John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and 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.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man 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 may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."
Grace to you and peace, from God: Creator, Christ, and Spirit of Love; amen. I don’t know about you, but I am not a sailor. I know there are people, likely a good number here this evening, who relish the opportunity to get out on the open water and work in harmony with the various sails and riggings, perhaps alone or perhaps with a crew, working to harness the wind and cut through the waves, gliding with ease across the vast expanse of blue and green water. Not me.

Every now and then, I have forgotten this central truth of my life, and I have accepted invitations from folks who are sailors, and I have headed out on a boat, looking forward to a nice, relaxing adventure on the water. In a few short minutes, however, as I would look out over the edge of the boat and see the chaos of the cold, menacing water and observe how tiny and fragile our boat was, the line between death and life became perilously thin, and I wanted nothing more than to plant my feet on solid ground.

My mind would think back to the opening lines of Genesis: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The ancient Hebrews had a word for this dark and formless void, tehom, or chaos, and it was for them a source of great fear. I could relate to that fear of chaos, and I fervently prayed for the wind of God, the ruach, the Holy and rescuing Spirit, to hover over me, and blow the waters of death far away from me, that I might be safe and secure, on firm and dry land.

The movement of the Spirit is an important part of John’s Gospel, beginning as it does with a reference back to the creation story, when light shines in the midst of the darkness, and the Word, the Logos, the ordering principle of all creation, gives form and structure to the chaos of the world. John then picks up on the image of the Holy Spirit as wind in this marvelous story from the third chapter, in which Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, seeking the clarity of the light, longing for a firm place to stand amidst the chaos and confusion of a changing world. Everything Nicodemus thought he knew no longer seemed trustworthy and true, so he sought Jesus out, and he tried to find a word, an image, a guiding principle, something he could hold on to in the midst of the tehom.

Anyone else feeling a bit like Nicodemus these days? Anyone else feeling like the world is slipping back into a formless void, and the structures and institutions and patterns of our common life are eroding and disappearing, leaving us adrift in the waters of tehom? Chaos and
violence swirl around us, and no place seems safe; not our schools, not our streets, not our churches, not our homes, not our nation, not our planet, there is no solid ground upon which we can rest.

But we’re going to try to find it. And, if we can’t find it, we’ll just create the order ourselves. We build walls and fortresses, we carve out a place for us to be safe, us and the people who think, and act, and look, and speak like us. We segregate ourselves by race and class and theology and politics, by gender identity and citizenship status, trying to separate the light from the dark, the good from the evil, we try to wall out the chaotic and frightening waters that threaten us and everything we hold dear; we try to be like God, creating order in the midst of tehom.

But, sooner or later, we will come to realize that we are not like God; we cannot create order amidst the chaos, clarity amidst the confusion, so we come to Jesus by night, seeking wisdom from the only one who can. And the word that Jesus gives us, the good news in which he invites us to trust, is this: “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.”

Do not trust in the institutions and the structures and the patterns and the truths of this world; trust instead in the winds of the Spirit that blow in ways we cannot predict or control. Trust in the God who has created and is still creating us, the God whose wind, and breath, and Spirit is still hovering over the waters, bringing us life and love and healing and hope. It may not be the clarity and stability we long for, but the gift of the Spirit will bring us what we need and carry us where we need to go.

I do not know what our congregations, our communities, our nation, or our planet will look like in the years and decades to come; I do not know how we will inch our way toward the beloved community that our God envisions for us; I do not know how we will overcome the darkness and fear and hatred that infects our common life. All I know is that the winds of the Spirit continue to blow, and it is only by trusting these holy and life-giving winds that we will ever find the peace and strength that our weary souls so deeply long for. So, blow, Spirit blow, move us and guide us, challenge and change us, carry us, by your love and through your grace, back to you, our only hope and our one true home; amen.