

## **“Blowing in the Wind”**

**Ray Speller, Binkley Baptist Church, March 20, 2011**

*Primary Text: John 20:19-31; Secondary Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14*

(Sung) “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. A long way from home.”

This centuries-old spiritual, originated by African slaves in America, still stands, in my mind, as one of the most profoundly moving pieces of American music. In these simple words, we hear a testimony of pain. I can almost taste the salty tears of slaves as I sing those words, people living with very little in which to find joy and even less in which to hope. People who were, literally, a long way from home.

And as I began to prepare for the preaching moment, in light of the Lenten season and in light of this song, I could not help but hear other songs of those motherless children of Africa. Those who wept and sang in the face of horror day after day after day. I also could not help but think of more modern things. I could not help but think of what it means to live in North Carolina, a state made rich by forced labor in tobacco and cotton fields in the past and which still relies heavily on semi-slave labor of day workers today. I could not help but think of those who live in constant uncertainty in war-torn nations like Iraq and now Libya or in tsunami-rocked places like Japan. Some who are watching their loved ones slowly die right before their very eyes with each passing day and week. And those mental images weighed heavily upon me as I took up this morning’s text because of its description of something similar. A similar kind of horror and death.

John’s picture is eerily familiar to me as I rise this morning. A picture of people reeling from the sudden and brutal loss of someone they love. Hiding out in secret chambers for fear that the aftershocks of what they’ve seen are not over and will come back soon to get them. Fearful of what is going on outside of their walls, and likely also fearful of what might exist within their own circle. After all Judas is conspicuously missing from the group of disciples gathered in the secret room, and his absence reminds them of the uncertainty of life. Even Judas, even one chosen by Jesus, even one whom they love had turned his back on them. And now their hope, their master, their leader is dead.

It is in the midst of this experience of total disappointment and debilitating fear that the disciples assemble into a secret room, door shut and knees knocking. And these followers of Jesus find themselves paralyzed by the death of the one they likely thought was the One. Ordinary people, fishers and tax collectors, find themselves dealing with the aftermath of having spent the last few years of their lives following a man who had turned their world upside down. They have seen him heal the sick without medicine, feed thousands with little to no food, command demons to flee and confound the greatest teachers of their religion. Jesus has blown their minds every step of the way, and now he has blown their lives apart.

They have left families for him, they have lost income for him, they have been called lunatics and heretics for Jesus. Their lives have been blown off course by this embodied tornado called Jesus. And for their trouble, and for their dedication, what did Jesus do? He left them. Jesus died. The one who said “I am the way, the truth and the life,” died on them. The one who offered living water to a Samaritan woman died on them. The one who promised Nicodemus that those who believed would not perish but have everlasting life in John 3, He died on them. And in fear, the disciples shut the door. And I can understand why they shut the door. They certainly must have felt betrayed. These people have followed this smooth-talking superstar who has taught with such power and lead with such authority and promise, and now it was all seemingly gone; wasted on a bloody cross. And in this historical moment where people often made claims of being Messiah, made claims of being a new leader who would arrest power and who would bring a new kingdom, Jesus’ claims, seemingly, had proven to be false. Either he was a liar or he was misguided. Either way their hope laid in a borrowed tomb.

And I can imagine the fear and frustration as they thought about the possibility that they had been taken in by what may have been, it seems at the moment, a con man. Jesus said he was going to do great things, and now he’s dead. And I’m sure they began to think about rumors that had heard as children. “I remember, he was the son of that woman Mary, her illegitimate son who she claimed was created when she was overshadowed by God or something crazy like that. Maybe it’s in his genes. Maybe Jesus was just another liar. Maybe he was just another one from that crazy family, making up stories.” I imagine at least some of the disciples were crushed by the thought that they had been taken in by the lies. And worse still, everybody knew they had been his followers! Everybody knew they had been Jesus’ fools! And now, to

add insult to injury, they have to hide out because they're liable for his heresy, in danger of being killed just like he was. I can see why they shut the door and hid. I imagine I would have, too.

