

May 27, 2018

Trinity Sunday

John 3: 7-8

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your word. Make it live and breathe anew, with the power of your breath. In the name you wore on earth, we pray. Amen.

Video Chats and Jetpacks

One of my favorite shows is “Madam Secretary” on Sunday nights. Whenever there’s a world crisis -- and there’s one a week -- Secretary McCord gets the president or ambassador of another country to video chat on her laptop.

And we don’t blink.

But that was the stuff of science fiction not too many years ago. In fact, when people ask us how we can stand having our children live in Europe and California, that’s part of it. When you are able to see them live and on screen over Saturday morning coffee, it makes things a lot easier.

On “Madam Secretary,” the State Department gets a lot of intel from drones. And whenever the Navy Seals go in, Secretary McCord and the President watch it live, in real time, from the White House War Room. What I remember watching on futuristic movies not so long ago is up and running.

On the other hand, most of us who grew up in the 1960s figured we’d be flying around with jetpacks by now.

That's pretty much what *The Jetsons* promised: Individual jetpacks to propel us straight up, then like the crow flies to church, to the grocery store, to the jetpack Spinx station.

Instead, five years ago, I remember reading in *The Greenville News* a story headlined, "Robotic housefly takes first flight."

Scientists at Harvard were all excited that they had invented a robotic housefly. Tethered to a thin copper wire, it could fly for 20 seconds.

And I remember thinking, *What exactly do we need done by houseflies that the real ones aren't accomplishing? Do we need more picnics ruined? More disease spread? More buzzing when we're trying to sleep?*

I was so confused that I read the article over several times, trying to figure out why these smart mechanical engineers from Harvard thought that creating an artificial housefly was a good thing. I'm still not sure I got it, but it had something to do with the aerodynamics of its wings.

Apparently, insect wings are far more complex than fixed aircraft wings. They can both flap and rotate at the same time.

The news story ended with the next step – creating a battery light enough to power the houseflies beyond 20 seconds. That didn't seem like much progress.

But I gave the Harvard guys the benefit of the doubt. I assume that somewhere down the line, this duplicating of insect flight may have practical applications – maybe for space flight, for aircraft, for drones. Maybe for jetpacks.

With inventions and medicine, research comes before application.

In other words, we can't always know what's going on. We can't always see the result of seeking knowledge.

So it is with an aspect of our faith – in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Last week at Pentecost, we read the incredible story in the book of Acts about the Holy Spirit whooshing onto the apostles in Jerusalem – just as Jesus had promised.

The third person of the Trinity made an explosive entrance amid fire and wind. But there had been earlier hints about the Spirit, and that's the content of our Scripture passage today.

In the gospel of John, Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus have a conversation. Nicodemus seems to sincerely want to learn the source of Jesus' healings and miracles.

Jesus answers, **“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”** (John 3: 3)

Nicodemus is confused, and asks how one can enter his mother's womb a second time. This is the passage we usually focus on – the meaning of this notion of being born again. But we're going in a slightly different direction this morning.

Please turn in your Bibles to **John 3: 7-8**. This is Jesus talking.

“⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.”⁸The 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.’

You know, so often in preaching, we focus on what we can *do* to be better Christians. What we can *do* to be more loving, more service-oriented, more neighborly, more Christ-like. I will cop to being the No. 1 offender. That is what I usually preach.

But there is another side to our faith.

And that is the non-practical side. The mysterious side. The mystical side.

When we talk about the Holy Spirit, we always arrive at a point where the natural world, our logic, our reason, hits a wall.

That is what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is saying that the Spirit behaves like the wind. We don't know when and where it will come. But often we can see evidence of where it's been.

Sometimes, with the wind, we see it in downed trees and power lines. Sometimes, with the Spirit, we see it in a life so changed there's no other explanation.

Other times, with the wind, we see no evidence at all after it's blown through. Sometimes, with the Spirit, we see nothing at all – nothing, at least, that we can point to. But perhaps there's been a quiet spiritual rebirth all the same.

The problem is we can't control the Spirit anymore than we can control the wind. We can pray. We can hold revivals. We can beg for revelation.

But the truth is, we have no control over the movement of the Spirit.

That's why I asked Marc to sing "Her Mercy" today.

Mercy, mercy, coming to you

Feel her beauty flowing through you

She will unbind you, set the word free

Mercy, mercy

What is that if not the movement of the Spirit? Setting the word free.

