

SPIRIT OF LIFE
Preached at Camp NaCoMe
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First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
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Psalm 104:24-30
Acts 2:1-9

I'll tell you my theory about why churches often have stained glass windows. I bet it was a preacher who invented them. You see, some preachers deliver sermons that are sort of boring (I know that comes as a surprise to you!). People are easily distracted by boring sermons, and start looking around to entertain themselves until the ordeal is over. Some count the organ pipes. Some count sheep. And some start looking out the window to see if something more interesting is going on outside.

So there surely must have been a day when a preacher got to thinking, "I need some way to keep people from looking out the window in church. That way, they'd have one less thing to look at, and they'd have to listen to my sermon, like it or not." So stained glass was invented. And ever since, gentle congregations have been trapped in rooms where you cannot look outside, and you might as well listen to the preacher whether you want to or not.

All of that goes out the window on the annual Sunday that we gather at NaCoMe, because we have no windows. This open-air chapel is a tough place to preach, because instead of listening to the preacher's sermon, you can listen to the sermon out there—the beauty of trees with full leaves turned to the sun; the sound of birds; the scurrying squirrel; the feel of the wind as it blows where it will. No wonder you'd rather be looking out there than trying to listen up here.

Most weeks we close ourselves up in a church, and imagine that we are totally separated from the outside world. It is not just in church. Most days of most weeks we spend our time closed off from the natural world. We go to air-conditioned offices or watch TV in our homes or drive in the cocooned isolation of our cars. Most weeks we can forget about nature and about our part in it.

But not today. Today nature comes right up to our doorstep, and even in here with us as wasps fly in the rafters and an occasional squirrel darts nearby. Today we realize that we human beings are a part of the natural world, that this is where we come from and where we belong. Our world of glass and asphalt causes us to think that we are separate from the natural world. But we are not separate. This is where we come from; this is where we will return.

Psalms 104 knows about this natural world of which we are a part. Listen to what it says:

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures.
 Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
 creeping things innumerable are there,
 living things both small and great.
 There go the ships,
 and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

It is a wonderful picture. All of creation is made and sustained by God. Creatures great and small. Even Leviathan, the sea monster that was believed to prowl the ocean, is a plaything for God. God is the little boy playing with monsters in *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Every time I go to the zoo, I am reminded in God's delight in the variety of creation. You can almost imagine God experimenting with life: "Let me see if I can create a creature fourteen feet high with a long neck. How about a feline creature with a mane and a loud roar? Or an animal with flippers that can balance a ball on its nose? Or an animal that almost looks human and swings in the trees and eats bananas and causes us humans to laugh, because humans also act funny sometimes."

We are a part of that creation. The same God who created the birds of the air created us.

And then the psalm goes on:

These all look to you
 to give them their food in due season;
 when you give to them, they gather it up;
 when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;

when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

God is the one who, with open hands, gives us what we need. God gives to the squirrel, to the bird, and to us.

It is easy to forget that. It is easy for us to imagine, amid our glass and asphalt and air-conditioning, that we don't need for God's hand to be open; we just need for Kroger's to be open. But of course we know better. All that we have comes from God. Here in the midst of God's creation, we remember that.

Moreover, our very life is given us by God. In Genesis we read of God's creation of the first man. But the man didn't come to life until God breathed into him. It is the breath of God, the Spirit of God. We don't even think about it—our bodies breathe in and out, twelve times a minute, and it is God's gift. Twelve times a minute God blesses us with breath. Twelve times a minute. And without it we die.

The psalmist is honest: The time will come when the breath of God will be removed from our physical bodies, and we will return to the earth from which we came. In town, surrounded by our buildings and cars, it's possible to forget that. But here surrounded by these natural surroundings, we know it is true. Living things are born and live and die. As someone has put it: Everyone dies. And I don't suppose God will make an exception in my case.

The psalmist seems to have it backwards: It talks first about taking away the breath of God, and then of getting God's breath. Maybe the psalm already understands what we know, that physical death is not the end, that Christ is alive, that he breathes on us and gives us his Spirit.

The day came when the disciples were together in an upper room. And on that day, the day of Pentecost, the wind blew across the room, and the Spirit came upon them, and they were made alive in the Spirit.

Not even the church is our doing. It is God's gift. The same Spirit that gives life to our bodies also gives life to the church. We take credit for none of it.

So this day, in this place, be aware of the wind of the spirit, blowing in our world and in our lives. Feel it fill your bodies with God's life-giving breath. Feel it filling the church with the Spirit of God.

It is God's spirit, and for it we can only give our thanks. †