

A Breeze from Jerusalem

A sermon preached by
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Texts:

1 John 3: 1-3
John 1:35-51

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1 John 3: 1-3

1 See what love [God] has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know [God]. *2* Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when [Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. *3* And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

John 1:35-51

The next day John [the Baptist] again was standing with two of his disciples,*36* and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. *38* When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" *39* He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. *40* One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. *41* He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). *42* He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." *44* Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. *45* Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." *46* Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." *47* When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" *48* Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." *49* Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" *50* Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that

I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." *51* And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."



I sat down in my advisor's office one day during my freshman year of college. It was an obligatory visit — everyone had to meet with his or her advisor to talk about the direction they were headed while at this noble institution. This professor was the token socialist on the faculty of this small, private school in suburban Trenton, New Jersey. He even looked like a little bit like Lenin or Hegel — balding head, grey goatee, wire rimmed glasses, black beret. It was definitely a statement to be a radical socialist in this mostly capitalist, business-oriented school that prided itself on the number of accountants it sent to the Top Ten firms.

But I was a political science major — not an accountant. And I already knew which direction I was headed, a politically middle-of-the-road-with-conservative-leanings (yes; a public confession about my younger life) pre-law student who had decided long before his college years that he was going to be a lawyer.

My socialist, professor-advisor knew that from my file. But he had to ask anyway. "Sooo," he asked, "whadaya wanna be when you grow up?" Those of you who understand that I can't resist a good straight line know that my humor kicked in as I responded with a serious look on my face and without hesitation, "A fireman."

He looked at me with a chuckle in his eye and said something like, "Well now, that's as good a thing as any, isn't it." And on we went with our conversation. And then on I went with my college years, learned about Adam Smith and Karl Marx, The Federalist Papers and Brown v. the Board of Education, I avoided taking any statistics courses and learned how not to become an accountant — no offense to you bean-counters out there, some of my best friends

were accounting majors.

During Annual Conference session a few years ago I was with a very close yet considerably more conservative clergy friend, when we began discussing whether the United Methodist Church should change its hateful policy about not ordaining homosexual persons, a change which my friend would never tolerate. For years I have urged that the rules be changed – for years I have taken a stand in support of performing covenant services for gay and lesbian couples. It was during that conversation and my friend's surprised reaction to my liberal theological stance that I thought back to that conversation with my college advisor 30 years ago. I was so sure back then how my life was going to be. I was so sure I was on the right path, that I knew *all the answers*, that I had thought through pretty much everything there was about life and that I was in complete control of my future. Never did I imagine myself as a theologically far-left, earring-wearing pastor arguing in favor of a position that is perceived by many as the heretical issue that is going to divide the denomination.

I was going to be a lawyer. When I told my professor "a fireman", I thought I was being funny. He laughed not because it was funny but because he knew that it could have very well been true — I might have been a fireman, or a trash collector or a store clerk – and it wouldn't have been such a bad thing from his proletarian point of view. At 18 years old, I could have ended up plucking chickens for Frank Purdue or I could have ended up in the US Senate. Who knew? I thought I did. But I didn't.

Life is full of movement. One starts out in one place and ends up in another only to find out that that place will lead to yet another. So I'm not where I thought I was going to be 30 years ago. I suspect that most people aren't where they thought they would be either. Life is movement.

“A body remains in a state of rest or . . . motion unless acted upon by an external force” is Sir Isaac Newton’s law. (*Principia Mathematica*, 1687) Something which is standing still is going to stay there until something else makes it move. Something moving is going to continue moving until something else makes it stop. So maybe my life would have followed along in the motion that I set it out on if no external forces had interacted and made it move differently. So is the secret to planning your future the avoidance of all external forces? It doesn’t work does it?

We read the call of the disciples in John’s Gospel. They had jobs, they had families, they had responsibilities, they probably had a pretty good idea how they wanted their lives to turn out. If they could have avoided external forces, their lives might have gone the way they thought they would. But Jesus was an external force. If they were in a state of rest — “John [the Baptist] was *standing* with two of his disciples” when Jesus walked by and they ended up following him to where he was staying — he put them in motion. If they were on the move — Philip had to *go find* Nathaniel and convince him to *come in the other direction* to meet this rabbi named Jesus — he would bring them to a sudden stop. “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you” stopped Nathaniel dead in his tracks.

Avoiding external forces? Impossible. Movement is inevitable. Movement is faith-filled.

Stephen Kuusisto is a poet and educator, and Director of Student Services for Guiding Eyes for the Blind, one of the country’s preeminent guide-dog schools. He was born with a condition that made him virtually sightless. Yet he never wanted to admit it — so he acted like a sighted person for most of his life, a facade which his parents and others promoted.

In his book, *Planet of the Blind: A Memoir*, he writes about trying to ride a bicycle without being able to see very much, having things whip by his face without knowing what they were, and the Coke bottle bottom glasses that really did him no good. He

tells of the kaleidoscope of colors that he encounters most anywhere he travels, “The sensorium of the blind who possess some marginal vision is by turns magical and disturbing. My eyes dance in a private, rising field of silver threads, teeming greens, roses and smoke.” He writes about the struggles of getting through school and college and graduate school earning a Ph.D. in literature without really being able to read books on his own. It’s an amazing story of how he eventually learns that it’s not so bad to use a cane and a guide dog and to admit that he can’t see.

