

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany; February 11, 2018

“Passing the Mantle”

Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9; Last Epiphany B RCL

I've often wondered about that conversation atop the mountain between two men long dead and one Jesus, seemingly very alive and different in that moment from any other time and any other person: glowing and dazzling in appearance even, and --- what?... pure? Heavenly? We call it “transfigured”--- very unlike the drab, tired, ordinary, and frightened men who accompanied him to the meeting. And just what words passed between Jesus and the heroes of the Jewish faith?... Moses, who led his people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt to a new land, and Elijah, the most magnificent and miraculous of the prophets, who some 800 years before Jesus called his people to account for their lack of fidelity in the God of their ancestors. I wonder if Moses and Elijah took a look over their shoulders at the three bewildered men huddled nearby ---Peter, James, and John--- and turned back to Jesus to say, “So, these are your guys? Is that all you've got?” Because the time is coming, as Moses and Elijah well know, when the mantle must surely be passed, and a new generation must raise up its leaders who will stand for what is good and right in the face of what is not.

“Passing the mantle...” The phrase has made its way into the contemporary lexicon of leadership, at least in part, based on this story of long ago when Elijah was preparing to leave this world, his time almost at an end, and Elisha, his faithful companion, ultimately his successor, would literally receive from his mentor that mantle, that sleeveless shawl Elijah wore that was surely recognized by any who knew him, to wrap over his own shoulders as a sign that he, Elisha, had taken up the leadership of his master. Understand, Elisha did not replace Elijah, rather he took upon himself the continuing call to speak up for faith in God, in whatever ways he could do best, with whatever gifts with which he was endued, and to continue a work begun long before him that would continue long after him. The mantle, after all, must always be passed.

And here sits Peter, James, and John, frightened, confused, and I gather not knowing, maybe hardly believing, what they are witnessing. And does Jesus look over at his companions that he is growing to trust and to love and turn back to Moses and Elijah to say: “Yes, these are my people. I’ve chosen them and a few others of their companionship: fishermen and tax collectors, some faithful women, a few agitators, ordinary folk, others who are not so sure of me. But I believe in them. They will tell the story.”

Because Jesus knows the mantle must surely be passed. And others must share the story of Jesus after him. Understand, Jesus' followers could never replace him--- there is no other savior--- but they would need to take up his message of love and forgiveness and fidelity, and with whatever gifts with which they have been endued, share the good news of God's love and salvation while caring for others.

And one sure way to avoid the passing of that mantle was Peter's suggestion to just set up camp on the mountaintop and stay put only in that moment of glory. But the problem with receiving the mantle is that one must eventually wear it, use it, live into it, rise to that occasion of faithful leadership. And that wasn't all going to happen on that mountaintop. And so the moment ends, the voice of God echoes off into the distance, the clouds dissipate, the heroes disappear, and the ordinary men make their way back to the people who need them... and to the people who don't necessarily want them. And are they ready... Peter, James, and John? They have experienced Jesus' transfiguration, but have they experienced their own? Elijah told Elisha he would receive his mantle, his role of service and leadership, if he was able to see Elijah being taken away from him. Is that something of a foreshadowing of what Peter, James, and John must do? Of what any of Jesus' followers must do? Of what we must do? I think so. Jesus was transfigured on a mountaintop, but I wonder if his followers were not transfigured at Golgotha, at that place where they saw him go. And there was nothing dazzling about them. No shining faces and bleached bright

clothing. The scriptures testify that the men essentially fled, and it was principally women who cared for Jesus' body. But I think they all were changed, even before they saw Jesus risen from the dead. Like us...

See, our mantle is not a cloak, but a cross. Our leadership is not by power, but by love. Our role is to live the message of that selfless love we have seen in Jesus, to tell how he has transfigured us for the sake of the world, to not so much defeat our adversaries as to love them, to speak the truth in a time of deceit, and to proclaim, as Paul says, Christ as Lord and us as servants in his name. The mantle is indeed passed.

Now I certainly have my contemporary heroes in the faith, and I like to believe that Jesus passed his mantle to *them*. But I wonder on this day when we remember the Transfiguration if it isn't as if Jesus looks over at us and says, "Yes, these are my people." The truth is we are all of us transfigured in our relationship with Christ crucified and risen, and we all carry the mantle of the cross, and fortunately we carry it together. And we must live into that mantle, put it on, while we can, in the best ways we can, until the day comes when we pass that mantle along to others. We are transfigured each time we share in Holy Communion with Christ and one other. We get a glimpse of glory, but we take it back and offer to the world.