this, Nicodemus? Will you see the living God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel in this man Jesus of Nazareth who was lifted up on a cross, placarded before the eyes of the world as a failure and a criminal? Will you see God there, Nicodemus? Will you see in this Jesus of Nazareth, God, not the passionless and static Ground of Being, reduced to a doctrine in the creed, but alive, moving, coming, transforming? Will you see in this man, this flesh-and-blood man the very radiant glory of the Creator of the universe? Will you, in this

man, recognize the Spirit that blows through creation, that blows you and me into life? Will you? Will you let this divine wind blow you into a new existence, Nicodemus?

The doctrine of the Trinity was not developed in order to put God into a box and confine him within our linguistic symbols of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity was simply the nearest we could come to express in human language something of the mystery and power and life that confronts us and calls us and engages us. If the traditional trinitarian language is an attempt to say something true about God, it is not, as St. Augustine reminded us, in order to say everything true that there is to say about God, but simply to avoid the worse problem of saying nothing at all. Austin Farrer once said that we "cannot think the Blessed Trinity. We can do better; we can live the Trinity by grace of the Trinity."<sup>1</sup> What he and Martin Thornton and St. Augustine and all the other great theologians who turned their minds to it were driving at, was that the doctrine of the Trinity does not exist for its own sake. It was intended to help us make sense of our encounters with the living God who comes to us always in the flesh-and-blood encounters with other persons in community. To confess our faith in the Triune God is to acknowledge with awe that in the face of Mrs. Jones, my neighbor or Sam Smith, my colleague, I am seeing the image of the invisible God, who is in God's very self a community of loving relationships. My encounter with my neighbor partakes of the same dynamic as the encounter between the *personas* that make up the loving community that is God. Or, as the author of the first epistle of John puts it, *"If one does not love his sister or brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? . . . The one who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love."*

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<sup>1</sup>Austin Farrer, "Thinking the Trinity," *The Essential Sermons*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991, 78.

In the encounter with God, which always occurs in an encounter with our neighbors, we, like Nicodemus, discover that we are up against life's mystery in such a way that all words and concepts fail us. We know we're in the presence of something bigger than we are. We are confronting no less than the Ultimate Mystery of Life itself. If we will not flinch from that encounter, but attend to God's presence as it comes to us in the presence of others, if we will allow the "three-personed God" to "batter our hearts" with love, and let the divine wind blow, it will fill every particle of our being with the life of God himself, eternal life.

*Blow wind of God! With wisdom blow  
Until our minds are free  
From mists of error, clouds of doubt,  
Which blind our eyes to thee.*

*Teach us to utter living words  
Of truth which all may hear,  
The language all folk understand  
When love speaks loud and clear.*

*So shall we know the power of him  
Who died us all to save,  
So shall we rise with him to life  
Which soars beyond the grave.*