The Prologue to his book is remarkable:

I’ve entered Grand Central Station with guide dog Corky, my yellow Labrador. We stand uncertain, man and dog collecting our wits while thousands of five o’clock commuters jostle around us. Beside them, Corky and I are in slow motion, like two sea lions. We’ve suddenly found ourselves in the ocean, and here in this railway terminal, where pickpockets and knife artists roam the crowds, we’re moving in a different tempo. There is something about us, the perfect poise of the dog, the uprightness of the man, I don’t know, a spirit maybe, fresh as the gibbous moon, the moon we’ve waited for, the one with the new light.

So this is our railway station, a temple for Hermes. We wash through the immense vault with no idea about how to find our train or the information kiosk. And just now it doesn’t matter. None of the turmoil or anxiety of being lost will reach us because moving is holy, the very motion is a breeze from Jerusalem.

This blindness of mine still allows me to see colors and shapes that seem windblown; the great terminal is supremely lovely in its

swaying hemlock darkness and sudden pools of rose-colored electric light. We don't know where we are, and though the world is dangerous, it's also haunting in its beauty. Even to a lost man with a speck of something like seeing, this minute here, just standing, taking in the air as a living circus, this is what tears of joy are for.

A railway employee has offered to guide me to my train. I hold his elbow gently, Corky heeling beside us, and we descend through the tunnels under the building. I've decided to trust a stranger.

Welcome to the planet of the blind."

Listen to this sentence again: "None of the turmoil or anxiety of being lost will reach us because moving is holy, the very motion is a breeze from Jerusalem." Imagine that, "moving is holy . . . a breeze from Jerusalem." It's such a great image.

And it fits the disciples coming to Jesus or he going to them. The back and forth, "Where are you staying?" — "Come and see" — "We've found the Messiah" — "Follow me." And the ultimate of holy movement at the conclusion of the passage, that which Jacob saw with his closed eyes in a dream and now Jesus fulfills, "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending." A breeze from Jerusalem. Holy is the movement. Holy is movement in anyone's life.

Faith is not something that stands still. Faith is about motion; and motion is holy. Faith is about changing and searching. Faith is about exploring and debating. Faith is about believing and doubting. Faith is about knowing and not knowing. Faith will never stand still.

We might want to believe that once we confess our faith it stays the same, that there is one truth, one faith, one belief. But that's just not so. The very foundation of the Protestant movement sits

on the reality that faith is always shifting, growing, renewing, moving, re-forming. That's what makes it a holy action. The very act of confessing one's faith is an act of movement — like a breeze from Jerusalem.

Let's go back to the laws of physics. "The mind-expanding discovery of quantum mechanics." says Gary Zukav in *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1979), "is that Newtonian physics does not apply to subatomic phenomena. . . . We cannot know both the position *and* the momentum of a particle with absolute precision. . . . This is [Werner Heisenberg's] uncertainty principle." There are some things that we just can't ever know both the position of — it's standing still-ness — and at the same time its momentum — the direction it is headed. Faith is like one of those subatomic particles. Yours and my faith journeys are like that.

Just like I had no way of knowing where I would end up 25 years out of college — fireman or lawyer or pastor — so also none of us, can now know where the movement of our faith will take us next. All we can know is that God is in it — in our faith and in our movement.

Stephen Kuusisto writes at the conclusion of his book:

Early one morning while shaving, I see a televangelist on TV in New York City. Here on my screen is this little man screaming about faith. Before him on the stage is a man who is purported to be blind.

'This man has *faith!*'

Instantly I snap off my electric razor, nauseated with outrage. The studio audience is applauding.

'This is *faith*, my friends!' The evangelist's voice is as slick as a roasting bird. '*Faith* can move mountains!'

The actor who is playing the blind man has stepped back from the preacher and is gazing upward in rapture. I wonder which drama school he graduated

from.

Saint Augustine wrote about the necessity of reason in the journey toward God. We all wish to be transported to the divine in one easy step, but reason is endowed with great discernment: it can tell the false sounds from the true. To be alive is to be in adversity. Prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice can only exist side by side with misfortune. But then I think this is too stoic, for I've discovered love from unforeseen sources. I try to hold on to the words from John, ... 'Beloved, now are we, the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be.'

Our translation [NRSV] says it a little differently: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed." (1 John) Faith is not something proclaimed by that little man on the TV screen or the actor that pretends to recover his vision. Faith is in Kuusisto's willingness to admit his limitations and move beyond them to live a full life on the planet of the blind. Faith is the movement from fearing that God has abandoned us to knowing that we are God's children. Faith is in the movement — like a breeze from Jerusalem — toward knowing that what we are to be will be revealed to us in God's time.

As we leave this place this morning we move into the next step of our faith journey. And we can take that step in the confidence that we are children of God and that we are stepping out in the midst of others on similar journeys. And we move in a holy way closer to the revelation of what we will yet be.

Let us all make that holy movement — like a breeze from Jerusalem.

Amen.