

**Water & Wind**  
*Mark 1:4-11 (& 12)*  
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Pray with me:

Holy God,

Who is as close as the wind on our face,

Who is as close as our next breath —

By your Spirit, pull us into this story

and let it breathe new life into us;

so that by it our stories might join more fully with your story,

and our purposes more fully with your purposes.

Through Christ, our Lord, amen.

The Rev. Maxwell Grant says this:

“Sometimes I wish it were harder to join the church. I honestly, sometimes, think it’s harder to get a membership at Costco than it is to become a Christian. And that’s a *bad* thing. It’s bad, because if the church is easy to join, then any notion of the responsibilities of membership can just fly right out the window.”

I think he has a point. Sometimes, talking about what it means to be part of the whole Christian enterprise can start to sound like that part in prescription drug commercials where they cover all the potential side effects.

*You know: Baptism has proven effective in 7 out of 10 participants in clinical trials. Side effects may include regular church attendance, being asked to lead a Bible study or Sunday School Class, using words like “fellowship” more than you ever thought possible, and regular tithing (we hope). Talk to your pastor about Baptism to see if it’s right for you.*

Sounds real appealing, doesn’t it? No wonder people tune that part out.

So what does the Rev. Maxwell Grant recommend? He recommends that we don’t make joining the church so easy — that we help folks understand that signing on the dotted line is a much bigger commitment. He says:

*“What if...*

What if instead of a little chaste sprinkling of water on the forehead or even a full immersion on the banks of a local river or something in between... *what if* the only way to join the church by *skydiving*?

The very idea makes *my* stomach do backflips. But think about it. Free fall, then rip the cord, and then a gentle floating down to the ground...

Stay with me a moment here. Because imagine what it would mean to go through that experience with its terrors and its rushes and its ultimate relief – and then show up at church on Sunday to be greeted by a room full of people who had been through all of that, too” (“Torn Open, By God,” *Day1.org*, January 11, 2015).

Think about how different that might make us see each other. The young, the old, the busy, the retired, the cranky, the overly cheery, the put-together, the falling-apart – think about how you would see each other, if being baptized meant that at some point, however many years before, we had each had *that day*: the day when we had somehow summoned up enough courage to leap out into thin air and into the hands of God...

Think about it. Think about it, because when Mark’s gospel describes the baptism of Jesus, it’s that kind of radical act that he seems to have in mind. Mark says that as Jesus “was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens *torn* apart and the Spirit *descending* like a dove on him” (Mark 1:10).

The *heavens* – where God lives and from where God comes – break open. The dam that keeps God up there and us down here cracks, and, before anyone can stick finger in the leak, God’s spirit is shooting through that crack and pouring out into the world, before settling on the person of Jesus.

Do you hear how crazy that sounds? When Jesus was baptized, it’s like God kicked open the door on some celestial aircraft, jumped out into thin air, and free-fell, until ripping the cord and floating down to earth to land on Jesus.

Into *what*, exactly, has Jesus just entered?

Unfortunately for you (or, maybe, fortunately *for* you), First Baptist Church does not own any airplanes. There is not a parachute in this world with our church logo on it. And not one of you was asked to jump out of plane to become a member of this church.

We don’t have any of that. All we have is a big, metal tub that we fill and dunk you in. All we have is baptism. All we have is water.

But that does not mean that God’s Spirit isn’t here. Earthiness and the Spirit go together.

C.S. Lewis once told an audience that for Christians, “spirit” is not lighter than matter, but *heavier*. Spirit, he said, is the real substance of God *acting* in this world – *acting* in creation, *acting* in redemption, *acting* in reconciliation. And yet, Spirit is always tied to the material world – a real table, real bread, real juice or wine, real *water*.

Water can be a weighty symbol.

Fred Rogers knew that.

In 1969, on his show “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood,” he invited Francois Clemmons, or Officer Clemmons as he was known on the show, to come into his yard on a particularly hot day and soak his feet in a little plastic swimming pool with him. There, for all the world to see, was one set of black feet and one set of white feet sitting together in the same pool of water. Fred even shared his towel with Francois, letting him towel his feet off with it.

