

Water from an Ancient Well- Life's Pilgrimage
John 3:5-8
Sunday, July 26, 2026

"Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'" John 3:5-8

I love games of all types. I have a large board and card game collection, but I also am a big fan of video games. I've been a fan of video games since I was a child, playing on my uncle's Commodore 64 or my generation one Sega system. One of the more unusual games I have ever played is a game called "Untitled Goose Game." In this game, you play as a goose. Your mission is to complete missions through harassing the residents of a small British village by stealing their things, honking at them, flapping your wings in that angry way geese are known for, and just generally being a chaotic annoyance. It's a fun game, honestly.

The reason the game works is that geese are scary! Geese can be boisterous and quite loud. You've maybe seen the videos of geese aggressively chasing people. No one wants to mess with a wild goose! Given all of this, I was very surprised as I started studying Celtic Christianity that Celtic Christians commonly used the wild goose as an image for the Holy Spirit. Why would the Celts see the Spirit of God as such a wild and possibly dangerous creature?

In the book *Water from an Ancient Well*, Kenneth McIntosh says that the ancient Irish observed that the geese would fly out to the west, into the ocean, and return from the same direction. No one knew of any land to the west, so this journey of the geese was a mystery. This

behavior is reminiscent of our Scripture passage, where Jesus speaks of those born of the Spirit as being like the wind, moving mysteriously where it wills.

When I re-read this Scripture to prepare for this sermon, I noticed something I had never noticed before. When I have always encountered this passage, it was applied to the Holy Spirit to describe the movement of the Spirit, but that is not directly what the text says. Notice the text is describing those who were born of the Holy Spirit. I believe that what Jesus is saying here is that those of us who claim to follow him and who are guided by the Holy Spirit are not going to have lives that have a sense of wildness to them.

I believe that this contrasts with the Christianity that most of us were raised in, which is much more concerned with control and regulation; a Christianity that is mostly concerned with having a good social respectability; a belief system that teaches our children to become "good people" with good reputations that don't cause too much of a stir. This kind of Christianity doesn't ask more of us than coming to church every Sunday dressed up nicely, putting a bit of money in the plate, and going on our way to live as we would like, as long as we "follow the rules".

Of course, there is nothing wrong with these things, until we become so solidified in them that we begin to stifle the Spirit that desires to move us. New life in Christ is so much more! And it requires us to set aside the idols we can make of comfort, consistency, and safety. God's Spirit is asking us to move in the world as the Spirit does; in ways that are uncomfortable, ever-changing, and even dangerous. When we behave like Jesus, we will challenge the status quo. We will join the Spirit working with the untouchable, the outcasts, the dregs of society, the lonely and the poor. To do these things requires us to step outside of respectability.

John Wesley understood this. In his journal entry for March 29, 1739, he describes how he met preacher George Whitfield in Bristol, England. He saw Whitfield preach to people out in the field, and Wesley said, "I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields...I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church." Wesley struggled with this leading of the Spirit to take his proclamation of the word out of the church for a couple of days, until April 2, 1739, when he journals, "At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation..."

Wesley's actions led to a tremendous amount of trouble for him. Church authorities did not like the preaching in the streets, fields, and factories. Wesley and his followers suffered much persecution for his willingness to "be more vile." And today we remember him as the founder of this great movement that is represented in the United Methodist Church. One never knows where following the Spirit might lead. It can often lead to trouble, but it always leads to abundant life, and healing for ourselves and for our world. Wesley saw great trouble on his journey of life, but also great beauty.

So it was with my favorite Celtic saint, Brendan the Navigator. Brendan was a monk who lived in the 5th century. The tales of his life contain lots of mythical elements, but like all myths, there is truth to be found in his story. He and a group of his monks set out in a boat to find an island west of Ireland called the "Promised Land of the Saints," which was reported to be a paradise on earth. Brendan's journey took him seven years of wandering the Atlantic Ocean. He and his monks faced sea monsters, volcanic islands populated by humanoid creatures that

threw molten lava at their boat. They faced loneliness, isolation, and despair. Yet they also saw sea monsters that saved them and islands less than the paradise they sought but still filled with food, drink, and encouragement from the inhabitants of those islands. When they reached the Paradise of the Saints, they only stayed three days before they had to head home. Brendan's story reminds us that following the leading of the Spirit on the pilgrimage of life will have its wildness. It will have moments of fear and danger. It will have moments of doubt and uncertainty. And there is nothing more amazing or fulfilling or wondrous than that journey. Let us open our hearts to the movement of the Spirit that we may follow where the Spirit leads and experience this journey that can heal ourselves and our world. Amen.