

*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.*

Perhaps you remember the story of Mary Poppins, who, complete with her traveling carpetbag, was blown by a very strong East wind to Number 17 Cherry Tree Lane, London, to the Banks' home to care for their children. Later, once her work is done, she abruptly leaves when she opens her umbrella, and the West wind carries her away.

These days, I am feeling a bit like Mary Poppins, blown into Christ Church by the East wind, which was aided by the then Christ Church clergy and my wonderful discernment committee, as I was ordained and became your Deacon in February 2010.

One's life opens up in mysterious and wonderful ways.

It is no accident, but rather through another wind of the Holy Spirit, that our Old Testament lesson, on this the very last day I will preach here at this pulpit, is about Abram being told to leave his home and to go to the land *that the Lord will show him*.

As I shared with you in my retirement letter, I also have been '*told to go*'. In my case, I am to go to Boston, later this spring.

When I mentioned, to my own Spiritual Director, that Christopher had invited me to write my retirement letter to all our wonderful parishioners, my Spiritual Director told me, "*You know, you must include the guidance you received.*"

And, so, being obedient to sound spiritual direction, I did include, in my letter, the guidance I received.

A few days before the letter went out, I shared with our terrific Christ Church staff the news that I am retiring and leaving Christ Church. I mentioned that my letter is quite *spiritual*, to which Leah Romanelli, our wondrous Youth Minister, said, "*Well, this is a church.*"

Our Gospel reading today is all about the puzzlement of Nicodemus when Jesus tells him one must be **born from above**, in order to see the kingdom of God. This puzzlement of Nicodemus I've always found to be quite delicious to contemplate, as it goes to the heart of Christian spiritual formation. When I was a little girl, attending Sunday School at St James Church in Farmington, Connecticut., if you had asked me what my concept of God might be, I would have said, "*God has a white beard and sits up high on a cloud. He can see me when I take a cookie from the cookie jar, but he is kind and loves me, and I will be forgiven.*"

The kindness and mercy of God has stayed with me, but as I grew up and was educated, first at an Episcopal girls' boarding school, and later at Wellesley College, my ideas of God were on somewhat of a roller coaster. Through most of college and graduate school, I was a secular humanist. To my rational mind, there was no way God could be proven to exist.

Admittedly, there was an early hint of this reasoning within me, when my Brownie troop was taken by train to New York City for a field trip. We had tea at The Plaza Hotel, which Eloise has made famous. At tea, as a third grader, I explained, to my friends, the Brownies, and to our

chaperones, that no one could prove that God exists, so maybe God doesn't exist. Our chaperones were aghast at my declaration; that I remember well, to this very day.

Yet doubts and questioning are all part of the spiritual journey of faith. In the fall of my sophomore year in college, as I continued to doubt the existence of God, President Kennedy was assassinated. I felt shaken, in the deepest possible way; I went straight to the Wellesley Chapel, where I had never been and where I then spent a long time in prayer. Finally, when I returned to my dorm room, I was startled to see that a number of my friends were waiting for me, in the hopes that I might comfort and reground them into this new reality. Fueled by my time spent on my knees in the chapel, I was able to meet them where they were in their fear and grief.

Though I could not have explained it at the time, I was beginning to be guided by the Holy Spirit. God was at work in me, and I did not know it.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus by night, in the darkness, not only so he won't be seen by his fellow Pharisees and Jews, but also because he himself feels he is in the darkness. Not quite knowing what he feels or thinks, Nicodemus is drawn to this new teacher, Jesus.

Nicodemus says to Jesus, "*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.*"

And Jesus responds to Nicodemus, saying, "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*"

Nicodemus, who has the literal mind I had as a little girl imagining God with a white beard sitting on a fluffy white cloud in the sky, is incredulous. He asks, "*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?*"

I imagine that Nicodemus was thrown into personal confusion and doubt by what must have seemed a very enigmatic teaching, which he has received from Jesus. Like me in my college years, I imagine that inside Nicodemus was a swirl of open ambivalence, with his belief in the Yahweh of his Jewish faith, along his lively sense that Jesus has something very precious to teach him.

