

Whenever I read this passage in Ecclesiastes (of course, the book should be read as a whole since it does not make sense until the end) and the others in it that speak of “chasing after the wind” I think of the 1956 movie, The Red Balloon. If I remember correctly this movie had no speaking, it just followed a red balloon floating around the city of Paris and a young boy who at times noticed the balloon and sought to discover its destination. A red balloon carried by the wind.

I also think of the leaves blowing around yards in the fall, a windjammer in full sail, the windmills of Holland or the electric wind generators that now dot many landscapes. They all speak of the power of the wind and how it is impossible to harness it and the futility of trying to do so. Recent news photos have shown towns in our area sandbagging in hopes of diverting the water from the recent floods – having them flow in a different direction, and many were successful in diverting the water away from homes and businesses. We know that we cannot do that with the wind – any attempts are futile at best. It is like “chasing after the wind.”

Wind first appears in the second verse of the first chapter of Genesis. The Jewish Publication Society of America translates the first two verses: “*When God began to create the heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of deep and a **wind** from God sweeping over the water.*” Most of our translations use the word “spirit” for “wind” – however, in the Hebrew wind and spirit are interchangeable.

Chasing after the wind, the folly of it all. The writer of Ecclesiastes is examining life through his microscope. One could say that is a longer version of Psalm 8:4: “*what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*” He has examined human wisdom and the things we strive for and found them all wanting. He has a rather pessimistic outlook on life. What good does it do? It is like “chasing after the wind.” And, what would we do if we caught the wind?

We had a great dog. He would ignore most things in the yard or house. People would come to the door and he would seldom raise an eyebrow. But, let a horse go by the house and that was a whole different story. He would jump frantically and bark loudly. One day he was outside with us and before we noticed a horse and rider were passing the house. Off he went. Now fortunately, the rider was experienced and just stopped the horse and waited for him (she did know him and us). We could do nothing but watch. And as he got closer he began to slow down. This “creature” was getting much bigger than he had anticipated it to be! What would he do if he caught it?

The writer of Ecclesiastes comes to the conclusion that when we chase after things they never seem to satisfy the way we had hoped they would. We want more. We want another experience because this did not do what we had hoped. When we think we know it all we discover that we just have more questions.

We were privileged to spend a couple of weeks with quantum theory physicist John Polkinghorne. He was talking about faith and physics. He repeatedly told us that the more physicists discover the less they know. Growing up, when we studied the atom there were the proton, electron and neutron. Today, they have broken it

down even greater. He said of the quark: “When I know where it is I don’t know what it is doing and when I know what it is doing I don’t know where it is.” Like “chasing after the wind.”

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. As I grow older I don’t agree with those who say that he came under the cover of darkness because he did not want others to know he was visiting Jesus. I believe he came at night, at the end of a busy day, because there would be a greater chance for him to sit and talk with Jesus. He had no motive other than discovering the power behind the things Jesus was doing. He truly wants to know more. He understands that no one can do the things Jesus was doing without it coming from God. However, this goes contrary to his understanding of how God acts in the world. He wants to know: How are these things happening? What have we missed?

Jesus responds to Nicodemus. Now, it seems we like to focus on verse 5, “...no one can enter the kingdom of God.” We miss verse 3, “...no one can *see* the kingdom of God.” Before we can enter the kingdom we must see God’s kingdom working in our midst. Our eyes must be opened to the new possibilities of God moving in the world. It is the spirit/wind that open our eyes to the kingdom of God and God’s movement in creation. God is moving through creation—the wind blows, God moves, where they want.

I thought of Elijah on Mount Horeb (I Kings 18:11f). He has just had a great victory over the prophets of Baal and yet is on the run for his life. He, alone on the mountain, seeks God. We read that God is not in the mighty wind, the earthquake or the fire. As he steps out of the cave and waits, God comes, “*in the sound of sheer silence*” (NRSV). Most other translations speak of a soft still voice. I like the “*sound of sheer silence*.”—complete stillness. It made me think about sound. What is sound? It is the movement of the wind. The vibrations produced.

Jim and Karen delighted us this morning with flute and piano. The sound from the flute was produced because Jim blew into it. Had he not given it “wind” it would have not produced any sound. It would be only a metal pipe full of holes. But because he knows how to introduce the right amount of wind into it and the right holes to cover or open as needed we are able to enjoy the wonderful sounds it produces. The same is for the piano with Karen knowing the right keys to play. The vibrations made by the hammer striking the strings produce wind making the sounds. And, do we not speak because the wind vibrates our vocal cords. Imagine the power of the image-- God’s moving through, “*the sound of sheer silence*.”

Are we chasing after the wind or going with the wind? The writer of Ecclesiastes comes to the conclusion: after all is said and done there is only one thing that is important—that we remember God (12:1). It is important that we remember God from the days of our youth – to give full meaning to our lives. When all the roads of wisdom have been traveled, when all the avenues of life explored, when our life is still empty because we have found nothing that truly satisfies—Remember the Creator. This is the one reality which will satisfy the deep longing of our souls. A God who sees and who moves through creation like a “*wind from God sweeping over the water*.”

Being born of the spirit is to be born of the wind. It is opening our eyes to the possibilities of God. It is opening our hearts to hope in the midst of despair. It is our seeing the world through new eyes, the eyes of God. Knowing God is the beginning of wisdom. It is allowing the spirit of God to blow through us – to lead us to the fresh places of the soul.

And yet, we want to be in control. We want to set the course and direction of our lives. We want to “chase after the wind.” We want to be in control but God says let go. We want to lead and have God follow us. Remember the adage: If you want to make God laugh tell God your plans. We want to see God and God says open your eyes, I am all around you.

Philip Yancey writes:

The wind blows wherever it pleases. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.” And so I have found, as I look for God in the everydayness of life. “Aha” moments catch me by surprise: a surge of gratitude, a pang of compassion. But they catch me, I have learned, only when I am looking for them.”

Jesus says to Nicodemus, catch the spirit, ride the wind. Nicodemus came to Jesus with a set of rules and regulations that tradition and custom said he should follow. There were limits on his understanding of God. This is not how the world is supposed to be. The things Jesus was doing were not supposed to happen. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to live life with possibilities—impossibilities—to sail with the wind and spirit. Not a life trying to chase the wind but a life allowing the wind to blow us where it will. A life that lets God direct and we follow, sail along with the wind of the spirit. We can’t chase the wind, that is folly—but we can go with it, that is wisdom.

One of the best vacations we have had was a windjammer cruise off the coast of Maine. We had had four days of good sailing. Our last day, though, was a day of great sailing. The wind filled the sails and we almost floated over the waves. It was a delight for most of us. However, the wind also prevented us from reaching the harbor. No matter how hard the captain tried he could not bring us into port. (It was a true windjammer and had no engine.) Now for those of us who did not have a plane to catch in Boston, etc., it was a delightful day as we allowed the wind to guide us. For those with agendas – well, there was a great deal of anticipation but nothing could be done. The majesty of the day – our willingness to let the wind take us where it will – God asks us to do the same.