With all of these things swirling around in their hearts and minds they find themselves locked away in a secret chamber and the last thing that they would expect to happen happens... the dead man appears. At least one of the disciples was there himself to see Jesus hung high and taken down to be placed in the tomb. There is no doubt; Jesus is dead. So when the disciples suddenly see this figure in the room, one who had not been there before they shut the door, one can only imagine their surprise, their fear and their confusion. "How is it that Jesus lives? How is it that he is in the room with them?" But Jesus acts like there is nothing strange at all about his post-crucifixion appearance. He starts in with them just as if he has simply returned from around the corner rather than from the cross. And He says to them, "Peace be with you," which he has said so many times before. But this time the words are a notice of victory. Jesus has just come back from the fate that was thought irreversible, death. Even the Roman officials and local leaders who thought they had power over his living and dying had not destroyed him. "Peace be with you." Then, the bible says, he shows them his hands and his side. In addition, when they see his hands and side the text says, "They were happy when they saw the Lord."

They know that it's really Jesus and get excited only when He shows them the scars. The one whom they've alternately confessed as the Son of God, and Lord, and Teacher, and Master, He shows them scars and it is clear that his purpose in doing this is to prove that this is not a hoax or a trick, He really is who they think He is. It is quite interesting to me that Jesus does not perform a mind-blowing act of power to prove his claim, He does not do some sort of miracle to convince them, He does not base the proof of his identity in some flash of divine showmanship. Rather Jesus points to the brokenness of his flesh in comforting the disciples, almost saying, "I'm not an imposter, I've experienced the pain. I really am the Jesus you loved and who loves you, even unto death. I really was whipped and pierced. I really did die. I really do understand."

Maybe this wouldn't be very important if we did not have a history, in the Christian faith, of covering up the scars of Jesus. But we do. Less than a generation after the crucifixion, there were already people in the Christian church called Docetists denying that Jesus was really a human being at all. They taught that Jesus was a spiritual being without a human body and therefore, that he couldn't have really died. From early on, people who have wanted to present Jesus as a superhuman champion have glossed over the nail prints and the bloody brow and the open side for fear that this kind of Jesus isn't good enough to be Master and Lord. I fall into this trap in my own thinking and preaching at times. For some reason, something inside of lots of us wants a Jesus that looks and sounds more like a pioneer from the Wild West than a humbled servant, fully embodied with piercable flesh and spillable blood. Often we have chosen a Jesus who is above pain and brokenness, a Lord who bears no scars.

However, Jesus challenges this right from the beginning, pointing to his humanity, pointing to his broken flesh as the sign that He truly is the One we've been waiting for. Jesus was flesh and blood, just like us. Jesus felt the sting of death, just like us. Jesus knew uncertainty, just like us. Jesus immediately preempts the author of the letter to the Hebrews, by showing the disciples that He is not a high priest who cannot sympathize with their weakness but rather that he knows the pain in their hearts, literally, as well as the back of his own nail-scarred hand. That's the Jesus of Scripture. And here, after declaring peace to their hearts and showing the proof of his own brokenness, Jesus says that He is sending them forth just as He was sent forth by God. Then Jesus says to the disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and breathes upon them. He breathes upon them. And this is where it gets interesting but also scary in my opinion. Because as generation after generation of Jesus' disciples will learn, the Holy Spirit is as unpredictable as breath or wind. It is fitting, then, that Jesus breathes upon them when He says to receive the Holy Spirit. All throughout Scripture and the Christian tradition the Spirit is linked to breath and linked to wind. As a matter of fact, ancient church leaders, when trying to figure out how to discuss the Holy Spirit faithfully, often used the language of the Spirit being "spirated," which is almost to say being "exhaled" or "breathed out" or "rushing forth like a blast of wind," from the Father and from the Son. This image of the Spirit of God as wind is consistent throughout the record of God's dealings in the world. In the Genesis 2 account of creation it is written that God formed a body from the dust of the ground and breathed into the nostrils the breath of life or of lives and it became a living soul. God moves often in the breath. But also in the wind. A person can never control the wind and the wind doesn't always act in the way that we would choose. Such is the Spirit of God.

