

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 20, 2011
Rev. John Tapscott

"AS COMES THE BREATH OF SPRING"

John 3:7,8

It's the first day of spring, and we're just starting to feel the warm breezes of spring come our way. Perhaps we're a bit impatient, because it was a cold winter. But the breath of spring is coming and that encourages us as we wait. The spring breezes and the warm sunshine will do us a lot of good. In John chapter 3, Jesus compares God's Spirit to the wind. In verses 7 & 8, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "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." Here is good news. Just as the warmer winds of spring are moving in our direction, so too, is the wind of God's Spirit. God's Spirit is blowing towards us, bringing us new birth from above.

One night Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, came to Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "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 told him, "Very truly, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus thought Jesus was telling him that he would have to be born again physically. But Jesus was talking about being born again spiritually. Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the 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.'" Older versions of the Bible translate this phrase "born from above" as "born again."

Unfortunately, that phrase has been used to divide Christians into camps, those who are "born again" and those who aren't. But there are not two classes of Christians, for every true Christian believer has been "born from above" or "born again." The passage we read concludes with Jesus' magnificent words. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Notice the stress on belief or faith in these verses. You see, being "born from above" really means coming to faith in the Son of God. It means hearing of him, turning to him and trusting Him as

One through whom you receive new and eternal life. Jesus was telling Nicodemus and the Jewish leaders that in order to see the Kingdom of God, they needed to go beyond seeing Jesus as a great teacher and a worker of miraculous signs. They needed to see him and trust him as the God-given Saviour, the one through who we all gain access to the Kingdom of God. And if they would become open to it, then God's Spirit would bring them to faith. This is God's gift to all who put themselves in the way of God's constantly moving Holy Spirit. "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."

It hadn't yet happened to Nicodemus and the other Jewish leaders, but it's happened for most of us here today. We are Christian believers. We trust Jesus; we follow him; we bear his name by baptism and faith. By God's Spirit we have been "born from above" or "born again", if you will. And if you are not yet a believer in Jesus, then I hope and pray that God's Spirit will move toward you in a powerful way and bring true faith alive in you.

So most of us here today don't need to be born again the first time, for that's already happened to us. But most of us may need a spiritual re-birth. You see, being born from above doesn't happen just once. Certainly there's a first time when you came to faith and confessed your faith before the church. But being re-born spiritually can happen to us many times. And that's good, because we need to be "born from above", not just once, but often.

You see, over time we can lose our spiritual vitality. It's not that we lose our faith so much, though sometimes it may seem that we're holding on by a thread. But our spiritual energy can run low. Our joy in the Lord dries up. We find it hard to pray. Reading God's word becomes a dull chore rather than an adventure in which we expect hear God speak to us. We become weary and discouraged in well doing because even the good we do seems to make so little difference. Illness or other personal problems can drain not only our physical energy but our spiritual energy, as well. The effect of a long winter can easily dampen our spirits. So too can the demands of life, the constant struggle to keep up with issues and deal with problems. Our spirits can be weighed down by the constant string of bad news we hear on the 24 hour news channels, or by the death and decay we see all around us. Of course, we see the terrible loss and destruction from the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. How dreadfully tragic was the death of seven children two weeks ago in a Pennsylvania farmhouse fire. And the loss of two volunteer firefighters in Listowel.

Sometimes the sadness is closer to home. I had a cousin 47 years old die two

weeks ago after suffering a stroke. Paul had been plagued with health problems for most of his life, and though he was able to deal with some of them, others came and took their place. He just never seemed to get untracked or find direction in life. Yes, we celebrate the health and long life and achievements of many people, but there are many for whom life seems short and unfulfilled and difficult. The burdens they bear trouble us. So the sadness of life and death can take away our spiritual energy. And our spirits become dulled not only by the sin of the world, but also by our own sin. Even those of us who have been "born from above" know what a hold sin has on us. The same old sins just won't let us go and we find it so hard to throw them off. We cry out with the apostle, "O wretched person that I am, who will set me free from this body of death?"

Yes, there are many reasons that we can lose our spiritual vitality. And perhaps some of us feel like this right now.

But if this is where you are, there is good news. Jesus said, "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." God's Spirit is blowing towards us, bringing us new birth from above. God's spirit is coming our way, bringing us new spiritual life.

One man was asked, "Are you born again?" and he replied, "Yes, I am, many, many times have I been born again." What a hope and what a promise. God's Spirit comes and gives us new spiritual life, not just once, but many, times. Now we can't control God's Spirit, but the Spirit is on the move, and it's coming towards all whose spirits have grown dull. Just as the breath of spring is not far off, neither is the wind of God's Spirit. In fact, it may reach some of us today. For the wind of the Spirit so often blows when God's word is proclaimed, especially in the Lenten season when the death of God's Son is lifted up before us. It's ironic, isn't it, that the proclamation of Christ Crucified should bring the wind of God's Spirit into our midst. But it does. When the sacrificial death of Christ is lifted up before us, a door is opened for God's Spirit to come into our church and into our lives. We are filled with wonder again at the message that God so loved the world, the broken sinful world, which includes you and me, that he gave his only Son to suffer with us and for us. Our spirits are lifted as we remember that God's great purpose is not to destroy or condemn the world, but to save the world. Our hearts are lifted by the promise that there is more beyond this world of death and decay where God will restore and finish all that is broken and unfulfilled. Our souls come alive as we take hold of the eternal life God gives to all who believe in the Son. Eternal life is life beyond death with God, to be sure, but it's also the new life God gives to us through Christ here and now. It is life full of hope and forgiveness and grace, life full of strength and love and service. Yes, God's Spirit blows towards us

when Christ crucified and Risen is proclaimed in our midst.

God's Spirit also moves in our direction when we are in fellowship with one another, studying, learning, praying and serving together. Read the Book of Acts and see how powerfully the wind of God's Spirit moved towards those early Christians when they were together in fellowship and worship. Personally speaking, I sense that God's Spirit often blows powerfully towards me when I'm in fellowship with other Christians. I feel refreshed, uplifted, strengthened, encouraged, spiritually reborn and I know that God's Spirit has come my way.

And of course, our hearts are strengthened as we witness the courage and resolve of the Japanese people in the aftermath of the disaster. Especially moving is the sacrifice of the workers who work in radiation to save the nuclear plant from complete melt-down. They know well that it may cost them their lives or at the very least, their health. But they're doing it anyway. It is a Christ-like sacrifice. My spirit was renewed when I read about the amazing outpouring of support for that desperately bereaved family in Pennsylvania. Within a day enough money had been raised to pay for the children's burials and to rebuild the house. Much more was done, as well. What love and compassion God has poured into the hearts of his people by the Holy Spirit. My spirit is always lifted by the Biblical promise that God draws near to all who suffer. We are also promised that God's Spirit will blow towards his creation mightily and Christ will return openly one day to complete God's Kingdom. There will be no more earthquakes or tsunamis, no more crying, no more pain or suffering. The former things will pass away and all things will be made new.

"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's going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Soon the warm winds of spring will be reaching our part of the world, bringing new life in God's creation. The promise of Lent is that God's Spirit is blowing towards us, giving us new birth from above. God's Spirit is coming to bring our spirits alive again, to strengthen us in faith and hope and love, to give us new courage and new zeal for service. Perhaps God's Spirit has even blown into our midst today so that someone here is saying, "I feel as if I've been born from above this morning. God's Spirit has touched me in a special way. I feel like I've been born again." This Lenten season may God's Spirit's blow powerfully towards God's church everywhere and towards us. This season may God's Spirit give you new birth from above.