

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 5, 2023 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year A)  
John 3:1-17

“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.”

Ah the wind. I remember working with my grandfather in the summer, putting up hay. My younger brother and I would be up in the hay loft all the way up in the peak. After working all day already, we would then go up into the heat of that hay loft. And we would just be dripping with sweat. We would be so exhausted and the dust from the hay was all over us. We come down out of there after we'd finish a wagon, and we would just be covered in black dust, head to toe. So when we came out, we really wanted to come out, because inside the air was just still, dead air. But when we came out, we could feel the wind. And that wind was so refreshing. I could catch my breath. I could feel the strength coming back into my body, knowing that I would need to go back up there again.

God's Spirit is like. It fills us and refreshes us, and sends us back out.

About 2 years ago, I buried my father-in-law. Now Roger Wangerin was one of those persons that you would call a free spirit. As a free spirit, this was a man who you didn't know when he was going to show up, IF he was going to show up, and when he GOT there, WHAT he was going to SAY. He was the kind of man that would show up at a wedding reception he WASN'T INVITED to, for people he'd never MET. He was the life of the party. Everybody loved that man. In his funeral sermon, I described him as a person who was like the wind – always stirring things up. He WAS the RUSTLING wind.

A man like that, you tend to want to put him into a BOX. This guy was a CERTAIN TYPE of person. BUT Roger was ALSO BORN of the Spirit. Not just a FREE spirit, but BORN of the Spirit. He was ALSO a man who was in church EVERY Sunday. And brought his CHILDREN to church EVERY Sunday. And was also one of the FOUNDING members of a mission congregation when he moved out to suburbs of the Cities. He was a VERY FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN. Both a FREE spirit and BORN of the spirit. He didn't FIT in just that ONE BOX.

What the Spirit teaches us, as it taught ME, is that you can't put God in boxes. You can't put PEOPLE on boxes. God used Roger to TEACH me that God uses people that we don't expect God to use – all kind of people, all kinds of personalities. And so, my understanding was stretched, and that's what the Spirit DOES.

*Show cartoon “Jesus the eraser boxes.” Describe for radio audience.*

This is my favorite cartoon. The people are annoyed by Jesus erasing their boxes, but they don't get to DECIDE; JESUS gets to decide. GOD WON'T be PUT into BOXES.

That's something that happens in this story. Nicodemus has a misunderstanding with Jesus. And he wants to put God into a box. Jesus says that people must be born from above, and Nicodemus misunderstands him, because the word Jesus uses to mean “born from above” can ALSO mean “born again.” Nicodemus takes “born again,” and he runs with it. “Born again?! What do you MEAN, I can't be born a SECOND TIME!” And Jesus says, “No, born from ABOVE, born of the SPIRIT.”

We STILL have that SAME disagreement in the CHURCH. We have this argument between DENOMINATIONS – what does “born again” MEAN? A lot of churches say that you must be BORN AGAIN in order to REALLY BE a CHRISTIAN.

Well, when I was dating my future wife, Wendy, I LEARNED something about this. I was a born again Christian. I'd become a Christian when I was in high school, and was really getting fired up

about my faith in college. I remember one day, we were driving and we were talking, and I'd been influenced by my friends who were evangelicals who HAD that way of thinking. So I thought that born again was HOW you BECAME a Christian, and if you HADN'T had the born again experience, then you WEREN'T REALLY a CHRISTIAN. And my girlfriend told me that she had ALWAYS been a Christian; she was BORN a Christian. A cradle Lutheran. She had been a LUTHERAN here whole LIFE. And I questioned her – if you haven't been born again, are you REALLY a CHRISTIAN? And my future wife, she said, "HOW DARE YOU...QUESTION WHETHER I'M REALLY A CHRISTIAN! I've been a Christian a lot longer than YOU." And I tell you, that woman put the FEAR OF GOD in me. And I learned something that day.

In the course of going to a Lutheran college, and marrying a Lutheran girl, and going to a Lutheran seminary, I've really come to EMBRACE this idea. As a Lutheran PASTOR, and KNOWING so MANY Lutherans in the congregations I've served, the experience that most of you have had, of ALWAYS HAVING BEEN CHRISTIANS, always having KNOWN God, always KNOWING that God LOVES you, I ENVY that.

Being a born again Christian meant that I had to slip into the PIT OF DESPAIR first, to hit ROCK BOTTOM before I could reach for God, and YOU LUTHERANS haven't needed to go THROUGH that. So WHY ON EARTH would I REQUIRE my PIT OF DESPAIR of someone else. WHY would I WISH that on ANYONE? I ENVY YOU, who didn't NEED to go through that, who've just KNOWN God's love your whole life.

So my GOD BOX got EXPLODED.

But then I went to SEMINARY, and in seminary, you're around all these theologically trained LUTHERANS. They believed that only way you can become a Christian is by GOD WORKING on you. God is doing ALL of the work, and there's NO SUCH THING as a born again Christian. And here I was, an actual born again Christian. We'd have these conversations, and they would say, "Your experience of giving up and giving yourself to God – that was just an ILLUSION. That was actually God doing all that IN you." That was a PROBLEM for me. Over the next 4 years of seminary, I CHALLENGED my classmates. I told them that the experience of being born again – it may be OBJECTIVELY TRUE that God works that IN a person, but don't discount the EXPERIENCE. Born again Christians are REAL Christians too. The experience is real.

So I exploded THEIR little box of how God works.

You see, God WON'T BE PUT in BOXES of HOW WE think God works. We're not God. God works in much BIGGER and BETTER ways.

So we have this disagreement in the church, between denominations about HOW God works, how God MAKES a Christian. But there are 5 questions that we are supposed to ask, right? Who, what, where, why and how. So we may disagree but HOW God works, but Jesus himself is very CLEAR about the OTHER 4.

WHO is acting? Well, it's GOD, who gave his ONLY SON.

WHAT does God do? Jesus says, "God SO LOVED."

WHERE does it happen? It happens in the WHOLE WORLD. Not just in THIS CHURCH, or THAT church, or this or that TYPE of church; it happens EVERYWHERE in the WHOLE WORLD.

WHY does it happen? So "all who believe in him may ... have eternal life."

*(Put John 3:16 on the screen)*

You heard this in our Gospel reading. You KNOW this verse. Many of you have MEMORIZED this verse. Jesus says EVERYTHING here. Let's read it together: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Do you see it? The who, what, where and why? In that 1 verse, Jesus says it ALL.

We may not agree on everything, we may argue about our BOXES, but when it comes to the IMPORTANT stuff, Jesus said EVERYTHING that NEEDS to be SAID: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only son." Amen.