The wind is uncontrollable and sometimes seems downright vicious to our finite minds. Most of all, it does not bend to the will of people. Remember that Jesus had already told the disciples in chapter 3 and verse 8 of John's gospel that, "the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." The spirit of God, like wind, doesn't always fit into our preconceived

notions of rationality or our post-Enlightenment ideas about history and modes of knowledge. The spirit of God doesn't always make sense in the moment and sometimes it fully blows our minds, toppling everything we thought we knew. Just like a cross had toppled the hopes of the disciples. Sometimes, in our own lives, we feel that the wind of God's presence should move in a certain way and when we desire it to, but our efforts to prod God into being our servant prove futile and foolish, time and time again. Sometimes we just want the wind to stop blowing long enough to catch our breath in the middle of crisis, in the middle of loss, in the middle of fear, but the wind refuses to settle down for us and such is the Spirit of God.

Brothers and sisters, despite the fact that the Spirit of God doesn't always move the way we expect, I believe with everything in me that the goodness of God is still at work. Even in the wind. Go back with me to our Old Testament text for this morning, in which we see another example of God and the wind. In Ezekiel chapter 37, the Spirit of God seizes the prophet Ezekiel and sits him down in the middle of a valley full of bones. The Scripture says that God then takes the prophet back and forth through this valley. And as the prophet sees the extent of death and loss which is represented by this massive valley of bones, God pulls a pop quiz, as God is so often known to do. God asks Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" This question is powerful in that it aptly leads Ezekiel, though a mighty prophet, to remember that even as the prophet and servant of God he is simply a person. God alone is God. Ezekiel gets the picture and says in response, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

As soon as Ezekiel admits his limitation and acknowledges the place of God, God empowers Ezekiel to change what he sees before him. God says, speak to these bones and tell them to live again. And so Ezekiel, in this prophetic vision or experience, speaks to the dry bones around him, telling them to come forth. And the Scripture says that the bones begin to rock and rattle and they start to form together into bodies, making skeletons before Ezekiel's eyes. Before he knew it, there were ligaments, sinews, muscles, tendons and skins growing on these once dead bones. But the story isn't over because there's no life in the bones. So God speaks again and says to the prophet, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" And life comes, through the blowing of the wind.

The bones featured in this prophetic illustration, as we are told later in the chapter, represent the masses of the biblical Hebrews who experienced death and destruction all along the way of biblical history. This story then, with its rebirth of dry bones, is a powerful reminder that it's never too late for God's power to show up and restore. Even those things that are dead. God was showing Ezekiel, and subsequently showing the many people who would read the Scriptures after Ezekiel's writing, that God's Spirit is still present and God still has the final say, even over the dead bones in our lives. I do not say this out of naiveté or some lack of real experience of suffering, as some are probably thinking. I can hear some of your internal grumbling loud and clear. Yes, sometimes it's much easier for a preacher to talk about God being in the wind than it is to hear it. Especially when the preacher has never seen his home destroyed by hurricane winds, as I have not. Especially when she's never seen her dreams and hopes torn apart in the death of one's child, as I have not. Especially when you've never had your heart torn from you in the form of the death of a life-long best friend or spouse, as I have not so far. But I still know what it is to be broken on my own scale, and believe me it has rocked me enough that I recognize the possible bitterness of these words of encouragement. I do not stand here as a stranger to fear and loneliness. I'm not somehow exempted, as a preacher, from fear or faithlessness. I've got my share of dry bones in my own valley. But I have seen God work in the wind, and I do believe with everything in me that God's power is at work, even in the midst of the contrary winds. I feel like Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego this morning, when they were thrown into a fiery furnace. If God doesn't move the way that we want God to move, that doesn't mean that God is not faithful and God is not able. We may not always understand it, but God is in the wind and I'd stake my life on the declaration that it's working together for good.