Now, that might seem small to you. Silly, even. How could that little bit of water mean so much?

But remember what the decades leading up that moment entailed. Across our country, there were some restrooms that were only for white people and some that were only for black people. Couldn’t use the same toilet, let alone wash our hands in the same sink.

There were some water fountains that were reserved for only white people and others for black people. Couldn’t drink from the same fountain.

And swimming pools? Many of you are old enough to remember. Couldn’t let black bodies and white bodies be immersed in the same water at the same time. But here was Fred Rogers – that Presbyterian pastor, that Christian – soaking his feet with a black man in a kiddie pool, and doing it on national television for all the world to see.

Now, do you really think that was all just a neat coincidence? Or was Fred Rogers using *water* to invite God to tear the heavens open and usher in a new day?

Do you know what Francois Clemmons said about Fred Rogers just a few years ago? He said:

“On the show, [Fred] would say, ‘I love you just the way you are.’

One day, I said, ‘Fred! Are you talking to me?’

And he looked at me and he said, ‘Yes. I’ve been talking to you for two years, and you finally heard me today.’ And I just collapsed into his arms and I started crying... That’s when I knew that I loved him. No man had ever told me they loved me like that. I needed to hear it all my life. My dad never told me, my step-father never told me. So from then on, he became my surrogate father” (*Won’t You Be My Neighbor*, 2018).

After the heavens were split and the Spirit descended, a voice came from the heavens, too. Do you remember what it said?

“*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased*” (Mark 1:11).

Before he had healed even one who was sick, fed even one who was hungry, befriended even one who was lonely or outcast, taught even one lesson, told even one parable, called even one disciple, calmed even one storm, confronted even one religious leader, or laid down his life, God said to Jesus, "You are one of mine. My *Son*. I love you. In you, I'm already well-pleased."

Why do we believe that God would say that to Jesus, but not to us? Is it because we think Jesus was more deserving? Wouldn't that, then, make God's love conditional?

What might it do to us, what might it have done *in* us if we actually believed that God says the same thing to us at our baptisms?

"You are *my* daughter, *my* son, *my* child. I *love* you. And I'm so *proud* of you."

It's enough to make you want to stop the lectionary reading right there...

...but, verse 12.

It reads: "And the *Spirit* immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12).

We tend to think that the Spirit of God is only with us when we feel happy, content, and fulfilled. But scripture would tell us otherwise. The same Spirit that affirms Jesus completely is the same Spirit that drives him into the wilderness to be tempted.

What kind of God are we worshipping here?

Annie Dillard points out that the God who affirms Jesus completely and then immediately casts him out into the wilderness is the same God we invoke in worship. She says:

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return."

After his baptism, Jesus would never pick up his carpenter's belt ever again. Things would never go back to the way they were. God was putting him on the path to something else.

You see, that's what happens when the Spirit shows up. It's like the wind. It pushes and it pulls, and we can't see it, but it might be trying to drive us to a place we don't necessarily want to go. But maybe it's the exact place or the exact circumstance where God needs us.

And the question is: will we go? Or will we resist?

I keep thinking this week about the story that late-great civil rights leader, Sen. John Lewis, used to tell:

“On this particular afternoon—it was a Saturday, I’m almost certain — about fifteen of us children were outside my aunt Seneva’s house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn’t thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified...

Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside.

Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.

That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies” (*Walking With the Wind*, 1998, xvi-xvii).

Lewis told that story as a metaphor for what it was like to be part of the civil rights movement — “rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another.”

But today I can’t help but think about that story differently.

What if the wind that is rocking this house is none other than the Spirit of God who drove Jesus into the wilderness?

And what if when we march arm-in-arm from one corner to the other to keep this house on the ground, what we’re doing is working not for, but against the Spirit of God who is trying to call us to something new?

What is God up to these days?

Or, are we so busy trying to preserve what we've always had that we aren't even open to what God might trying to do?

The wind, I think, is picking up... starting to gust... starting to blow. Can't you feel it?

Maybe I'm feeling it first... or most... because I'm so close to the baptistry right now.

But there is a wind a blowin', and I think God just might be trying to tell us something.

Will you go? Can't we go together?

Let's see where that wind might take us.

Amen.