

Passing the Mantle

Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 11, 2024

Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9; Psalm 50:1-6

Sermon text: 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.”

Elijah took his mantle, struck the Jordan River—and it parted, affirming his status as a great prophet, second only to Moses. After Elijah was taken by in the flaming chariot, his disciple Elisha picked up the mantle, and struck the river. It parted again, affirming his status as the rightful heir of Elijah—just as Joshua had crossed over the Jordan following the example of Moses leading the people across the Red Sea.

Parting the water as the test of having truly the power of God—and passing on the mantle, now a proverbial expression akin to passing the torch, handing on and over to the next generation the role and responsibility of leadership.

We installed a new bishop yesterday at the cathedral, a glorious ceremony.

Nobody passes the torch like the church, except perhaps presidential inaugurations. Incredible pageantry—three knocks on the great brass doors, the procession, wonderful music, readings in many languages and some from the cathedral archives, Bp Moore, Eleanor Roosevelt, MLK Jr. A great sermon by Winnie Vargese on the question, what does the church have to say to the world now? And Bp Heyd’s short remarks: which included a question, what could we do if weren’t afraid? The courage to lead a renewal of the church for the healing of the world.

We all have to pass the mantle some time, sooner or later. Even Jesus had to pass on the role and responsibilities of leadership. His unveiling at the Transfiguration—flanked by Moses and Elijah—though certainly on one hand an affirmation of his unique status as the only begotten son of God—was also a secret he is passing on the peter, James and John, who would inherit the mantle of leadership and the job of proclaiming and witnessing to Christ and the gospel of love.

And that mantle has been passed on down the generations and centuries—until it has come to us, this generation.

And we must take it up whether we inherit a double share or half a share, a little or a lot of the Holy spirit of power and grace.

Just as we must one day pass it on.

Is it that day for some of our current political leaders? Well, you be the judge. It is that time for some of our religious leaders—well, the pope traditionally dies in office but the last pope, Benedict, retired and the current one is 88.

For rectors the mandatory retirement age is 72, which I will turn in September 2027. So I have a few years left. But on the other hand it is not too soon to start planning for the next generation of leaders, not only for my successor when the time comes but for those in leadership roles and worker bee roles and for those who are simply faithful Christians who worry about their children and grandchildren—and great grandchildren inheriting or not inheriting the faith.

Now the storyline is everywhere that the church is in decline. But Bp Heyd has challenged that way of thinking. It is certainly true that patterns of attendance have changed—diminished considerably—younger generations increasingly profess little attachment to traditional organized religions and choose “none” of the above. Some fall into the category of once Christian but now “done.” The nones and dones are real. The baby boom church bursting at the seams of church pews and Sunday School classes is not coming back.

But there is another story to be told. A story of bold change and prudent adaptation in the face of challenges. A story that starts from listening, and looking to see where the Spirit is active and leading. How the story will end depends for success on faith, courage, wisdom and endurance. If we are faithful wise and brave, if we follow the winds of the Spirit, it will lead to a renewed church and a better world.

That will one of the themes in next Saturday’s Vestry retreat. We are borrowing Bp Heyd’s goal of the diocesan mission review: the renewal of the church for the healing of the world. At our recent annual meeting, in response to a request from the diocese, we asked these questions of those attending: what would renewal look like, what needs to happen to make it possible, what needs to stop, and how can we better connect to the wider community, to contribute to the healing of the world.

Seven tables or so had a lively discussion. We got a lot of feedback; I collated the answers and copies are available in the back.

I like one of the answers from table 2 (whoever that was) to the question what does renewal mean, what it look like: “building community, community activities,

fundraisers, ideas, discussion, new energy to support the church/community activities, also rejuvenation for the next generation/wave, starting something fresh & new”

Table 3 noted that if we are experience renewal we need to know how people feel, and we need to stop assuming we know what people need and want—so we are going to need everyone’s feedback in iterations as we plan and execute.

Table 4 said we need to talk to people in person and find opportunities to interact.

Table 6 wrote that what is needed is a “weaving of old & new,” and we need to “stop making silos & embrace difference.” And I love this comment: we need to “provide an experience of God not already defined.”

So let’s do that, weave together old & new—as our value statement puts it: deep roots & open doors. I can promise this: We are never going to stop doing what Jesus commanded us to do: proclaim the good news of the coming kingdom, make disciples, love God and neighbor, care for this creation.

But we are going to break out of our silos, connect people; and we are going to put together the church and the world, in the form of being more open to the community and hosting activities and cultural and commerce and compassion.

We are going to open our hearts and pray to God to provide us experiences not already defined, fresh expressions of the Spirit, we are going to bring in a new generation of leaders, next generations of believers and disciples. We are going to pass the mantle.

God willing, and all of us working together. And I hope you will be part of this adventure,

in the name of Christ, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY