

VOWR Meditation Series
St. John's, NL
August 20 – 24, 2007
Rev. Dr. Jonathan Dent

Monday, August 20

I am new to this province and city, but one thing I have noticed in the six provinces in which we have lived is constant and that is talk about the weather. In California where I grew up, you were more interested in the pollution alerts than the weather, warm and sunny was pretty much every day. And of course, that can cause problems. But in Canada and Newfoundland, you have good reason to talk about the weather, in many parts of this country, talking about the weather and staying up on the weather news is tantamount to survival. So if you want to live, listen to the weather news.

Jesus talked about the weather as well: Consider Matthew 16: *1* The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. *2* He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' *3* and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

So Jesus noted regarding the weather, "Red sky at morning, sailors take warning; red sky at night, sailors' delight." So in Israel, just like here, there was some agreement on the signs in the sky. You should enjoy a beautiful sunset, but when it comes to a beautiful sunrise, look out, at least if you're going out into the sea. And I'm sure there is some kind of meteorological principle that the weather people know about that can somehow help you or warn you as the case may be. But Jesus wasn't really talking about weather.

He was talking about being able to discern the environment in which you live. Now I'm not talking about global warming, or how green a lifestyle you choose to have, someone else can talk about those things, I'm talking about understanding the spiritual environment that you live in. Can you discern what the spiritual environment is here?

How open are people here to talking about spiritual things? How open are you to talking about what your relationship to God is? If we're not open

about such things, then we are missing a vital chance to talk about the most important subject in life, your relationship to your Creator.

Years ago, a provincial motto was chosen for Newfoundland. I believe it is still in Latin, “quarite primum regnum dei,” which you probably know means “Seek ye first the kingdom of God,” a portion of a Bible verse in Matthew 6:33 and the second part of that verse says: and all these things shall be added unto you. Focusing on what God wants for our lives, reflecting God’s character in love, mercy, compassion, justice, truth and beauty and what God has given us in Jesus Christ is a central life principle. It is in the DNA of the province and this city. I’m sure there are quite a few who object to this, but nevertheless this is a part of our spiritual environment.

In fact, even having this radio broadcast meditation on the Voice of the Wesleyan radio is unique to here. So what do you think? Is there a spiritual environment here which is more open to the gospel, to the good news about Jesus Christ here in Newfoundland? I’m going to be talking about the weather this week in a spiritual environment context. Come and hear the forecasts and take a moment to think about the most important relationship on earth, you and the Lord.

Tuesday August 21

This week on meditation, we are looking at the weather. We noted yesterday that Jesus talked about the weather, as Canadians and Newfoundlanders often do. But he had a purpose in saying in Matthew 16: 1-3 the following words: *1* The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. *2* He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' *3* and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Jesus’ purpose was to get us to think about why we are so able to talk about the weather, yet so unable to talk about spiritual things and the condition of our hearts. The Pharisees came to him looking for a sign, for something miraculous to prove that Jesus was who he said he was. On this occasion, he gave them no sign but pointed them back to the Scripture, by saying that they should look again at Jonah. Jonah was a person whose time in the big fish or whale foreshadowed Jesus’ three days dead and then alive again. So

he pointed those who said they wanted to see something to someone they couldn't see.

This is always the case when we talk about God. I need to point you to someone you can't see, which in turn introduces me to a weather topic: the fog. Now fog is big part of our experience here in Newfoundland.

As I said before, I've just moved here but some days I can see Signal Hill from my house. Some days, I can see how blue the ocean is. But most days I'm lucky to see the trees across the street. I'm told that St. John's is in the Guinness Book of World Records for being the city with the highest average number of days of fog in the world, something like 159 days per year. Is that true? You can telephone me at St. David's Presbyterian Church if you agree or disagree with that statistic.

Fog hides the horizon. It can also get in your way if it is thick enough. Doubts are the same in a spiritual context. You can say to yourself, "Now is God really real, because such and such happened?" I believe we say such things because we go through tough times, times of loss, confusing times, times when politicians and others let us down. We lose the horizon, like when the fog rolls in. But I still know that when I drove into work today, Signal Hill and the ocean are still there, even though I can't see them. I still know where the road is even if the fog is thick. I might have to slow down, but I know the way.

