



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 6-30-19*

*"Passing the Mantle"*

*Psalm 77:11-20 and 2 Kings 2:6-14*



When Nici, the person who makes our bulletins, saw my text and title for this morning's sermon, she put this picture of the two dogs on the cover for our bulletin review this past Tuesday. She did it as a joke, thinking I'd be sure to change it. Like everyone else, I broke out laughing. But I loved it. I still love it. That's sheer joy on that dog's face.

And isn't that the way it should be? God passes the mantle to us, calls us to be a part of what God is doing in the world, and shouldn't the privilege and wonder and miracle of it all fill our hearts with joy?

That's why we stayed with the picture. The stick may not have been passed to him – that dog may have taken it more than been given it – but his bubbling energy and delight in the moment speak volumes. There is, indeed, deep joy to be found when we say "yes" to God.

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We use the phrase "passing the mantle" to talk about a shift in leadership or responsibility from one person to another. We find its origins here in our text, this morning. Elijah's mantle – a cloak or covering – became a symbol of his call to the prophetic ministry. When the cloak was passed from him to Elisha it served as the outward sign of Elisha's succession.

Passing the mantle, however, can be tricky stuff. We see it all the time in organizations; there are so many ways to mess it up – picking the wrong person, or having a former leader who is unwilling or unable to let go of the control or power, or failing to recognize and constructively engage all the politics that are a part of any system.

One of the all-time worst transitions came in the early part of the last century. Of the eleven presidents who served this country from 1869 to 1923, seven of them came from a single state: Ohio. But William Howard Taft didn't get the job because he was from Ohio. He got it because he was Teddy Roosevelt hand-picked successor. Roosevelt was sure that his close friend and Secretary of War would continue the progressive policies that he had begun. Roosevelt had publicly announced he wouldn't seek a third term. He thought getting Taft in would be the next best thing.

When Taft was elected in 1908, he did indeed pursue some of Roosevelt's most important work including the break-up of trusts, support for regulatory policies that would prevent corporate abuses, and conservation efforts. But Taft had been a judge for twelve years and when it came to the Constitution itself, he was a staunch conservative. Even more, lacking Roosevelt's dynamism, he struggled to navigate and lead an increasingly divided Republican party.

When Roosevelt returned from his post-presidential travels, it didn't take much for some of his old buddies to convince him that Taft had betrayed him. Roosevelt proceeded to ruin Taft's presidency, split the Republican Party, and pretty much single-handedly ensured that the Democrats would take the White House in 1912 which is precisely what they did with Woodrow Wilson.

To my mind, Teddy Roosevelt was one of the greatest presidents we've ever had. But I would also say he was perhaps the worst ex-president this country has ever witnessed. He utterly failed in one of the most important tasks of leadership: passing the mantle on to those who follow and ensuring their success.

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This process of transition can be exquisitely difficult. Much has been written, for example, about the challenges of passing a family business from one generation to the next. Newspapers and business magazines often feature stories about a transition that went particularly well, or one that turned catastrophically wrong.

There is broad interest in these stories because investors, board members and leaders are eager to learn what it takes to get this process right.

So here in our text we are seeing just such a transition. Elijah has played his part, one of the greatest prophets in all of scripture. But now it is time for him to move on. It's time for a new prophet to take his place. The shift begins back in 1 Kings 19; the first encounter between Elijah and Elisha. Elisha was a farmer at the time, working his field when Elijah approached and placed his cloak, his mantle, upon him.

How did Elisha respond? We are told he sacrificed his oxen and burned his equipment. He was literally destroying his former way of life. He was all in. There would be no going back for him.

What a contrast to our own tendency to temporize when it comes to God; to try to keep our options open; to seek the best of both worlds; to want God's blessings without giving up control. What Elisha understood right from the start is that you are either all in or you aren't in at all. There is no middle ground. You can't dive into a swimming pool and still stay dry.

We don't know how long Elisha served as Elijah's servant; certainly long enough to gain a sense of what he was getting into. When the time came for the transition, Elisha asked for a double portion of the prophet's spirit. He was not asking twice as much power. What he was asking for was the inheritance that an oldest son would receive: a double portion. He was asking for the outward sign that he was Elijah's designated heir – the one appointed by God to carry God's ministry forward.

The mantle was that sign, and when Elisha chose to pick it up he was consciously choosing to accept the responsibilities and sacrifices and privileges that came with that call. Elijah had laid the groundwork. Now it was up to Elisha to build upon it. God, in God's wisdom, had provided for a seamless transition.

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When Jesus calls us, he doesn't give us a cloak or mantle. He gives us his own Spirit. The call is clear: "All authority has been given unto me," he says. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always to the end of this age" (Mt. 28:18-20).

The mantle is being passed, and the Spirit – Christ’s presence – is given that we might have all we need to accomplish those purposes: it is the Spirit who guides us into all truth, the Spirit who works from the inside out gradually transforming us – setting us free from all that holds us back; it is the Spirit who brings a power into our lives so much greater than our own, so that we might accomplish so much more than we ever dreamed or imagined.

“I am with you always.” That’s what Jesus is talking about. But unlike Teddy Roosevelt who couldn’t stop looking over the shoulder of his successor, criticizing him, undermining him, making him smaller and smaller – unlike Roosevelt, the Spirit’s role isn’t to judge or criticize or belittle. The Spirit, rather, is given to help us find the very lives for which we long: lives full of meaning and purpose; lives suffused with peace and joy; lives lived in right relationship with God and with each other and with even ourselves.

In Jesus the mantle of God’s call is passed to us. It is now up to us to further the work of the Kingdom: the work of justice and righteousness; mercy and compassion and love. Like Elisha before us we are given the choice: we can pick that mantle up with all the privilege and responsibility that comes with it, or we can leave it right where it is and move on with our lives as if we’ve never seen it.

Some people might think saying “yes” to God’s call means taking on some great, oppressive burden. I get that. Jesus himself spoke of picking up our cross in order to follow. But as you make your own decision, I would invite you instead to consider those two dogs on the cover. Which of them looks more joyful to you: the one who got the stick, or the one who is moving through this life without it?