

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

*You must be born from above.... The wind blows where it chooses, you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.*

John 3:1-17

Wind. Breath. Spirit. Soul. Pneuma. Ruach. In the most ancient of understandings, Air-in-motion, breath, wind, is known as the element from which all else originated. Just as our soul, being air, holds us together, so does it—Pneuma and Air encompass the whole world—the words are synonymous. Moving Air. Circulating throughout the body to give it life and a connection to the entire cosmos. Moving Air. When we breathe, we participate, we pray—the Holy Spirit moves throughout. Spirit is immanent—part of everything, just as God is immanent—the creator of everything. In Genesis, God, moves in the darkness above the waters of chaos, out of which creation is shaped and formed. And in humankind, God gives Spirit—the soul and life-giving principle. Moving Air. Mysterious. Unexpected.

More than once, like Nicodemus, I've forgotten to "figure in the wind." A few years back my son asked me if I would construct the setting for his wedding which was to be outdoors at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York. The old brick warehouses have been rehabbed as workspaces for young entrepreneurs. In the middle of the complex is a contemporary glass museum housing the history of the Naval Yard. They chose this site, in part, because Sarah's grandmother was a young secretary who processed young service men being deployed for WWII and worked in one of these buildings and met the man she married—love at first sight. The Brooklyn Navy Yard is now a sort of hip place for young New Yorkers. I, of course, said I would create the setting for their evening—an outdoor wedding and dinner for about 120 people. I won't take you through the design phase and its construction in my backyard and the fact that I drove the set in a truck across the Bay Bridge and even worse, drove that truck with only side mirrors down the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. It had to be unloaded and stored two weeks in advance—and on the day of the wedding it took 5 hours to set it up. But what I will tell you is, that despite my beautiful design and careful planning—in all my calculations, and with all my staging experience—I forgot to figure in the wind. Wind and Spirit. It really does "blow where it chooses, you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." Twenty eight-foot poles, stung with over a hundred lights, mounted and weighted in twenty buckets filled with cement, fell like dominoes when the wind came whipping through those canyon-like, building-lined New York streets. A torrent of moving air. I stood there and watched. As if in slow motion, *boom, boom, boom, boom*, there was not one left standing. I said nothing. I couldn't speak. But I thought, "I forgot to figure in the wind."

Fortunately, the wedding wasn't for another few hours. Three friends, great friends—one a Broadway Theatre Production Manager—filled twenty buckets with water making an outside ring of water around the smaller cement buckets that held up the poles. Water is heavier than cement. I watched as they set everything up as if nothing had happened. Like Nicodemus, I forgot about the wind. Air in motion, breath, wind—the powerful element from which all else originates. Without it we are nothing. Even an old man, Nicodemus— a learned scholar, a teacher, a Pharisee—can overlook something so important, so critical to understanding what it means to be truly alive. We are small, yet part of an astounding movement of God — living, breathing, children of God. Part of a much bigger picture.

Today's Gospel story is an old familiar story — about Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the middle of the night to question him. Nicodemus sneaks around so as not to be seen by the other leaders of the community. It shows just how desperate he was—how desperate the religious community was—how desperately they were all in need of hope to keep them going while under Roman occupation. The Gospels are stories about desperate, frightened people who are sufferers of war—trying to live their lives, raise their children, and hold on to what makes them who they are—their faith. Palestine was an occupied nation, powerless under the rule of their oppressors. It was only a matter of time—there were plenty of signs—the Jewish community was soon to be decimated by the Romans. Nicodemus was looking for any sign of hope. He might have said to the young Galilean, Jesus from Nazareth, “Why should we listen to you? What could an outlier like you, possibly do to save us, when the best minds we have are failing. Ah..... why not? God chooses to do what God chooses. Jesus of Nazareth. Take a closer look.

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An important part of the Nicodemus story is that Nicodemus willingly stepped into the darkness of his life. We can only imagine the struggles and fears he had for himself and his family. The struggles and fears he carried for his students and for the whole community. He was a teacher, looked up to for answers. He was a good teacher, for he was honest—and sought the real answers he did not possess. Perhaps it is his humility and the *sound of the genuine* in Nicodemus that makes him such a memorable part of the story—our story.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, I was recently in Atlanta to meet with an artist—Maurice Evans. As I drove through a dark, rainy night, on highways I didn't know, in a rental car, I felt a bit like Nicodemus. I was hoping to have a conversation that might effect my perspectives, specifically about the difficult and complex issues of race in America. I made the journey because the possibility of seeing things in a new way was enough—enough to keep me going. A great artist works out of his own struggles and perspectives in the techniques and materials he uses to express his ideas —and in the process, discovers and *puts it out there*— truths and lessons to be learned by all. Maurice has a series of four paintings he calls “Flying without Wings.” His harlequin-like figures attempt to fly down the road of life. They move with wheels, they spread their arms, and some have little butterfly wings attached. Each wears a mask, black and white striped tights. They are surreal. Bare feet and hands. There are some bumblebees in the painting, unlikely flying creatures, who seem to do it with ease. Like gazing at a religious icon, one can find hidden spiritual truths in the images. Maurice explains, “Some in our society have had their wings clipped, but look at the ingenious ways they learn to fly! “ I sit with these images. Yes. We are all in this together. Black and white—striped. Imprisoned? We are damaged by the lack of privilege and also because of privilege. We are all trying to fly—without wings. Where is the hope? And then I remember the wind.

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To be born on the Spirit. We only think we need wings and wheels. We peddle as fast as we can and flap about. But the Spirit of God can just pick us up and take us where God wants us to go! Learn to ride the wave, unencumbered. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are able to go so much farther than we realize. With God's help we can accomplish more than we can imagine or hope for. Wait and watch for the wind! The spirit of God! Catch the ride! Hope buoys us up —to get us ready.

For God so loved the world—this is what the gift of the Holy Spirit is all about. Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it—and through the Holy Spirit, God's Will will be done!

AMEN