

The Eerie Wonder of Tennessee Jack Daniels

Colleagues,

Two Sundays ago St. John's account of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus was read in churches around the world. Many of you caught it, some for the hundredth time. So to get things started today, a quick question: to whom was Jesus referring when he spoke of the wind blowing where it pleases, of which you hear the sound, not knowing where it came from or where it's headed?

"The Holy Spirit." Is that what you just said?

Then the awful sound you're hearing now is that game-show buzzer blaring "Wroooong!"

And if you're hearing that, please, don't be too embarrassed. The company you're keeping is great. Check with the people around you. Nine out of ten will get it wrong too. That includes a heap of pastors.

What's with the eye-to-mind connection, I wonder, that it now and then refuses to register what a line of type is aiming to transmit? I've been misreading—mis-thinking?—John 3:8 for decades. It was only this month that the eyes finally focused, and the brain as well. Did you hear the buzzer just now as I did two weeks ago? Then look yet again, and see for yourselves:

"The wind blows where it chooses.... So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Whom does the wind signify here? Not the Spirit. For that see Acts 2:2. In John 3:8 the spotlight rests on others, the ones "born of the Spirit." That would be Jesus in the first place. It

also includes the countless others who trust him. Go figure. You who read this with a modicum of thanks to God on Christ's account are among the wind people, so to speak. You blow where you please. You make noise that others notice. Those who do notice can't for the life of them figure you out. So says your Lord, describing you.

"Oh, really?" you say, echoing me. Next question for us all, a huge one: how on earth might such things be playing out as we go about our real-time days as baptized children of God, born of water and the Spirit, as Jesus says, then loosed on the world by a weird and eerie grace of God, beyond our explication?

This, it seems to me, calls for some fresh exercising of our Christian imagination, a worthy project for Lent if ever there was one. To get us started on this, I'm pleased to pass along a recent gift from Bruce Modahl. You [last heard from him](#) in Thursday Theology in the first week of December, 2015. The piece I pass along today seems strikingly apt to the matters Jesus talks about with Nicodemus. May the sounds made by the wind-folk Bruce describes refresh your spirits too.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Tennessee Jack Daniels Joins the Lutheran Church

by Bruce K. Modahl

When we visited my cousin and his wife in Tennessee, I learned Jack Daniels was a Lutheran. He joined Joyful Servants Lutheran Church in Seymour. No doubt for all eighty-four years of his life people have been saying, "What was his momma thinking when she named him Jack?" She was not thinking Tennessee whiskey. She was thinking John, the beloved disciple. In full disclosure, his

name is not Jack Daniels but something like it. The church in Seymour is not Joyful Servants but close. Otherwise the story is as my cousin handed it on to me.

The Lutheran Church in Seymour has had its ups and downs. A group of people organized the congregation almost thirty years ago. They are mostly retirees from up north. They came looking for a place warmer than Michigan but not as hot as Florida. They were looking for someplace lukewarm with a good view so they settled in Seymour in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Dollywood is just down the road in Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg is nearby if they need some excitement. Mostly, they do not. They grew to about two hundred people and built an attractive little church. After five years the pastor left for larger challenges and with him went the first wave of people out. They were dissatisfied over the way worship was being conducted. A new pastor came and by all accounts was doing a great job. The best way to say what happened to him was he lost his nerve. People were still fighting over which hymnal to use and what hymns to sing and on and on. Everyone said, "This is not the way we did it up north." He did not have any experience. He had no one to talk to that could help him sort out the trivia from the treasure. He lost his nerve. When he went another wave of people left.

By the time Jack Daniels found them they were down to twenty people in worship on a good Sunday. They had long since sold their church building. They are on their second storefront location. Soon it will be a third. Owners keep selling buildings out from under them. They rely on retired pastors to take turns preaching. When they aren't available my cousin fills in though church headquarters does not like him doing that. When he has the sermon he has to call it a talk.

What attracted Jack to Joyful Servants is hard to say other than

he had been in most other churches in town and wore out his welcome in one after the other. That is a lot of welcome to wear out because there are a lot of churches in this notch on the bible belt.

Jack presented himself to the people of Joyful Servants as their new evangelist. He would talk to anybody anytime about the Lord. In the grocery store he asked the lady choosing lettuce next to him if she knew Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior. He stood on the street corner in Gatlinburg and stopped tourists by posing the question, "If you died tonight would you go to heaven?"

Rather than throw away an old Bible he took it apart and carried pages with him. At the end of his witness he handed people a page saying, "Here is a gift for you, a page from the Word of God. I think you will find something helpful in its message."

Someone pointed out to him that random pages from the Bible might not be helpful. And what if you got a good story, Jesus stilling the storm, for example, and the page ended right in the middle of the story, leaving Jesus asleep in the stern of the boat and the disciples crying out in fear.

Jack could see this was a weakness in his method. So, he took to handing out pages from old hymnals. He told people, "Here is a blessing for you, a page from a hymnal. If you can't read music you can read the words. God will bless you."

Some people worried Jack's brand of evangelism would scare people off. They said, "We need to tell Jack he is not to identify himself as being from Joyful Servants." But someone pointed out "Folks are not exactly beating the doors down to get in. Let him alone." They did. And so, they had their official evangelist, the only Lutheran evangelist working the grocery store aisles and street corners in Seymour and its environs.

Jack lived all his life in the foothills of the Smokey Mountains. All his life Jack attended churches in which people were known to encourage the preacher by calling out, "Amen, brother" or "Praise the Lord." For all the years of his life that is what Jack did when he heard the word of God preached. The people of Joyful Servants Lutheran Church had never before heard such a thing. That is not the way they did it up north. Hearing Jack call out, "Amen" and "Praise the Lord" got on peoples' nerves. People said they didn't hear a word of the sermon because they were on edge, waiting for the next "Amen," and trying to anticipate "Praise the Lord," so they wouldn't jump in their seats.

My cousin told me one retired pastor got so flustered by Jack that after the service was over he came over to Jack and shook his finger in Jack's face saying, "Now listen here. In the Lutheran Church we do not say 'Praise the Lord.'"

That moment may have been the turning point. The story made the rounds. People told and retold it and laughed over it. Jack kept coming to church; the people made room for him.

Jack was also a regular at the Wednesday night Bible study. Joyful Servants was the only church in the circuit and probably the entire district claiming 75% of its members in small group Bible study. They regularly had fifteen show up at 7:30 on a Wednesday night. Jack added in his "Amen" and "Praise the Lord" at this gathering as well. On the rare occasions Jack missed Bible study my cousin placed in the center of the table a battery-powered button he found in a catalogue. Pushing the button triggers a voice calling out, "Praise the Lord."

Jack came to church for three years before anyone saw his wife. He talked about Edna. Folks knew their children had come together to celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary. After three

years, she showed up at church one Sunday. She told people she came to see the people who put up with her husband. She came back the next Sunday and the Sunday after that and has kept on coming. She told one of the ladies she had not been to church in over thirty years. She said, "You want to know about being shunned, I'll tell you."

To my knowledge no one asked for the details. There is more to the story than I know. All I know is here was a wounded soul, starved for the Bread of Life.

Joyful Servants Lutheran Church might not survive. They will never build a mega-worship center, advertise on billboards leading into town, or broadcast their services on television. However, by the power at work within this stiff-necked people God accomplished something beyond our imagination.