

# Wind Advisory

March 30, 2014

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

Many of you met a couple years ago a dear pastor friend of mine name Tim. You met him at the point when he was a field worker for the Presbyterian Church over in Istanbul, Turkey. He preached here. Before Tim had entered the mission field he had been a pastor of a Presbyterian church out on the west coast north of Los Angeles. Years ago I went to visit him and while I was there Tim received an invitation from one of his parishioners for us to go sailing. Now I am not much of a sailor, but I grew up on a lake and so the idea of a little pleasure cruise on the Pacific ocean sounded pretty good. So late that afternoon Tim and I made our way over to this man's house whose name was Bob. And there behind Bob's house was this beautiful thirty-six foot sail boat. Now it turned out that there were going to be four of us who were going to serve as the crew for this little excursion upon the Pacific. Two of whom knew nothing about sailing – I being one of them. So we got on the boat, checked some last minute things, untied our lines from the dock and off we went. Now in order to get out to the ocean we had to pass through a series of canals and into a harbor and then finally out to sea. And so for a while we chugged along under the power of the boat's motor just to get us out to the ocean. Now before we started out I hadn't realized how windy it was. And it seemed that with each passing minute as we drew closer and closer to the ocean it got windier and windier. And then all of a sudden, Bob, the captain, said, "Well gentlemen ... let us

prepare to race.” Race? Now, nobody had said anything to me about racing. You see, I thought this was going to be a pleasure cruise – I was ready for the cheese and crackers to be served. But before I knew it the sails were up, the engine was off, the wind was getting windier, and the waves were getting wavier. Now remember I am not a sailor. And so as we got out onto the ocean and the boat started going this way and that way, and I mean this way and that way so that I quickly learned the meaning of the phrase “keel over”. And as the waves seemed to be tossing us around at their whim – and as Captain Bob was barking orders at us with a voice that betrayed a slight sense of panic – and as it was all I could do to hold onto these lines which were holding the sails which were holding the wind which was driving us further and further from the shore – it was then that I began to think what a wonderful life I had lived.

Now we were on that ocean three hours and it took me about the first half hour to realize that we were not going to die. No, it wasn't until we were well into the race, with the ocean spray in our face, and the wind whipping us around, and the boom going back and forth almost knocking my head off a few times, it wasn't until then that I began to realize that this was not the end of my life, this was sailing!!! This is what happens when you put out into the deep and raise your sails and you let the wind take you. There is nothing like being on a sailboat to gain a sense of what the wind is about, of what happens when you let the wind take you. When was the last time you let the wind take you? When was the last time you stepped off the security of the shoreline and let the wind take you?

So this morning John tells us the story about Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a religious leader in Jesus' day. He has found his way to the top of the ladder in the religious world. He is a highly respected orthodox teacher of Israel. He is a member of the Sanhedrin which means Nicodemus has arrived. He is on the Supreme Court. He has gotten himself set in the spot that any good Jewish boy would wish to someday set himself. And set is a good word. Nicodemus is set. He has gotten himself set.

It is an interesting philosophy that you and I learned when we were young. We learned a lot about getting ourselves set. Do you remember being told when you were young that what you most

needed to be concerned about what getting yourself set? I had several adults in my life when I was young tell me that what I needed to focus on was getting set. It's how we are supposed to spend the first half our life –getting half-decent grades so we can get into a half-decent college ... so we can get a half-decent job and have a half-decent family. And then we are to make half-decent enough money in order to invest in a half-decent mutual fund ... in order to have a half-decent retirement fund when we retire at a half-decent age. That is what it means to be set --- to live life half-decently. We are supposed to nail our life down by the age of 25 ... maybe 30. We are supposed to pound our pegs into the ground ... lay down the permanent foundation ... and get our lives set. We get nervous when our kids get to a certain age and they are not "set" yet. Like a slab of concrete ... we want our kids to get set.

So John tells us that under cover of night Nicodemus slips out of the place where he had been "set" and clandestinely meets with Jesus and he asks his question. And it is a question that a lot of "set" people are afraid to ask. They may want to ask it, but they are afraid to. And they are afraid to because it might mean there is a different answer to their life than the one they once thought. Nicodemus asks Jesus, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Good question. And Jesus says, "You must be born again from above." And it's from there Jesus begins to speak about the Holy Spirit and that's when he starts talking about the wind. If you want to know about what it means to be born again from above, if you want to know what it means to be born after you have already grown old, let me tell you about the living in and with the wind or the Spirit of God. Let me tell you about surrendering yourself to the wind. Surrendering yourself to the wind of God's spirit. Because you know, Jesus says, the Spirit is like the wind, and you know about the wind, it blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not where it comes from or where it goes. And Nicodemus says, "O but you don't understand Jesus, my life is set." And Jesus says, "Oh, but I do understand, to be born again from above, you have to unset yourself. You got to pull up stakes. You got to push off from the shore and hoist the sails. You have to surrender yourself to the mysterious movement of the spirit of God."

What an interesting invitation for us to hear on Confirmation Sunday. What an interesting invitation for us to hear on a Sunday when we say that we believe in the Holy Spirit. Because you know in a real way when you and I name our belief in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we may think that in some way we are grounding ourselves. And to some degree we are – we are anchoring ourselves in the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ – and yet at the very same time when we say that we believe in the Holy Spirit ... when we say that we are joining the church ... when we say that we want to be born again from above -- it means that sooner or later we've got to pull up anchor. We got to push off shore.

We thought that maybe the church was a bunch of old people eating cheese and crackers on deck – but no we've got the old man Nicodemus asking for us, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" And Jesus says – I'll show you, get in the boat, hoist the sails and let's take a ride.

And so the gospel writers give us an early glimpse of the Church when they tell us the story of Jesus and the disciples out in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and the wind picks up and the waves get angry – and the disciples freak out – this is not the pleasure cruise we signed up for. Where's the wine and cheese? No, Jesus says, this isn't a pleasure cruise, this is the Church. We are in the wind now. We've pulled up anchor. It's going to get a little rocky. But that's OK. Right? That's OK. Because we believe in the Holy Spirit. And if there is anything the Holy Spirit will do ... is unset you.

We've read our history. We know the stories. We look back a few centuries to those pilgrims of whom we are so proud and see them set sail into the winds of the Atlantic. Those abolitionists of a couple centuries ago set sail into the winds of racism. Those missionaries set sail into the winds of foreign lands. Those civil rights champions set sail into the winds of resistance. Those peacemakers set sail into the winds of conflict and war. It's what the church does.

Is there still some risk God has for you to take? Is there a stirring, a wind that is going on inside of you? Is there an urge to push off from the shore? Are there people in this world that you need to take a chance on?

Oliver Wendell Holmes put it this way, "To reach the port of heaven we must sail, sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it —— but we must sail, not drift or lie at anchor."

So are you set? Have you laid anchor? Have you pounded down the stakes? Have you tethered yourself to shore? Are you on your way to the half-decent life?

Or dare we, like brother Nicodemus, dare we ask – young or old – dare we ask of the rabbi, "How can I be born again?"