We too are told many times in Scripture that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and He is the way to God. But the fog of contemporary doubt, and the talk of atheists and agnostics on the airwaves and other places causes questions. Questions are good. And so are answers. We need to think more deeply about what we believe. We need to meditate not only at 9 a.m. listening to the radio, but also every day, and talk to the One who is there. One day we shall see God face to face. Meanwhile we live in the fog and dreariness that often makes our life what it is.

I'm told quite a few deal with SAD, seasonal affective disease. Where the lack of light and the missing of the sun effect one's mental and physical condition. I believe it is the same in a spiritual context. We need the light, we need the Son. And so today I encourage you to talk again to those around you and directly to God. He is the light. He has spoken through His

Son. I encourage you to read a portion of his teachings everyday, at least today.

Wednesday August 22

This week on meditation we are looking at the weather. We all talk about the weather, but I'm suggesting that there is much to talk about in the weather as a metaphor for the spiritual environment in which we live. We live in a province whose motto is "Seek ye first the kingdom of God," a wonderful focus for living from Matthew 6:33. But does that motto reflect the attitude of the majority of Newfoundlanders any more? As individuals we can choose to live by that motto or not.

I wanted to talk about the rain today, because God talks about the weather in Scripture. Jesus mentions the rain in the chapter before he encourages his followers to seek first the kingdom of God. He causes the rain (and the sunshine) to fall on the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45) It's a simple fact. No matter how we act, the total population, the totally selfish, the criminal, the ones who serve, the ones who love and seek justice, everyone gets the same weather pattern. The rain falls on the good and the bad. No one can dispute that. What is the rain falling on Newfoundland? It is our motto, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God..." falling on us all like the rain. It sets our spiritual environment. We sing "God guard thee, God guard thee, God guard thee Newfoundland" and some sing "God keep our land" in the Canadian anthem. Now what do you think when you sing that? Do you actually believe you are singing to the One personal God, the Creator, or are you just singing the words?

If you have a relationship with God, such wording presents no problem. But without that relationship, then it becomes quite muddled, something like the fog and driving rain. A cool rain refreshes the land. Rainy weather, someone once told me in Vancouver, keeps the skin soft and supple. It is good for one's health, as drinking water is. If you agree or disagree with this you can call me at St. David's Presbyterian Church.

The rain waters the food that is essential to our existence. The rain provides the water resources that we often take for granted for our nutrition and our household needs. When the rain stops, and drought ensues, serious damage can result. Elijah prayed for the rain to stop in Israel, and it stopped for three years. God was trying to teach the people of the time that Baal was not

the god of rain, nor of the weather, He was. You can read about it in 1 Kings 17 and 18. We sometimes take the rain for granted. Jesus wanted to remind us to love each other, even to love our neighbours who don't believe what we believe. Let your love for one another be like the rain that falls, not like a spigot, a tap that gets turned off and on depending on who you meet.

But that kind of love comes only as we receive it from the hand of the One who created our life, gives us our days here on earth, and tells us there is more. You can only give what you have received. So I encourage you to receive from God the love, grace and mercy you need today to live and to be able to give the same to others.

Thursday August 23

This week on meditation we're talking about the weather. We've taken a bit of a different slant on the weather, taking our clue from the words of Jesus in Matthew 16: **1** The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. **2** He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' **3** and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Jesus told the religious leaders of his time that they were good with figuring out the jet stream and the arctic inflows and outflows, but not so hot when it came to figuring out the spiritual environment in which they lived. We are the same. We find it difficult to talk about the spiritual environment in which we live. What do Newfoundlanders believe about God? Gone are any days where the majority of the population went to church. Gone are the days when the children were being taught about their particular brand of Christianity in school. Gone are the days when we can expect that our neighbours will have Christian values and respect. Tell me if you think differently.

In that sense, it is a chilly environment spiritually. In California, and most of the southern states, people generally are more concerned about how to stay cool. Air conditioning and heat pumps get priority, even in BC where we used to live. But here people generally are more concerned about how to stay warm. Some even turn their heat on in July and August, scatter times.

So what does Scripture say about the cold? Jesus warns in Matthew 24:12, that at the end of the age, “because of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.” Would you say that’s true here now? I understand that Newfoundlanders pride themselves on their hospitality, as well they should. But is there a cooling of the love and hospitality that there once was? I’ll ask you that question because you know much better than I do. Jesus says that the reason why people’s love will grow cold is because of the wickedness, the general rebellion against and God’s ways. The Bible calls that sin, as you well know. So even if the physical environment warms up here so that we have longer summers and more sunshine, what is the spiritual environment like? Are people less responsive to God and to one another? I would say that is the case in the rest of Canada, but what about here?

