

John 3:1-8

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus answered him, "Very truly I tell you: no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered,
Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." 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.

Ezekiel 36:24-29

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you.

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God. Join me in prayer. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer ~ Amen

Born of the Spirit

This morning we return to the study of John 3 we started two weeks ago where we focused on the idea of being born of flesh. We saw that people try to please or to pacify God by doing things with their own flesh, but the only flesh that can bring us into right relationship with God is **Jesus'** flesh.

Today we focus to the idea of being *born from above, or born again, born of the Spirit.*

So what does it **mean**, to be born of the Spirit? **How** can we be born of the Spirit? Well, I'm afraid to adequately answer that question you'll need to understand some Greek, and some Hebrew as well. I had a preaching professor who told us our congregations didn't need to know *any* Greek or Hebrew. I think he was trying to prevent us from preparing sermons that were little more than dry language lectures. While I appreciate his sentiment, I believe congregations *do* need to know some Greek and Hebrew. This holds true particularly for the word we know in English as *spirit*. In Greek it is *pneuma*; in Hebrew it is *ruach*; and the Greek and Hebrew are virtually interchangeable. If you're translating from Hebrew to Greek and you come to *ruach* you just put in *pneuma*; all the nuances of meaning of the Hebrew move right into the Greek. That is *not* the case, however, in translating *ruach* or *pneuma* into English. Translators can choose from *three* English words when translating *pneuma*. All three are valid choices, and the translator has to choose which one to use based on the context. *Pneuma* means **Spirit, Breath, or Wind**. Therefore, when you're reading along in your English bible, and you come to the word Spirit, you can usually add, as an aside to yourself, *wind or breath*. Your Bible may even have a footnote to that effect. The same goes for wind or breath.

There *are* other Greek and Hebrew words for breath, some for wind, but you should keep in mind that these three words—wind/breath/spirit—are closely linked in Greek and Hebrew thought. That makes sense if you

think about it: breath is a form of wind; it's wind that comes from our lungs. It's a movement of air. And you can see how breath might symbolize Spirit: it's something you can't see but know is there. Let's look at our passage for today with these multiple meanings in mind:

*Very truly I tell you,
No one can enter the kingdom of God
Without being born of water and pneuma.
What is born of the flesh is flesh,
And what is born of the pneuma is pneuma.*

Now I want to read you another passage; this one is from the Old Testament, and uses the Hebrew word *ruach*:

*In the beginning when God created
The heavens and the earth,
The earth was a formless void
And darkness covered the face of the deep,
While a **ruach** from God
Swept over the face of the waters*

Now, when Jesus says, 'you need to be born of the *pneuma*, the *ruach*,' do you hear the echoes of Genesis, of creation in that statement? Jesus is suggesting that you need to be born *as if you were back in the beginning of creation*, with the wind/spirit/breath of God blowing over you. And then in Genesis 2, the Creator *breathed* (although it isn't *ruach*—it's a different Hebrew word for breath) into the man, and he became a *living (breathing) being*. Breath is life itself.

How long can you go without eating? *Weeks*
How long can you go without drinking? *Days*
How long can you go without breathing? *Minutes*

Pneuma and *ruach* also mean *spirit*. That's the way we usually translate *ruach* when speaking of the prophets: *the ruach of God came upon me*, the prophets would say. The spirit was a way of understanding God's will

or purpose in a given situation. The prophets were able to prophecy because they were *inspired*! Look at the word, *inspired*, for a moment. It literally means *breathed into*! Because the prophets had the spirit/wind/breath of God in them, they were able to proclaim God's word.

So Jesus says we must be born of the *pneuma*:

Born as in a new creation

Born as one given life by God

Born as one given wisdom by God

Born with a new breath, a new spirit.

The pneuma of God

What does that mean for us, for you and me?

Let's look at verses 7 and 8 again:

Do not be astonished that I say to you, you must be born from above. The pneuma 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 pneuma.

I found a concrete image for that passage a number of years ago; it's an image that has helped me understand what Jesus was saying. Larry and I were on the beautiful island of Mustique, deep in the Caribbean. The house we were staying in is named Rutland Hill. It sits high on a hill on the northeast end of the small island. To the east and south is the Atlantic Ocean. To the west is the Caribbean. It's warm and sunny on Rutland Hill.

The sun blazes down at mid-day, but the perpetual breeze (part of the fabled Trade Winds) keeps it bearable.

To the southwest you can see the sheltered cove where we go swimming. It's protected from the wind by Rutland Hill and from the rough seas by a reef. One morning we decided to climb down Rutland Hill itself in order to experience the wild side of Mustique, to feel the full force of the Trade Winds on an unprotected shore.

It was an amazing experience. We left the house under a hot sun and a light breeze. By the time we reached the bottom of the hill, the wind was so strong we could barely hear each other speak. It was a combination of sounds, actually: the roar of the wind, the crash of the wind-whipped waves as they hit the rocks, and the laughter of the stones that made up the beach. Laughter is what the locals call the sound produced by thousands of fist-sized stones being tossed about by the retreating water. The laughter is a *clicka clicka clicka* sound, like a chuckle.

It was just like Jesus said: we could hear the sounds of the wind and feel the force of the wind but couldn't see it: that is, until I noticed a lone tree, determinedly growing a hundred yards up the steep slope. It was undoubtedly strong, having spent its entire existence in the full force of the Trade Winds. But its shape was what intrigued me. Its branches followed the contours of the land beneath it. It grew *up* in response to the sun, but it hugged the hill, twisted, turned, shaped by the relentless wind. And I looked over to the more protected slope where there were plenty of trees, and realized they, too, had been shaped by the wind, not as fierce a wind, but a wind none-the-less.

The next morning, back on top of Rutland Hill, I was meditating and praying when I felt the breeze on my face, and I remembered the linguistic connection between wind and spirit. It was a defining theological moment for me. I realized that here in the sheltered, developed northeastern United States we are protected by and large from the power of the wind. We do periodically experience the force of hurricane winds, but we aren't exposed on a regular basis to the noise, to the power of the wind. On the beach at Rutland Hill, I was awed by that noise, that power. And I saw the evidence of that power: the tree shaped by the wind.

And so it is with the Spirit of God. The *ruach* that blows over our lives isn't supposed to be a gentle breeze that barely ruffles our hair, designed only to keep us cool and comfortable.

NO! The *ruach* that blows over our lives is supposed to be like that powerful, demanding, relentless, transforming Trade Wind. The *ruach* is a wind that shapes us, that makes us strong as we grow in the face of its onslaught. I think it comes down to this. God gives us the choice of where we want to put down roots: up on the top of the hill where it's warm and breezy or down on the rocky shore, where the wind blows hard, making demands of us, shaping us, making us strong.

That's what it means to be *born of the Spirit*:
To put yourself at the mercy of the Almighty God
To plant yourself in the soil of the Living Word
And then to let the *ruach*, the *pneuma* of God shape you, challenge you,
inspire you, bend you, until it becomes evident to everyone who looks at
you that you have indeed been *born of the Spirit*.

So, during this transitional time for your church, I ask you this: are you willing to put yourself at the mercy of Almighty God and allow the *ruach* of God to shape you, as individuals and as a congregation?

Are you willing to allow the *pneuma of God* to challenge you, inspire you, bend you, until it becomes evident to everyone who looks at you that Pollocksville Presbyterian Church has indeed been *born of the Spirit*?

Join me in prayer. AMEN