

PASSING THE MANTLE
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

One of the things I've noticed in the two weeks I've been at IPC is that there is a lot of change going on. There is change in the leadership of the congregation. You just elected new council members who will be attending their first meeting Tuesday night. You said goodbye to a beloved pastor, and the Pastor Search Committee is hard at work looking for a new pastor.

But it's not just change in the congregation as a body that's going on. There is lots of change going in individual lives. It's the nature of an international church that there are many of expatriates. Since I've been here I've heard stories about the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and learning a new language and mastering a new job. Many spouses who aren't employed are dealing with big changes in their lives. Many have put their careers on hold to come here, and they're wrestling with the challenge of knowing who they are apart from their work or as new parents who face demands of stay at home parenting that bring out both good and not so good aspects of themselves that they never recognized.

It's not just expats who are dealing with change. Many who have lived here their whole lives have told me about the changes going on in their lives. Some are students who will be graduating in the spring, facing the big changes of starting university or a job. Some are going through significant changes in their employment, some voluntary and some involuntary. Some are facing retirement, a big change in how you'll use your time and how you'll define yourself when people ask, "So what do you do?" And all of us who are of a certain age are aware of the change in our bodies, how steps seem to get steeper and the name of the person we just met takes a little longer to pop up in our minds.

Today's scripture lessons are about moments of change, points of transition. In the Old Testament lesson Elijah passes the mantle to Elisha to take over as God's main prophet in Israel. In the New Testament lesson Jesus gives three of his disciples some insight into how he is getting ready to change not just their lives but the course of all creation. There are some

PASSING THE MANTLE
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

things those two stories can teach us about how God works through change, in our own lives and in the life of IPC.

One thing to notice is that those changes are part of an ongoing story. Even though they marked something new, they were rooted in what had happened before.

You may remember the story in the book of 1 Kings about God speaking to Elijah in a still small voice. Elijah had fled his persecutor Queen Jezebel and gone to a mountain in the wilderness. As he took shelter in a cave, there was a violent wind, a strong earthquake and a raging fire. Then there was a sheer silence, and in the silence God spoke to Elijah. Many sermons and devotionals have been written about how we need to be still and listen for God in silence, and I've contributed my share. But when God spoke in the silence, God had a message, and the message was that Elijah was to summon Elisha to carry on the work Elijah had been doing for years. Elisha was to keep on reminding Israel of their covenant with God and calling them back to it. When Elisha had that big change in his life, when he picked up the mantle of Elijah, he was part of that ongoing story of God calling Israel back to himself.

On the Mount of the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. It's tempting to think of Jesus' ministry as something completely new, unlike anything God had ever done. And God was doing a new thing in Jesus, but it was part of what God had been doing since the beginning of time. One of the earliest heresies in the church was the belief that since Jesus has come we have no more use for the Old Testament. Maybe you've heard people talk about the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament as if they are two different gods. Remember that when Jesus said that he came to fulfill the scriptures, he meant what we call the Old Testament. The two main parts of the Old Testament are the law, which God gave through Moses, and the prophets, of whom Elijah was the greatest. At the Transfiguration, when Jesus was speaking with Moses and Elijah, he was making it clear that he was part of the ongoing story of God's dealings with humanity. It was new chapter in that story, a fulfillment of what had gone before, but it was the same God and

PASSING THE MANTLE
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

the same ancient story. That tells us something about how God works amid the changes in our lives. The God who has been with us in the past is the same God who is with us through every change.

My son went to a university run by the Jesuits. While he was there I became intrigued by some of the spiritual practices taught by that order of priests. One practice which I've found helpful is called the daily examen. It works like this: At the end of each day, or first thing in the morning if you're too tired to do it at night, you review in your mind the events of the day before. You envision the day like a movie. As you replay the movie in your mind, you notice what you did, what you saw, the people you encountered. As you do, you notice where you encountered God. Perhaps it was in some kindness that you received, some unexpected grace, maybe in a glimpse of beauty like a snowy mountain peak or the song of a bird. Each time you see in your mind's eye some thing or some event or some person in which you get a glimpse of the work of God's Spirit, you offer up thanks. You also notice those places where you didn't see God's Spirit, perhaps in some harsh words that were exchanged, or a painful loss, or something you saw in the news about human cruelty and injustice. Those things you lift up to God in prayer, asking forgiveness for the times you've let God down, help for those ongoing challenges you face, and God's peace and strength for those places of suffering and need. The practice of a daily examen, where you notice what God has done in the past, helps you to notice God in the day to come.

When we face change in our life – a new job, relocation, graduation, a loss, retirement – we can look back over our life and notice where God has been. That reminds us that lives are not a series of disjointed episodes but part of the ongoing story of God's mighty works.

Another thing to notice about the stories we read today is that God is giving people a part in that ongoing story. Sometimes when we're faced with change, we are pretty clear about what we're leaving behind but we don't know what to do moving forward. For Elisha the path was pretty clear. By inheriting Elijah's mantle, he became God's prophet in Israel.