Now God talks about not only the cold but also the snow. Yes, I hate to use that word in August, but there it is. Strangely enough, the snow is used in quite a positive context in Scripture. It is used to describe what Jesus would fulfill in his work on the cross. Snow? How is that connected to the cross? You’ve probably heard the verse from Isaiah 1: **18** "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

Now I’m told that Bible translators had to think hard when they were translating this for the Polynesian islands, where they had never seen snow nor sheep. Their answer? They chose the local word for “coconut meat.” And you know why. It was the whitest thing they knew. White symbolizes purity and cleanliness. So here God is saying that he will take our rebellion and wipe it away and give us a new relationship with himself. So when you see the snow, think of the pure white, and what God has done for you. The question is still: will you receive what he has done for you... The snow comes whether you want it to or not. Receive today the love and forgiveness you need.

Friday August 24

This week on meditation we have been looking at the weather. Not just the physical weather, every radio station broadcasts that, we’re looking at the spiritual weather. What’s the forecast for St. John’s and the rest of Newfoundland and Labrador?

I've been talking about the fog, and our doubts, the rain and our need to give and receive love, the snow and the promise of God for a new start in life, and today I wanted to talk to you about the wind. The Bible has well over a hundred references to the wind and Jesus himself talks about the forecasting of the wind in Luke 12:54ff. He says we know how to forecast the rain by the clouds and the heat by the wind, but we don't know how to interpret the spiritual times in which we live. And that's true we don't do well in understanding our spiritual environment even though we do somewhat well in forecasting the physical environment's weather. We know lots about global warming and the ozone layer, or we think we do, but we don't know the condition of our own hearts and our neighbors'.

This is where Jesus challenges us to consider the life he calls us to, as stated in the Newfoundland motto: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" a reference to what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. It doesn't matter what walk of life you come from, whether you have lots of stuff and money or not. What matters is whether you come to Jesus, as one of the Supreme Court judges did in Jesus' time. His name was Nicodemus, probably was called "Nic" by familiars. He came at night, possibly because he was embarrassed being seen with Jesus. And he had a conversation with Jesus, that he didn't understand. He didn't understand what Jesus was trying to teach him about spiritual birth, and starting anew with God. He also didn't understand about the wind.

So what was Jesus trying to teach about the wind? First of all, he said in John 3:8: The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." He was teaching about how the Holy Spirit, God Himself, was free to draw people to himself. Just like the wind blows here and there and you can't see it, nevertheless, you can see the effects of the wind. And so too you can see the effects of the love of God in people's lives. This passage links the work of the Holy Spirit to the image of the wind blowing.

Newfoundland is a place where the wind blows pretty steady. I wonder why there aren't more shops with kites for sale in them that can withstand the higher winds? But the wind can annoy us, or reek havoc on our newly planted trees, or it can be a reminder of the work of the Holy Spirit in this place. The gospel of John teaches us that the Holy Spirit's work is to draw

us to God. If you're feeling far away from God, or he from you, ask the Holy Spirit to draw you to Himself.

The Holy Spirit, the wind of God, blows in our lives in two general directions. One, is for comfort. No one else in this world knows what you are going through. Nobody knows what goes on in your heart and mind, except God himself and you to some degree. Sometimes we can be lonely in a crowd of people. Sometimes we can be down with a smile on our faces. No matter where you are in life, the Holy Spirit wants to comfort you with His love and draw you to Jesus and God the Father. That's what he does.

The other prevailing wind is that of challenging and convicting us. Sometimes it is our conscience that convicts of us wrong, but more often, and certainly for believers, it is the Holy Spirit who teaches us about sin, or rebellion against God. It is also he who teaches us that we will someday be accountable, all of us who believe and who don't believe, we will all be accountable to God for what we have done. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our need for God. So when you feel the wind next, think of God the Holy Spirit drawing you to himself. God will use many things in our lives to draw us to himself.

My name is Jonathan Dent. I hope you have enjoyed this week of meditations and also hope that I might speak with you again. Thanks for listening.