

Sermon for March 12, 2017 (Lent 2, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

Title: The Wind Blows Where It Chooses

“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.” (John 3:7-8).

My dear friends, what does it mean to be born from above by the Spirit of God who blows in ways we cannot understand?

Here on this second Sunday in the season of Lent, we are given the gift of two amazing stories of new birth, new life arising from the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Abram – not yet known as Abraham – is called away by God, away from his country and his family and his home. Blown by the Spirit to a new land, to a place where he had never been.

Abram was chosen for this task far beyond his understanding.

Do you think that was difficult? You bet it was!

Don’t let the simplicity of this ancient text fool you. It HAD to be incredibly challenging.

And yet Abram walked forward in faith, trusting God and not looking back.

He was, in the truest sense, born again on that day he left for the land of Canaan.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, his mind was blown away by the word coming from this carpenter from Nazareth.

Nicodemus as a learned man, well-respected and faithful, firmly established in the traditions of his people. And yet, the Lord told him that even he had to begin again. Even he had to be born from above.

God had something new in store for Nicodemus, IF he was open to it!

My friends, THIS is how the Spirit of God works! As soon as we think we’ve got it all figured out, when we are secure and stable and settled, the wind blows and shakes and moves everything around!

Recently, a young woman named Megan Phelps-Roper shared her story in a TED Talk. What she had to say is noteworthy because of who she is.

(http://www.ted.com/speakers/megan_phelps_roper)

Megan is the grand-daughter of Fred Phelps, the founding pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas.

Now, in case you don't know, don't be deceived by that respectable sounding name! This is no community of faithful Baptist or even faithful Christians, but rather a group of hate-filled protesters who travel around the nation with bright signs that explain how much God hates America – and anyone who thinks differently than they do!

Westboro Baptist Church once protested in front of the parish I served in Virginia, St. George's Episcopal Church in Fredericksburg. They protested us simply because we welcomed all people and they consider all Episcopalians like us to be headed straight to hell.

Megan grew up standing on street corners holding signs which say "God hates fags" and "Thank God for dead soldiers."

However, somehow – praise God! – Megan began to see a different side of things as she interacted with people on Twitter. Yes, Twitter can be a tool for good things – even healthy dialogue! At least in Megan's case it was.

As she tweeted out streams of hate-filled lines that were carefully taught to her by her family, others on Twitter began to respond to her with grace and kindness and compassion.

Without responding in the same spirit of anger, these people helped Megan to see a different side to God and to the Bible.

Soon, there were enough cracks in her ice-cold ideology for the wind of God to blow through and bring some new life. About four years ago, Megan left her church – which meant being abandoned and ostracized by her family. Now they all hate her as well. But Megan Phelps-Roper is now experiencing that freedom for which Christ has set us free.

Abram had a good life where he was. Nicodemus had his faith all figured out.

Megan was taught to know EXACTLY what God wanted.

But the truth is that God wanted to do something new in all of their lives.

To be born again from above doesn't mean that your old life is thrown away as worthless.

It means that God takes that foundation already in place AND creates something new out of it!

Jesus took the foundation of Abraham and Moses and Elijah and built something new with it – without throwing away the goodness and beauty of that foundation.

There can be a tension between having a solid foundation, a core identity, an unwavering commitment to a set of beliefs, while ALSO being open to new possibilities brought by the wind of God's Spirit.

But both of these are vital and essential.

Think of those who proudly claim an undying trust in science.

They claim unshakeable faith in the scientific method, while also being continually open to new ideas and new truths brought to light by that very method.

Both of those perspectives are necessary.

The same is true in a relationship like marriage. To stay married for 50 years or more requires both of these same commitments. One must have an unwavering commitment to the marriage, while also being continually open to the changing reality of who your spouse is, because all of us change and adapt over time.

Just imagine: if the one who claims faith in science ALSO sticks to the things that she learned about science in school and resists all new theories, well then that person is not actually faithful to science at all! Instead, she clings to a past set of ideas which may not be true after all.

Or if a married man claims commitment to his marriage while also expecting his spouse to remain exactly the way she was on the day of their marriage, well then that man is not actually committed to his spouse at all! Instead, he is committed to some kind of illusory statue – to some person who once existed but does no longer.

The same dynamic is at work in our relationship with God! As soon as we think we have God figured out, as soon as we think we know what God is asking from us, then we are not actually committed to God at all, but to our own ideas, to our conceptions, to our perception of what God desires.

To walk faithfully in the way of Jesus, we need a firm foundation, a clear understanding of who God is and who God has made us to be and how God loves us unconditionally.

And then, with that firm foundation, we must move and grow. Follow the wind of God's Spirit into new lands, like Abraham, into new horizons of thought, like Nicodemus. If we stay put and resist new ideas, new realities, then we are not faithful to the God who walks with us in the path of life, but rather to a false idol, some kind of statue that promises safety and security because it never changes.

My friends, this is such a basic reality about our life as human beings.

For instance, do you know that recent research suggests you will have better outcomes with a doctor fresh out of medical school than with a doctor who has 20 years of experience?

This is not true of all doctors, of course, but this research suggests that many will stay true to what they learned years ago, to what has worked for them so far, to what has gotten them to where they are now, and so they will not be as open and knowledgeable about new treatments and new options as the young doctor.

Pop culture mistakenly talks about the survival of the fittest. You hear that phrase all the time; it's a common refrain which claims to be a summary of Charles Darwin's idea of natural selection and how it works. But what does it mean to be the fittest? Darwin did NOT mean physical fitness, but fitness in terms of suitability.

To be a natural fit for a particular job does not mean that you are physically stronger than others but better adapted to the needs of the task.

Survival of the fittest does not refer to strength and stamina, but rather to adaptation. Those who are most able to adapt and to fit within a changing environment are the ones who are most likely to succeed and thrive.

Consider this: do you know why the Shakers failed to succeed and thrive?

Their ideological convictions from the past told them that human procreation was wrong. So they grew and prospered by taking in young orphans, especially after the devastation of the Civil War and the successive waves of Yellow Fever and Smallpox epidemics.

Not all of the orphans stayed once they reached adulthood, but enough did to allow these communities to thrive. However, near the turn of the 20th century, states began the contemporary practice of foster parenting within private homes. Orphans no longer made their way to communities like the Shakers. Without this influx of young people, and without young of their own, they have died out entirely. Only 2 Shakers remain alive today – right here in Maine, about 20 miles away.

Here is a classic example of the failure to adapt and the failure to thrive, because they could not find a way to remain true to their foundation AND adapt to changing circumstances.

But God calls you and me to both.

So what does it mean to be born from above by the Spirit of God who blows in ways we cannot understand?

It means to know who we are. To be clear about who God has made us to be, and called us to be.

But also to not be overly attached to our own ideas and thoughts. And to be ready! Because the wind of the Holy Spirit blows wherever it chooses, and we cannot control it!

It means being carried away to places you never imagined and discovering new possibilities!

Because God is always calling us forward. May you have the courage always to follow where the Spirit leads. Amen.