Jesus's simple statement, that "*You must be born from above*", must have thrown Nicodemus into internal confusion. To my mind, confusion is far preferable to certainty, for it means that one's mind is open to new understanding.

In my own inner confusion and questioning, I continued to grapple with the concept of being born from above, of somehow letting faith enter and change you, just like the wind, which *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.*"

After college I was drawn to attend the Episcopal Church, wherever we were living. In Winnetka when my older boys were young, we brought them to Christ Church and enrolled

them in Sunday School. Both boys turned out to be superb ice hockey players, and their teams practiced on Sunday mornings. There went Sunday School.

Fast forward to 1992. My second son, who suffers from severe schizophrenia, had been hospitalized several times, only to walk out, medications in hand. The hospital social worker told us he would be a '*revolving door*' patient, as he would not, ever, be compliant with medication. I was worried sick about the danger he posed to others and to himself, out in the world.

One Sunday morning, I '*heard*': "*Get up and go to church.*"

Raised to be obedient, I dressed up in a dress and high heels, and as I came down the stairs my dogs, who were accustomed to seeing me in blue jeans, thought I was a stranger, and they actually barked at me. I came to Christ Church. During the service tears were coming down my face. The nice lady in front of me, turned around and gave me a kleenex. Later I learned that the nice lady was Bev Prevost, wife of Rector Ned Prevost.

That Sunday morning, when I went up to take communion, and I was down on my knees, totally humble and open, totally vulnerable and lost, I received a beautiful message: *You are not alone, I will be with you to guide you.*

In that moment, at the communion rail, I believe I was *born from above*. As I stood up, all my fears and anxieties about my son evaporated. **I was not alone. I would be guided.**

From that moment on, I have been open to God's guidance in my life. My faith is very real and very deep. My job is to be alert and aware, open to the wind of the Holy Spirit. My hope for Nicodemus is that, sometime in his own life, he had a similar experience, which is beyond reason and logic, and that he came to know, deep within, that he also was '*born of the Spirit*'. He could indeed *be born from above*.

There are two later mentions of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. The second time Nicodemus is mentioned, he reminds his colleagues in the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Council or Court, that the law requires that a person be heard before he is judged. Finally, Nicodemus appears after the Crucifixion of Jesus to provide the customary embalming spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes, and he assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial.

We are not told, for sure, but my sense is that Nicodemus, having questioned Jesus, and having received the teaching that he must be born from above, became both a defender of Jesus and a devoted disciple, in his own way. He had become open to guidance, and, in that sense, had become born from above.

To receive new teaching, we must have enough space in our busy minds to be open to receive new teaching. Nicodemus's mind clearly was open. From the literal thinking of childhood, most of us do experience questions and wonderings, and hopefully we come to believe, to understand, and to feel that we are indeed born from above. That is the general journey of spiritual formation, which continues and deepens all throughout our lives. The key is always to be open to the incoming of God's grace, which is both unexpected and unearned, into our lives.

Lent is a perfect time to clear out the inside of one's mind, to let go of the cobwebs of fears, anxieties, unhealthy habits, angers and grudges, resentments and ambitions, jealousies

and insecurities, to let them all float out of your busy mind, so as to leave a clarity and spaciousness. In the new space created by the emptying of what we no longer need, or even want, the wind of the Holy Spirit will find space to enter.

To quote Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and superb spiritual teacher: *The idea is to keep the spirit alive, grateful, fresh, and joyful. We are about growing into the goodness, trust, and abundance that is there to meet us at every step of the way.*

Trust the process of inner faith being nurtured and fed, deep within you, just as the seeds of spring flowers, nourished by sun and rain, are coming up through the hard ground of winter. One's faith, while a slightly different process in each of us, does grow, deepen, and flourish. We do become open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We do become born from above.

And so, on Easter Sunday, after I have Dismissed you all in love and blessing, I will, like Mary Poppins, open my umbrella and let the West wind carry me, gradually and safely, East in the general direction of Boston, where I have been called.

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)*

Sermon by Heath Missner on March 12, 2017  
Christ Church Winnetka