



SERMON "Camping With God" 2016

by Rev. Mark Schowalter and Chaplain Nathan Athorp

Picture it: a young camper sits around a dwindling campfire with Chaplain Nathan at Pilgrim Center... or perhaps an older adult with Chaplain Mark at Moon Beach... watching the fire slowly burn. The smoke rises and circles around in the wisp of a breeze coming off the lake. The camper, whom we'll call Nicodemus asks, "Chaplain, what must I do to gain entrance into the realm of God?" The Chaplain replies: "see the smoke rising as it swirls in the gentle breeze? We know not from where it comes, nor where it goes, still we know it is here. God will touch and speak to you when you open yourself to the presence of God's voice in your life." [John 3:8-13]

Then the camper responds: "But Chaplain, how will I know it is the voice of God speaking to me? Elijah looked for God in an earthquake, the wind, and the fire... but did not find God there." To which the Chaplain responds: "But Elijah did find God in the immense moment of silence. Elijah knew God was there... and so it will be with you, my friend." [1 Kings 19:11-13]

Every breath we inhale, every breath we push out, is known as 'pneuma', the "breath of God" or "the breath of the Holy Spirit". God breathed into the first human "the breath of life" or wind of the spirit giving us life. [Genesis 2:4b-9] So too, God breathes life into us through our outdoor ministries at Pilgrim Center and Moon Beach. We are one ministry - two sites full of life – sharing the same Statement of Mission: "We will love God, one another, and the earth by providing Sanctuary, practicing Hospitality, and performing Ministry."

2016 is the year we "Mark This Place" with "wind" following a cycle of "earth, water, and fire". Our curriculum is designed to explore the winds of the Holy Spirit as we seek to understand and comprehend more fully how God moves in us, around us, and through us... in the community life at

camp... in our personal lives at home...and in our communities. Our directors, counseling staff, site staff, and volunteers are all in this together helping each one of us find answers to questions we might have... or discover questions still needing to be asked. Outdoor ministries provide this opportunity in a unique setting surrounded by a unique community, working through unique opportunities to help you and I find our paths and journeys moved by the winds of the spirit.

Wind comes in many different forms. Sometimes we stand in awe as we watch an approaching squall line with a dangerous 'wall cloud' rolling across the lake. By experience we know when a storm approaches, we must take shelter. Other moments, we are comforted by a gentle breeze --calming, refreshing, fulfilling. Even though we cannot actually see the wind we still know it is present as it moves the trees and the leaves... gives lift to the eagles' wings...or fuels a sailboat across the lake. Wind is as much an everyday part of our lives as breathing in and out... pneuma, breath of life.

The winds of times are blowing as well. Since 1902 when the Congregationalists believed it necessary to invest in the Green Lake Bible Institute now known as Pilgrim Center... and in 1957 when our Evangelical & Reformed ancestors purchased Moon Beach Camp, their mission was to provide an outdoor "camp setting" to help people, young and old, experience the winds of the Holy Spirit in a unique place. For some, these moments come in being baptized in the refreshing and renewing waters of Green or Moon Lake. Other times, the winds of change touch a person's soul while meditating on Vespers Point looking out over the water as God paints one unique sunset after another. The opportunity to attend camp; be it a week long session with your peers... a family camp... a unique camp in adventure, sailing, music, arts, dance, & drama [M.A.D.D.] ... or a retreat specializing in things like wild women weekends, to cooking, to quilting, to grandparents and me... Pilgrim Center and Moon Beach attempt to provide the opportunity for everyone to experience the winds of the Holy Spirit moving upon the face of the community gathered.

Let's head back to the campfire circle with Nicodemus and the Chaplain. We find the circle has grown; a few more 'campers' (our guests) have joined in. The questions are asked; "How do we define God? Who is God? How do we know God is real?" The Chaplain might respond; "Wind can be a

mysterious thing. We are never really sure how or where it starts, we can't really see it, and it is only felt. Sometimes it is very predictable and yet other times it swirls around and causes all sorts of confusion. Sometimes it brings us comfort on a hot, muggy day and sometimes it chills us to the bone on a crisp, winter morning. Maybe wind is one of the best descriptions we can use when we are trying to describe God and the Holy Spirit. It is commonly noted that as soon as we try to describe God or the Holy Spirit in words we are going to come up short because our human language just isn't big enough to describe all that God is. Our words create images and those images create limits, but our God is beyond our human limits."

Campers attend looking for many things. Some come to seek a better understanding of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and self. Some come to be with friends; old and new. Some come because for a week they are allowed to be themselves and not judged by the environment in which they live. Experiencing the winds of the Holy Spirit through those on the autism spectrum during our Camp AweSum sessions is sometimes like the disciples waiting for the Spirit Jesus promised them. When it comes, it touches everyone like a tongue of fire and the rush of a mighty wind! We think we have it all pretty clear in our hearts and minds... and like that mighty wind of Pentecost; God pierces our bubbles of reality and allows us to experience true community... the realm of God. [Acts 2:1-13]

People come to Moon Beach and Pilgrim Center with this same objective... to search for a stronger connection with God. At camp they are able to find quiet time, sanctuary, and the communal support enabling them to become aware of the Holy Spirit's presence while singing a song, reading a scripture passage or sharing an experience with a friend who might be on a similar journey. At camp, our guests are able to step away from hectic routines and schedules to center themselves on communicating with God. This can also happen walking one of our labyrinths...sitting quietly at Vesper Point... paddling a kayak or canoe... singing and telling stories around the campfire... or during a conversation shared around the table a meal time. Our camping guests are offered the opportunity to set their busy daily lives aside to find time for prayer, worship, singing, centering, and self-awareness. Come, we'll do the cooking... come as you are!

Let's return to the campfire circle one more time... the group has grown some more. Someone has a guitar and is strumming chords to a favorite song. It might be a meaningful tune which touches the heart, the soul, your spirit... it might be so silly you can't help but laugh and giggle all the way back to your cabin. Notice who is in the circle, it is you, and me, the sojourner on an unknown journey, the very young to the very old. It is boys and girls... women and men... gays and straights...Africans, Asians, Syrians Protestants, Catholics, Muslims... All are welcome to the campfire circle... just as all are welcome to the table of the Lord where we break bread and drink of the cup... together... one body... the body of Christ... the presence of the Holy Spirit... wind... breath... God in our midst. God is still speaking... it's in the wind... it is the wind... it's the breath of life.

God is still speaking... blessing you and the person sitting next to you... this day and every day. Let the whole people of God breathe out together in saying Amen. Amen!