

“Blowing in the Wind”
Final Chapel Sermon by Ed Christman
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Transcription by Laura Altizer 2004
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An eighty-seven year old woman called me last week. She said, “Ed, I’ve been thinking about something and pondering something, and I just wanted to know what you could say to my question. Where did God come from?” I was a little ahead of schedule last week so I was beginning to prepare for this sermon. I said, “Well, Mary the answer is blowing in the wind.” I said, “We don’t know where God came from. Oh someone says that the horizon is the hem of God’s garment. That doesn’t answer your question.” She said, “Well, I guess I didn’t know that you would have the answer, but I do know where I am going.” I said, “Well, that’s your answer to where God comes from.”

A person somewhat younger is sitting in a high powered meeting and by his own words he said, “I had an epiphany. I suddenly listened and looked and I wasn’t interested in any of the things they were saying or any of what these fine people were talking about. Their language, their words seemed to be strange to me.” He had an epiphany, which is to say he’s going to have to make a change. The wind blows where it wills, and he is going to have to change.

A recent graduate returns and she said, “Your advice to me five years ago was that I was going to do many things in my life, different things. So I took the job with the religious group and I did that for a while, and now I’m an Irish folk singer.” The wind blows where it will.

But let’s not leave the younger generation out. The Bible tells a powerful and poignant story about Jonah. Now many of us at whatever age have tried to run away from the wind that’s blowing in our face and hide from God. Jonah failed at that. He finally got the message, and he preached at Ninevah and thousands of people were converted to the Lord’s way. Then he went out of town and sat down on a stump and began to sulk real big time, sulking. Somehow he knew that wherever the wind was blowing God was there, and he said, “I knew that was what you would do. I knew you were a God of grace and not of law. You saved all those people and I am angry,” he said, “to God. And I want to die.” God said, “Jonah, all kinds of people heard your message. And besides Jonah, what do you think about their cows.” That’s where the story ends? So there are two possibilities aren’t there, and let me modestly suggest what they are. There was something about a little tree that helped give him shade, and then the tree went away and he was just baking in the sun. Jonah continues to be angry. He continues to want to die and he shrivels up and he dies. On the other hand, the Ninevites to whom he has preached who have heard the words of God and are rejoicing, they go out of town to have a picnic and they see him over there and they say, “Hey. Isn’t that the young person who preached to us? Let’s invite him to our picnic.”

The Bible is a buffet of stories that have some non-endings like Jonah and leave us to figure it out. The Bible is full of nourishment if we will only pay attention to it. Nicodemus paid attention. He studied the law. He understood it.

He practiced it. He was a good man. But he comes to Jesus at night, not because the sun had gone down but because Nicodemus, without knowing it, was in the dark. He begins his conversation with Jesus and Jesus says, "You must be born again. You must be born from above." It's at that point that this good man limited his own vision by a literal interpretation of those words. How can a grown man re-enter his mother's womb? Jesus said you must be born again. Now if Jesus had wanted to push the envelope a little bit, he would have said you must be born again and again and again and yet again. But he left Nicodemus to ponder what he had said, you must be born from above. The wind blows where it wills and the spirit of God is alive in the world. Nicodemus began to get the message. For when Jesus was brought before the leaders of the people, they genuinely saw him as a threat. They were not going to provide the usual customary trial, which the law provided for. Nicodemus said, "He's entitled to be heard." They said, "You a teacher?" Well, in point of fact he was living out the teaching. He was doing what the law said. He was being fair. They said, "Who are you anyway? Are you from the backside of the universe, Galilee where he's from. No prophet, no great teacher ever came from there." Nicodemus was there when Jesus died. He began to sense something about the blowing of the spirit. It blows where it wills. It's not always pleasant, is it? It's often sad.

There will be a service for Nancy Priddy in Davis Chapel at four o'clock on Monday. Nancy Priddy who worked at the university in Residence Life for several years. When she got the word that she was going to die of cancer, she told me I am not afraid to die. Nancy Priddy was not afraid to live either. She filled the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run and lived as long as she could, the best that she could. and at that memorial service there will be tears to be sure and there will be laughter as well. She would've had it no other way and since she was in the business of making room assignments, someone has already said, "Well, we don't know what heaven's like, but if there are any room assignments to be made, Nancy will make them."

The spirit blows where it wills at dedications, at marriages and memorial services, at initiations. In this chapel and at Davis Chapel people gather for prayer and they sometimes sing quietly or with others or they play the piano, they play the organ, they have found a place of quietness where the spirit blows ever so softly and ever so completely. The spirit blows where it wills. It blows in your rooms, doesn't it? It blows in the library. It blows on the trail to Reynolda Village. It blows in the car with the music playing loudly while you're on the way to the beach or anywhere else. The spirit of God blows sometimes quietly, sometimes with great force. But the spirit blows where it wills.

Who among us is going to write the songs, the words the lyrics, the music that will keep us on fire? Who among you is going to take a song that hasn't been set to music and set it to music? Who is going to write some new songs for our edification to demonstrate that the spirit blows where it wills? Who is going to teach? Who is going to preach? Who is going to get their hands into the mud of life's goriness? Who is going to sing? Who is going to pray? Who is going to preach? Who is going to teach? The spirit blows where it wills. We do not know and we cannot predict its blowing.

We can only listen for it in the quietness of our hearts and of our minds. The spirit blows. Do you hear it? Do you hear it in the sounds of silence? Do you hear it in the noisy street? Do you hear it when you are walking the quad, especially at night? Do you hear it? If you hear it, will you heed it and not be afraid?

Last week I was in a doctor's office and the spirit blows where it wills. I see there a framed picture, a framed copy of words by Nelson Mandela who spent over a quarter of a century in a South African prison. These were remarks that he made at his inaugural address as president of South Africa. "It is not the darkness that we are afraid of. It is the light that we have that makes us afraid because it reveals who and what we can be and what we can do. God has put the light of life," he said, "into not some of you but every one of us. This is not the time to withhold your talent, your skill, your ambition, your joy so that someone else won't feel intimidated. This is not the time," he said, "to live small for you have been given the gift of light of almighty God. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine." God's breath breathes on you and on me. Loudly and softly hear it and live as if it is true that the spirit blows on you and me, now and always. Amen.