For many decades, David Smith was the pastor of First Baptist Church of Lenoir, North Carolina. Before he retired, he brought a team of his deacons to visit Triune. He was challenging them to move into more hands-on mission work after he left.

I always thought that was remarkable, that at the time of his retirement – when I would be thinking *How fast can I get to the beach?* – he was thinking about the health and vibrancy of his church.

David told me about living as a missionary for awhile in Ecuador, South America, and leading a six-week Bible study.

The Bible study was held in a house in the poorest section of the city where he lived. The house was just one room with a loft, so he had to climb a ladder to the loft every week.

Ten children and three adults attended the study. Each week, two of the adults helped push and pull the elderly lady next door up the ladder.

This elderly neighbor spent the entire six weeks either scowling at David or falling asleep during the class.

He considered the entire six weeks a disaster.

On the last night, he thanked the children for coming and prepared to leave. And as he gathered his books, this scowling elderly lady said to him, “I want to follow Jesus.”

David almost fell out of the loft.

There was no explanation, he said, except that the Holy Spirit had defied his expectations, had defied everything he knew as a seasoned Bible teacher.

The Holy Spirit is in the defiance business.

The Holy Spirit is in the defiance business.

I wonder if that's why revivals have gone out of style. When I was growing up, every church had a revival once a year. You don't hear so much of that anymore.

The point of revival was to invite the Holy Spirit to sweep through a church. To *entice* the Holy Spirit to sweep through a church.

Perhaps, we don't have revivals anymore because we've learned that we can't force the Holy Spirit to respond to "Just As I Am." We can't force the Holy Spirit onto our time table.

This activity of the Holy Spirit is closely linked to another message in the Bible, the message that Jesus talked about probably more than anything else. The message, in fact, that he referenced four verses before today's Scripture – **"I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."** He was always talking about the kingdom of God.

If we don't always notice the work of the Holy Spirit, neither do we always recognize the in-breaking kingdom of God. Nor can we control either one.

Jesus tells a parable in the gospel of Mark that underlines this.

Mark 4: 26-29:

26 He (Jesus) also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, *he does not know how.*

'²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

While this farmer set the action in motion by planting the seeds, he had no control over their growing – any more than Rev. Smith had control over his seeds taking root in the sleeping Ecuadorean woman's mind. The Holy Spirit takes over when we cannot.

As I've mentioned before, our work at Triune is usually about action. It's about orthopraxy more than orthodoxy. An emphasis on right practices rather than right beliefs.

One is not better than the other. I think it's probably a matter of the personality of church members as much as anything.

But as Jesus reminds Nicodemus – and us – there is a part of our faith that has nothing to do with practice or action. There is part of our faith that simply involves being open, flexible, welcoming, to the movement of the Spirit. To her mercy.

We sleep and rise and know not how the Spirit moves. But move it does.

It is no accident that Jesus uses a metaphor of wind for the Spirit when he talks to Nicodemus. The Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma* – translated as a current of air, a breath, a breeze, a wind.

When we get *pneumonia*, it is a disease of the breath, a disease of the lungs.

“⁸ (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 Spirit.”

Just as we are powerless before the mysterious wind – be it a gentle breeze or a violent tornado -- we are powerless before the Holy Spirit. As we understand the work of the Spirit, it is always responsible for transformation.

We can plant seeds. We can water. We can speak the gospel. We can encourage.

But we cannot make seeds grow into plants. And we cannot make believers out of non-believers. That is the work of the Spirit.

All through the gospels, we hear Jesus preaching about the coming of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is coming. The kingdom of God is approaching. The kingdom of God is near. Whether we believe it or not, whether we recognize it or not.

These passages in John and Mark make similar claims. The Holy Spirit is active whether we believe it or not, whether we recognize it or not. The kingdom of God is coming, whether we believe it or not, whether we recognize it or not.

Our choice is not whether to help the kingdom of God along, or even build it, though we sometimes use that language. Our choice is simply whether to align ourselves with it.

In our Lord's Prayer, we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, said, "The kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us." (*The Book of Concord*, Fortress Press, 1959, p. 346)

"Let thy kingdom come ... and let me align myself with it."

Likewise, we may pray that the Holy Spirit fall afresh on us.

But we can't force it to.

What we can do is admit there are places in our faith where our works and our reason cannot take us. We can't always know what's going on. We don't always see the results.

Robotic houseflies may or may not get us to a new plane in aviation.

But our Scripture promises that the Holy Spirit can blow us into the kingdom.

Amen.