

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.

Picture this—it's Dick Van Dyke, his face smudged with soot. His back is to the smokestacks of the Victorian London skyline. The mood is dark and bleak. And Dick Van Dyke, playing the friendly chimney sweep Burt, has a premonition that something strange is about to happen—he can feel it in the air. Everything slows down, the music is haunting, and with his cockney accent he says...

Winds from the East is coming in. Like something is brewing, about to begin. Can't put me finger on what lies in store. But I feel what's to happen has all happened before.



It's the movie *Mary Poppins*. And many of the children and youth of this congregation know that it's my favorite movie from childhood. I think I like it the best because it is dark—it has that gloomy Victorian aesthetic that I love. And more importantly it has a real-life pathos that *The Little Mermaid* is lacking. The movie is about a wealthy family that's disconnected. Naughty children keep chasing off Nannies, mom is distracted by her involvement with the Suffragettes, Dad with his important job at the bank and they need reliable childcare. And there is a whole class of service workers—cooks, chimney sweeps and the like, who are struggling to make ends meet in the industrial economy.

Maybe I also like the movie because my brother has the unlikely profession of *being* a chimney sweep. But he really hates Mary Poppins jokes.

So there's Burt, aka Dick Van Dyke, noticing that the winds are changing, and then there's Jesus explaining to Nicodemus about that pesky Holy Spirit, the wind blowing where it chooses—I guess Mary Poppins is in my blood, but I couldn't help but make the connection with this moment in the life of Epiphany. Nicodemus really wants to believe in Jesus. But what Jesus is asking him to believe is practically impossible for Nicodemus. He just can't grasp what Jesus is saying. How can we be born again from above? Can we go back into our mother's wombs?

Jesus is speaking an entirely different language than Nicodemus. Jesus is speaking the language of the Spirit. In the Gospel of John, the Spirit is very important. He, or as some of you say, She, is the one Jesus leaves with us even as he goes away—first to die, then to rise, and then

to ascend to Heaven. But at the Last Supper, before his death, Jesus assures the disciples that he will not abandon them—he will leave them the Holy Spirit, whom he calls ‘the advocate.’ Jesus is clear: The Holy Spirit is Jesus’ presence *in* each of the disciples, and *among* them.

And that’s what he is saying to Nicodemus. All of us are born of water—the amniotic fluids nourish us in our mother’s wombs. And when that sack of water breaks, labor begins. But Jesus says we must also be born of the Spirit—we must enter into the kind of new life that comes when we invite the Holy Spirit inside us—the very presence of Jesus within us and nourishing us. The Spirit inside us allows us to know God’s truth. That is how we know God, and what God wants of us.

When the clergy of Epiphany decided to do a Lenten preaching series on these scriptures from the Gospel of John, we did not know that the Holy Spirit would be leading us somewhere so unexpected. We did not know that the Holy Spirit would call Gail away from us and to something new.

How will we respond as a Christian community to this new thing? The Gospel promises new life. But first there’s the birth part. The Gospel does not promise that new life will be without pain. That’s an important thing about the birth metaphor, right? Being born is a traumatic experience for mother and child alike. It is a painful process but necessary to begin a new life. The Gospel writer could have picked all kinds of metaphors for life in the Spirit—sprouting seeds, sunrises, nice gradual and painless events. But nope—we have to be born from above. As we begin this new life, we will feel the birth pains.

Do you remember the rest of what happens in Mary Poppins? Mary Poppins is such a good Nanny. She restores structure and discipline for the children, but she is also warm and playful—and they love her. And the parents are relieved—finally they’ve found someone to care for their children. One day Mary Poppins takes her day off (she has healthy boundaries!) and the father is forced, or kind of tricked, into taking the children to the bank. Due to a series of events, the children cause a run on the bank and the father gets fired. It’s a shameful and painful moment for the father, but he realizes that his family is more important than the bank, and he goes home to reconnect with his children. Of course, once that has happened, Mary Poppins sees they don’t need her anymore. Everyone is very sad to see her go—they will miss her terribly, but they will be just fine. And off Mary Poppins goes, catching that strange wind with her flying umbrella. While the family goes off to fly a kite.

Gail may never forgive me for this analogy, but we are that family and of course she is Mary Poppins. We will miss her terribly, but we will be just fine. She’s done the work here that God called her for. The winds of the Spirit have blown in an unpredictable way, and now God needs Gail to begin something new. And we must also begin something new. We are very sad to see her go. But we are not abandoned. That same spirit that called her abides in all of us and makes Jesus present among us. It’s hard to comprehend. And some of us, in our grief, may be stretched like Nicodemus to understand how we will be born again into new life when it hurts so much.

Very truly, we cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. The Kingdom of God is that place and time when we will live in perfect union with God. As the church, we do our best to make the kingdom real here on earth—by living in reconciliation with one another, and unity with the whole church. Our brothers and sisters at St. Michael and All Angels church in Kansas City need Gail at this moment—let’s rejoice for them that they have called such an amazing leader. And God also has a new thing in store for Epiphany, because God does not favor some over others. God shows no partiality, so let’s respond faithfully and with open hearts—to discern how the Spirit is leading us to that new thing. Maybe we will catch that spirit on our own flying umbrella!

I will be very sad to say good-bye to Gail on the first Sunday after Easter. She has been an amazing colleague, and mentor, and friend. One thing I love about Gail is that she loves to have fun. For both of us, church is a great party every week, and we have so much fun celebrating with you. And so I have this feeling, that even as we say good-bye to Gail, we will be like the

family saying goodbye to Mary Poppins—better off than before she came, and ready to have fun together. *Let's go fly a kite.*
— *The Rev. Amber Stancliffe Evans*