

The Winds of the Spirit  
A Sermon by the Very Rev'd Timothy Jones  
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Have you ever gone on a trip,  
thinking you knew what to expect,  
and it turned out to be kind of a crazy adventure?

I have a friend, Reynolds, who's an amateur pilot.

He flies a single-engine two-seater plane.

His little plane is, well, little,  
large enough only for two to squeeze in.

Years ago he invited me to fly with him.

We flew from a small airport north of Houston,  
where I lived at the time, to Oklahoma,  
where we both had a meeting  
with an association of churches.

Flying with him would cut back on the cost of  
commercial travel and meant we could escape the  
long hours of a car trip.

As I got in the canvas fabric-covered plane,  
the phrase *traveling light* took on new meaning.

The storage area, just behind our seats, could hold  
only our two briefcases and small flight bags.  
Anything more, Reynolds told me, and we risked  
overburdening the plane's engine.  
I thought, *Well, I'm glad I didn't over-pack!*

We took off in a roar, and the view out the little  
window to my right was awe-inspiring.  
Snaking interstate highways, wooded knolls,  
sprawling estates.

Nothing has ever made me feel quite so *up there*  
as looking out the thin pane of window glass  
to the vast reaches below.

But I felt precariously suspended not only because  
of the tiny lightness of the plane  
But also because of the "thermals."  
This was summer, and we were traveling over  
brown, summer-sun baked Oklahoma fields.  
Hot air rises. And the heated earth below sent up  
rushing currents of air.

So sometimes we would glide atop the  
upstreaming air of the thermals,  
only to go over a cooler, wooded area,  
and drop precipitously, sometimes smoothly  
coasting, only to plunge without warning.  
We found ourselves lurching up and down.  
I felt like my stomach feeling had gotten left fifty  
feet up, where we had been seconds before.  
My palms grew sweaty.

We talked a bit about how you land the thing,  
how a control tower can coach and guide a plane  
in when someone in the cockpit who has never  
flown before has to take over—  
that would be me. That didn't help!

I marveled at the sights, but prayed my way  
through that two-hour trip.  
I've never been one to worry when I get on a  
commercial jet, but I have a new appreciation for  
those who do, who white-knuckle their way  
through any flight they board.

More than any trip I can ever remember,  
that flight, hung above the earth and subject to the  
currents of wind and air,  
seemed like a topsy-turvy venture. I saw things  
with a vividness I'll never forget.  
And I felt exhilarated when finally we touched  
down and my feet met the solid good ground  
of the tarmac.

I see parallels to our larger lives. For I want to  
talk about those times when like it or not life  
seems unpredictable, where what we thought  
would be an interesting outing turns into a scary  
undertaking, with ups and downs,  
where things happen beyond our control and when  
circumstances leave us feeling like we are  
lurching or even hitting a free-fall.

It could be that way with a lot of things:  
Having your first baby, starting a new career,  
leading a committee for a nonprofit or church  
committee, facing a chronic illness,

getting more serious about your faith as perhaps  
you have in Lent.

All have elements of the unexpected, elements of  
risk and surprise.

I think that is a helpful way to introduce  
Nicodemus, and a helpful way to consider Jesus'  
words about how following Christ demands  
radical openness because the wind blows where it  
chooses, the Spirit blows where he wills.

It's interesting with Jesus and Nicodemus, first  
off, because usually, in the Gospels,  
we see Jesus surrounded by ordinary people –  
fishermen, tax collectors,  
the poor, ordinary people who get sick and need  
healing, people needing in dependence  
the help Jesus can give.

But here, in today's reading from John,  
we see Jesus sitting down with one of the  
aristocracy of Jerusalem.

Nicodemus was wealthy.

He had all the power that comes from having  
all the money you need.

And he was part of a branch of Jewish religion  
that was big on control  
and precision and detailed instructions.

And that's what makes Nicodemus so striking.  
He was a by-the-book believer. As a Pharisee he  
was a religious leader and he and his religious  
colleagues were the most respected and  
outstanding citizens of the land.

For all that he had achieved—admiration,  
influence, wealth—I think he begins to glimpse  
that having a tidy, ordered religious life  
isn't quite all it's cracked up to be.

Perhaps Nicodemus had come to end of the perks  
of social standing and self-confidence and  
spiritual notoriety.

Maybe his certainty that he could do everything  
he ever wanted with his life was wavering.

So he comes to Jesus curious.

For something about Jesus intrigued him.

But John's Gospel gives us a detail that shows how much Nicodemus also wanted to be careful.

For John tells us he came by night, hidden:

Nicodemus didn't want to be seen by  
his fellow religious elites.

There would be a political cost to his career if he were to be seen with the controversial Jesus. Nicodemus seems willing to ask more questions, but not commit, not yet.

He was out for a spiritual excursion, not a journey where he might not be in charge of every move. By the way, given the role he had in burying Jesus after the crucifixion, we do know he kept at it. He would stay faithful, he would go public, whatever the price to his career or standing.

But now, in John's story, he comes,  
under the shadow of night, secretly.

He takes only a cautious step or two toward Jesus.

And he is perhaps like us.

We sense something missing in our faith,  
too, perhaps.

But we want to keep things manageable.  
We don't want God messing too much with us.  
Perhaps we want a faith still safely hidden in the  
womb, not willing to brave the demands of birth.

Jesus seems to know this about Nicodemus,  
and us, because he talks about the change in a  
person that God brings  
as more than some little hobby.

Jesus talks about a change so radical it can only  
be described as new birth, as being born from  
above, as being born again.

What Jesus describes is more than just trying  
harder to live a good life.

Nicodemus needs a *new* life.

He needs to cast his life, his future,  
on the God whose breath is a wind,  
who blows with force and power,

and not always in directions we predict.

One of the words for “Spirit” in Hebrew is *ruach*;  
It’s guttural, has an element of wildness about it.  
The word *ruach* means not only “spirit,” but also  
“breath” or “wind.”

You cannot grab hold of breath and mold it.

You cannot capture wind  
and make it do your bidding.

Sometimes you ride the ups and downs of  
thermals.

The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit  
blows with power. There’s something about the  
Spirit’s movement that cannot be tamed.

So does that make you a little concerned?

Jesus wants from his followers an openness to go  
where the winds of his Spirit will take us.

There’s much comfort in that life founded on an  
assurance from a God who so loved the world that  
he gave his only Son.

But some uncertainty; you have to open yourself  
to what a vast, infinite God might ask.

My late friend and pastoral mentor Don Shelby once said, “One of the marks of growing older, of moving toward maturity ... is coping with change, in which we must let go of the past and present to embrace something new in the future, when we must take risks and venture toward horizons whose outcomes are unknown.” Horizons whose outcomes are unknown, But we venture also toward wonderful possibilities, too.

Life with God is beyond my predicting or imagining, both in what it asks of us, and what it promises us.

This means we don't have to sneak off from life's transitions, or insist we've always done it this way or that, and have to do it that way forever, to turn away from the riskiness of faithfulness.

Not when we glimpse what  
God's future can mean.  
Today Jesus calls us to courage.

To trust God with every outcome,  
to move into the unknown knowing we go with  
One who, whatever the ups and downs,  
will never leave us or forsake us.  
He leads us into a future where God is,  
where God always is.