Some might ask for a specific reasoning, saying "how do you know for sure that God is in the wind?" Well, I know in part because I come from people who know what it is to see God move even in the midst of cruel winds. There have been hard times for us, times of sorrow and fear and destruction, but I come from people who remembered God's hand, even in the wind. As I sang that song earlier, I was reminded of great-great grandparents and great-great-great grandparents who believed God even when it seemed like there was no hope, but rather contrary winds everywhere.

I remembered people who once wished and prayed that the vindictive westward winds would stop blowing altogether, knowing that those winds slowly but surely carried the bobbing slave ship closer and closer to unspeakable horror on foreign shores. We know about the wind. People who were betrayed on their ill-fated pilgrimages toward freedom when the unfriendly wind carried their scent to the bloodhounds of slave catchers, sealing for many a fate worse

than death; a return to hell right here on Earth. We know about the wind. People who have been reduced to uncontrollable weeping and violent vomiting as the tepid summer breeze blows the smell of the charred flesh of their loved ones into their nostrils, burned to death as an example for casting a ballot in their own democracy or for simply forgetting to use the words "ma'am" or "sir." We know all about the wind. People who have become what Billie Holiday called America's strange fruit, "black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." Oh, we know about the wind.

But somehow they believed through it all that there was still a God somewhere, blowing in the wind. And so they sang, even on the shores of their Babylon when it looked like there was no hope. Because they believed deep down that there was a God, blowing in the wind. Even as they experienced the death of dignity and the destruction of their hope, or so it was thought, they continued to believe God. And they would go down to the cool river banks in the evening time, when nobody was watching, and they would sing and dance and pray to God, unafraid because they knew that the wind muffled their voices from the ears of their masters, but carried their worship to the ears of their God. And they went down into the brush arbors which they called hush harbors and began to call on their Lord and they were not afraid, because they knew that God heard them and would not allow them to waste away. Even when the wind turned on them, they knew that God was there. And so, as a child of their faith, I stand before you today as living reminder that God does work in the wind. It doesn't always work the way we expected or the way we want it to, but eventually the wind is able to blow, even blow you from slave ships and cotton fields to the Supreme Court and the White House. God is blowing in the wind.

God is able to blow even in times when it seems that there is no hope and there is no peace. God still blows in the wind. I preach this not only out of a historical knowledge and a communal knowledge. I think back to one of my maternal great-grandmothers, who sat with my mother and grandmother a little over 20 years ago as a doctor told them that the little boy in the neo-natal intensive care unit was possibly going to die because of the horrible pneumonia attacking his little lungs. His lung capacity had diminished to the point that he was likely not to make it and there was even suggestion that they make preparations for a memorial service. Even though the doctors warned them not to expect much for this boy, great-grandma knew a little something about the wind. And so she picked me up in her arms and carried me near her chest and walked the floor of the Children's Hospital and prayed all night long, believing that God was able to move even though the wind had blown her what looked like death. She believed that God still takes trips to the valley of dry bones.

And I stand here more than 20 years later, preaching my lungs out, as a reminder that no matter what you may be going through in your life, no matter what things may feel like or look like today, God is still in the wind. I don't have a sophisticated theological explanation for how or why it is that God shows up in the winds. All I know is that when I look back over my own short life, I can remember times that the storms of life were rocking and raging but God stood by me. I can remember times when like the hymnist I was "shackled by an angry burden," tossed and driven as on a raging sea. But the hand of God has been my protection and my rear guard. God has been a hedge of security and a strong tower that has held safe in the middle of storms. So when it's all said and done, I believe I can trust God's will to be done even in the middle of a storm. Thanks be to the God who is made known in my storm, blowing in the wind.