

Sermon – “Passing the Torch”

Sunday, February 11, 2018

Scripture Readings – II Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

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Our first Scripture reading, II Kings, 2:1-12, focuses on the prophet Elijah’s last day on earth, as he passes the torch of his ministry to Elisha. Elisha is determined to remain with Elijah until the end as they journey to places of significance in their history together, finally crossing over the Jordan before Elijah ascends in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha mourns the loss of his mentor as he carries on the ministry and leadership of the Israelite people. Hear now God’s holy word.

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. ³ The company of prophets^[a] who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”⁴ Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. ⁵ The company of prophets^[b] who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”⁶ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. ⁷ Fifty men of the company of prophets^[c] also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸ Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.”¹⁰ He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.”¹¹ As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹² Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. Amen.

On this Transfiguration Sunday we celebrate the radiant light of God revealed in the glory of Jesus Christ as he stood with Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop so long ago. Christ’s Transfiguration is commemorated the Sunday before Lent as a glimpse of the resurrection, empowering us for the journey of Lent and the road of sorrow Christ walked. Our second Scripture is Mark 9:2-8. Three disciples witness Jesus’ Transfiguration. Like Elisha, they keep silent until this mystery is revealed in the resurrection. Listen to the Word of God.

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one^[a] on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^[b] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved;^[c] listen to him!”⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Amen.

The title of the sermon “Passing the Torch”

The Text: '8 Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.' II Kings 2:8'

Let us pray. Loving God, give us your spirit that we may rise to the call to carry and pass the torch of your light into the world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our minds and hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

This weekend the Winter Olympics began in Pyeongchang, South Korea with a spectacular opening ceremony. The lighting and the extinguishing of the Olympic flame are the most dramatic and symbolic moments of the games. During the ancient games in Olympia, Greece from the eighth century BCE through the fourth century of the Common era, a sacred flame burned at the Alter of Zeus. The modern Olympic games resumed in 1896 and the first Olympic flame was in 1928 when Amsterdam hosted the games. The torch relay began twelve years later when the flame was carried from Greece to Berlin. The passing of the torch has been the prelude to every Olympic game since 1936.

The ritual of keeping this flame burning and passing it from one person to another, both men and women, from different walks of life, across the landscape of different countries provides a wonderful image for the faith community passing the torch of the gospel from one generation to the next. The torch for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia passed a few blocks from our home in St. Louis. Peter jogged with our son Paul in the stroller to witness the passing of the torch.

The flame is a rich symbol for our faith tradition. Moses knew God's presence in the burning bush and the church was given birth at Pentecost with the fire on the tongues of those gathered, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit.

What a joy it is to be among the torchbearers in this congregation, both men and women, passing the torch of the rich heritage and faith we share to our sons and daughters...using the spiritual gifts God has given us. Two weeks ago Karen Sherrick, our new Director for Children's Ministry, Dale Rogers and I welcomed the older adults who serve as advocates and torchbearers to our Bridges children in grades 3-5. At our gathering we participated in an exercise exploring each of our spiritual gifts. Our children delighted as they learned they possess gifts of leadership, serving, teaching, insight, mercy and compassion.

This past Friday evening, Natalie Knox, Interim Director for Youth, and I joined the 2018 Confirmation class and their mentors, their torchbearers at Temple Israel to learn about the Jewish faith and to share in a meaningful worship experience led by Rabbi Barry Marks.

This afternoon the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee will join our junior and senior high youth to provide dinner and to invite their thoughts about the pastor who will join us this spring as a torchbearer.

Our Scripture readings on this Transfiguration Sunday shed some light on the important work of torchbearers. As Elijah passes the mantle of leadership onto Elisha, they spend their last day journeying from one significant location to another in their history. Revisiting these milestones

and places of vulnerability gives them perspective and renews their faith in the One who calls them, the One who provides a way, the One who parts the waters before they part ways.

Peter, James and John are given the privilege to witness the dazzling splendor, the Transfiguration, a sign of Christ's resurrection glory. Although unable to comprehend the meaning at the time, they are not left totally baffled. The voice of God gives them and each of us definite insight and direction to listen to Christ. We are not left to fumble through life merely doing the best we can, right or wrong! God's love is made flesh and God's will is articulated in the voice of Jesus Christ. As believers, as torchbearers, we have been given the certitude of living by listening to Christ.

As we prepare for our journey into lent and revisit the places of vulnerability and suffering in Christ's life and as we share our own lives in the passing of the torch, we can do so without apology for the suffering that is a part of life. As Christ taught and as the disciplined athletes in the Olympic games often understand better than we do, there is no victory without sacrifice, there is no gain without loss, there is no glory without suffering; and there is no joy without sorrow. These are integrally related, each a part of the whole, and each a part of the human experience.

As torchbearers, we give thanks that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus who joined us in our humanity, who lived with integrity, compassion and justice, and who conquered death by dying on a cross. As we come down from the mountain of the transfiguration in a world that is broken and longs for healing, may we be torchbearers in the unbroken legacy of our hope in Jesus Christ. May we never forget the broken places in our own lives and the God who entered into our suffering to make us whole. Amen.