PASSING THE MANTLE
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

By picking up Elijah's mantle Elisha took on his work of performing miracles and speaking God's work of justice and purity to those in power.

The specifics of what Peter, James and John were supposed to do once they came down from the mountain weren't so clear. Peter botched it from the start. He offered to put up three tents to commemorate the event, an offer that Jesus politely ignored. The only instruction they had on the mountain was the voice of God: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him." That instruction was pretty broad. I suspect the disciples eventually found themselves in situations where they wished they had more specific direction on what to do. There have been plenty of times when I would have welcomed clearer instructions about what God wanted me to do. Wouldn't it be great if God had given a handbook with detailed instruction on parenting that spells out how much time a kid should spend on social media? Or there was a manual for churches that described exactly how to design a web site that will communicate its mission clearly to the world? But the instruction God did give, "Listen to him," is good no matter how radically things change over 2000 years.

1 Corinthians 12 compares the vast body of believers, the church, to a body, Christ's body. In our baptism we are incorporated into that body, each of us with different gifts to bring to it. When we're faced with a new situation and don't know what we should do, we listen to Jesus. We do that through prayer. We do it through careful study of scripture where we learn about the character of God and how to recognize the work of the Spirit when we see it. We listen when we talk with trusted friends and hear what God might be telling us through them. Times of change can be times when God is leading us in new directions, doing the same work of God's reign, but in some new way.

That's what IPC will be doing during this time of change. God calls a congregation to a particular kind of ministry, drawing on the gifts and skills of its members, its place in the community, its spiritual maturity and readiness to reach out beyond itself. The church council will be prayerfully engaged in that process in the coming months. The person whom God is

PASSING THE MANTLE
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

calling to be your new pastor is doing that, trying to discern if the spiritual gifts and skills God has given him or her are what God wants at IPC. Whatever that mission is will be grounded in the church's rich history. It will build on the work that has been done by Doug and by all of you over the course of years. But it won't be a repeat of that past. It will be what God's reign needs for this time, in a world that is constantly changing.

Finally, we may not know where God is leading us until we've gotten there. Luke's gospel says that when Jesus came down from the mountain he turned his face toward Jerusalem. He began his journey to the cross. That's why he told his disciples to say nothing until he had risen from the dead. They could not understand what Jesus was calling them to do or what the glory of Jesus they saw on that mountain means until after he had gone through his suffering and his death on the cross.

One thing that's notable about Moses and Elijah, the two with whom Jesus spoke on the mountain, is how their life on earth ended. Moses peacefully went to the top of a mountain and died at a ripe old age in peace. Elijah was swept up into heaven with a chariot of fire, without having to go through the agony of death. Jesus, on the other hand, was tortured, humiliated and died the drawn-out agony of the cross. If I have a choice, I'll take a death like Moses' or Elijah's any day.

For most of my relatively sheltered life I was put off by the way some branches of the Christian church have crucifixes in their sanctuaries, images of Jesus suffering and bleeding on the cross. I much prefer the empty Protestant cross. It's much cleaner, less gruesome, and after all, Jesus came down from the cross and is no longer there. But as I got more acquainted with some of the communities around the world where residents live lives less sheltered from violence and suffering than the places I knew, I became more sympathetic with their focus on Jesus' suffering, on his blood, and the on adoration of his wounds. For many of those people, violence and suffering and death are part of every day life, and in that suffering Savior they know that the God of power and might suffers with them. Just because he is risen doesn't

PASSING THE MANTLE
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

mean he has left them behind. He shares their pain and their tears. In their very weakness they find the strength of God.

The hope of the gospel is that God is alongside us and sweeps us into the glorious work God is doing, the work of bringing the whole creation back to God. As it says in Romans 8, we wait along with the whole creation to be set free from bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. And often it's in the pain and confusion of life that we're most likely to encounter God.

I have a friend who was a lawyer in a job that crushed her spirit. She was an alcoholic and in an unhealthy relationship with her boyfriend. She hadn't set foot in a church in years, but one Easter morning she woke up and something told her to go to church. She called her boyfriend, and there they were on the third row that Easter morning. She heard for the first time in years that story of resurrection and the new creation that Jesus has begun. To make a long story short, she and her boyfriend recommitted their lives to Christ. She used her training as a lawyer to set up a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity building homes for the poor, and through the guidance of the Spirit was led to another career that she found life giving. She started on the road to addiction recovery. She and her boyfriend realized that they were not meant for each other and moved on to other relationships. Recently she retired and can look back over the last 30 years and see how God has directed her, but when she walked into that church on Easter morning, she had no idea where that decision would take her.

When our lives, and the life of the church, belong to Jesus, we know that the one who has been with us so far is with us now. We know that we are given a place in the work God is doing to bring peace and justice and goodness to all creation, whether that's our classroom, the corporate board room, or the hospital room. On the cross Jesus shows us that we matter to God. What we do matters, and one day we can look back and see where God has brought us. And we'll know that the place he's brought us is where we are supposed to be, in the presence of God who is with us, just as God has been all along.