

January 14, 2018

“By Water and the Spirit”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 1:4-11; John 3:1-8

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

*Sing: Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew,
That I may love the way you love, and do what you would do.
Breathe on me breath of God, until my heart is pure,
Until my will is one with you, to do or to endure.
Breathe on me breath of God, till I am wholly thine,
Till all this earthly part of me glows with thy fire divine.*

This is a hymn I sometimes use as a prayer during my morning devotions, and it seems an appropriate way to begin my sermon, for reasons you'll soon see. Today we celebrate “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday. It was actually celebrated throughout Christendom last week, but we had our important New Year's Covenant service last Sunday, so we'll celebrate the Lord's baptism, and ours, today.

So let's begin two thousand years ago, when Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Now when someone is baptized, that person is claimed by God as his beloved son, his beloved daughter, is assured of God's everlasting and redeeming grace, and is given the gift of God's own Holy Spirit. Baptism by water and the Holy Spirit. That's a good thing! But, you might ask, what about Jesus? Why did he need to be baptized? He was without sin, he was the Son of God. Well, the point of Jesus' baptism was primarily to give witness to the power of the Holy Spirit. You see, we typically think of God the Father as “up in Heaven,” almighty, all knowing, all powerful. We think of Jesus the Son as a friend, beside us, teaching us with his words and example, guiding us on our Christian journey. But the Holy Spirit ...well that's sometimes harder for us to grasp. What is it? Where does it come from? What does it do? Well, let's look at the scripture. At Jesus' baptism, the very beginning of his ministry, when he most needed help... when he most needed power, strength and support, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove from God, directly into him, and would guide him from that point forward. And the same holds true for you and me at our baptism.

So let's look more at the Holy Spirit. We've all heard that on Pentecost, the day the disciples and others were filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit was described as tongues of fire, igniting them with a power that would forever change the world. And that's a great metaphor. But I want to focus on today's metaphor – how Jesus described the Holy Spirit to Nicodemus – that the Holy Spirit is like the wind. Like the wind! Because it reminds me of something greater. “Truly, I tell you, no one can enter the

kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear the sound of it, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Here, Jesus seems to be saying that not everyone has the Spirit within them. But for those who do have the Spirit, and allow the Spirit to fill them and use them, they become a different person. Moving, changing, affecting things and people...like the wind. Just think about the mystery of the wind. It can stretch out for thousands of miles, and its patterns and movements are affected by the very workings of God's Creation itself. The wind is unseen, yet it permeates into places all around us, and it has the power to bring about great change. So just think – might we dare to associate the wind to... the breath of God. Where his Holy Spirit permeates into all parts of us, refreshing us, purifying us and having the power to bring great change in our lives.

You know, back at the very beginning, in the book of Genesis, it says, “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” The breath of God filling us, giving us our very life. A life he wants us to live joyfully, abundantly. And don't we want to make the most out of our life? After Jesus' resurrection, the first night he appeared to his disciples, St. John tells us “Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’” preparing them for all that they would face - the good and the difficult. That is why we can and should pray, “Breathe on me breath of God. May I love the way you love, and do what you would do. May my will become one with yours, until I am wholly thine.” Yes, Holy Spirit, move me, change me, fill me.

Think for a moment of a sailboat. Isn't there something beautiful in seeing it glide through the water, sails strong and curved and taut as the wind fills them, setting the course for the boat on its journey. But that boat can only continue to sail like that if it has the power of the wind upon it, otherwise it will just sit there. Now certainly it can look nice just sitting, content where it is, but that's not what the boat is made for. Its purpose is to sail, and it needs the wind to give it its power to accomplish that purpose. And likewise, you and I can just sit around, nice and content wherever we are, but that's not what we are made for. As Jesus implied to Nicodemus, we are made to be filled with the Spirit so that we move, change and affect things and people. We are made to be kingdom-builders for God. We are made to have hearts that love, that forgive, even when we have been wronged. We are made to bring peace and wisdom and understanding to confusing and difficult situations. We are made to be the hands and feet of Christ to those around us, to make disciples for Christ, to make a difference in this hurting and often unjust world. And we can do all these things, only if we allow God to breathe upon us and fill us with

his Holy Spirit. As seventeenth century archbishop Francois Fenelon wrote, “The wind of God is always blowing, but you must first hoist your sails.”

Let me close with a very powerful story told by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin. This story hits home for me because John and I have developed a friendship with the couple that's renting the parsonage, Maria and Dan. Maria is from Venezuela, and although the news doesn't report too often on what's happening there, trust me, it's not good; a dictator trampling over basic human rights, food shortages, hyper-inflation, social injustice, and so much more. It's very nearly a powder keg about to explode, and Maria's mother, father and family are there, and she's worried about where all this might go. Because something similar happened in another South American country, Chile, which is the basis of Rev. Sloane's story. When the Salvador Allende government was overthrown in Chile in the 1970s, thousands of political prisoners were locked inside the National Stadium in Santiago. A young man stood among the frightened and demoralized prisoners, and he began singing a song. A guitar was somehow passed to him, and the Spirit began to blow. Soon thousands were singing with him. As usual, the authorities were threatened by the power of the Spirit, the power of a righteous God, moving so freely and blatantly. So they seized the young man and took him away. When he returned, not only had his guitar been smashed, but all ten fingers had been cut off. The other prisoners drew back. But he walked into the empty space they created, lifted his bloody hands, and began to sing again. Once more the Spirit began to move, the people took up the song, and predictably, the guards moved in again. The next time he came back, there was blood trickling from his mouth. They had cut off his tongue. Many wept openly. For a while he stood dazed and motionless. Then he began simply to sway. Some thought he was fainting. But then they realized the graceful style and swing was a silent dance. And soon they were all swaying silently with him. This time, when the guards came back, the only way to stop him was to shoot him dead. To take the very breath of life out of him. But, you see, the Spirit never stopped blowing through that place. That place, or anyplace where sin or evil seek to take control. Anyplace where change needs to happen. Anyplace where God's will needs to be done for the good of his kingdom.

So today, let us remember our baptism. Where we will be claimed again as God's beloved sons, God's beloved daughters. Where we will be assured again of God's grace upon us. And, most importantly, where we will be breathed on again by the breath of God, and receive his Holy Spirit.