

Ascension Day Transferred

Text: Acts 1:1-11

Title: Passing on the torch

Rev. Sharon Smith

Passing the torch.

I will never forget the build-up to the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics. There was excitement, nervous anticipation and scepticism whether this small city could pull it off – the Olympic village was built with much public debate over housing, the Downtown Eastside community held its breath as talk of gentrification hit the news. And not to mention the concern about if the weather would cooperate and deliver snow.

But all was forgotten when the torch was passed between 1200 participants in the relay. Rick Hansen brought it into BC Place Stadium, in turn lighting Catriona Le May Doan's torch, who lit Steve Nash's torch, and the flame continued to Nancy Greene and Wayne Gretzky. It was so exciting to watch.

It is no wonder that when we talk about the process of passing an important role from one person to another, that we say 'they passed the torch'. It is a great metaphor.

But there is an even better one. A more ancient metaphor of succession. It involves a cloud, a God-man being lifted up, and the successors staring gobsmacked, necks cranked looking up, watching.

The ascension story as the author of Luke's gospel and the book of Acts, wrote it, is a metaphor of succession.

It was not the first time it is used. For in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) the prophet Elijah had been coaching and mentoring Elisha. A younger man of the next generation.

Until one day Elijah planning to leave for Bethel and he planned to leave alone, but Elisha had clung onto him and said "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you".

And then Elijah went on to Jericho and then to Jordan.

And each time, Elisha followed him and would not let him go.

For he sensed that the time was coming where he would have to take on the work that Elijah had been doing.

And it is a scary, daunting moment when a person is given the task of taking over from a much loved and renowned elder.

So Elijah turned to Elisha and said to him:

"Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

Elisha asks: let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.

Elijah replies: if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours.

So in this story, as they were walking along Elijah is taken up to heaven in whirlwind and Elisha, neck cranked up, gobsmacked, made sure he saw him. And the Spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha.

Luke Timothy Johnson, Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles

A succession story.

Passing the torch.

Barbara Brown Taylor, writes that Ascension Day, one of the most forgotten feast days of the church year, is the day that eleven people, with nothing but a promise and a prayer, consented to become the church.

For while they still stood with their necks cranked up, gobsmacked, wondering what the heck was going on. They were given the message: stop looking up, better to look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their lives, because that was where they were most likely to find Christ, not the way they used to know him, but the new way, not in his own body, but in their bodies, the risen, the ascended Lord who was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere instead.

Barbara Brown Taylor Gospel Medicine

And it is out of a powerful, unbelievable story like this. That I am called to pay attention to the the poetics of this event. Not to read it literally, but literarily, as an entrance door to my own lived experience.

As John Caputo writes: I fix my eyes and my ears on the call of this story – on the way of life that it is calling me toward... and I look and listen for what the Spirit is inviting us into...

John Caputo The Weakness of God

And the invitation before us, IS one of succession.

The succession of living the Way of Jesus.

We are the body of Christ.

For the moment of Christ's ascension began our own ascension.

Our ascension to embody this way. To live it out, as Christ, for the life of our world.

And here we are in 2019. And we have some succession planning to do.

In a 2016 blog Sam Eaton, in his early twenties, wrote a piece on the reasons he thinks his generation are over church.

First, he said: Nobody's Listening to Us

When a church forges ahead without ever asking for the next generation's input we get the message loud and clear: **Nobody cares what we think.**

Just before Jesus left the disciples, Luke makes a point of recording the disciples asking Jesus their questions. And he listened, he responded, he guided, he reassures.

Second, Sam writes: Helping the Poor Isn't a Priority

His heart is broken for how radically self-centered and our institution has become. He asks church members to clock the number of hours we spends in "church-type" activities. Bible studies, meetings, groups, social functions, book clubs, talking about building community, discussing a new mission statement... And then asks: "Now let's clock the number of hours spent serving the least of these." He says that his generation wants a faith lived in authentic action.

The disciples were hung up on restoring their national kingdom, and Jesus was passing on a Kingdom of the heart. That is the seat of motivation for action – so that we act justly, love mercy and walk humbly.

Perhaps the next generation will call us back to what is most important.

Third, Sam writes: We're tired of the church blaming the culture

He writes that it seems to be easier to point out the down-falls of the culture – life is too fast, people have gotten too busy, choosing sports events over church on Sundays, technology is corrupting our way of life...

Rather he says: "mentor us don't preach at us".
He writes: "We crave relationship, to have someone walking beside us through all this muck. We are the generation with the highest ever percentage of single parent homes. We're looking for mentors who are authentically invested in our lives and our future"

Church - this is our invitation.
To pass the torch. So that the embodiment of this transformative way of Jesus lives on.

Reflecting on the ascension, poet Jan Richardson, writes:

In the leaving
in the letting go
let there be this
to hold onto
at the last:

the enduring of love
the persisting of hope
the remembering of joy

the offering of gratitude
the receiving of grace
the blessing of peace.