“Passing the Baton—Moses & Joshua”

Joshua 1: 1-9 / June 18, 2017 / Pastor Dennis Carlson

Video clip of Jamaican Men’s Olympic 4 X 100 meters Relay Race (1:15 seconds)

Don’t you love the Olympics? They should do this every summer, don’t you think? This was from a few years ago. I knew the last two runners—Usain Bolt and Asafa Powell— but I was trying to make out that first runner. He sure looked like Melbourne Bennett! 😊

While there are Swimming TEAMS and Track TEAMS, most of those athletes compete largely on an individual basis—except when it comes to the RELAYS! My daughter swam relays in High School and I know there are a number of kids from our church that are high school swimmers now. But in track relay races, there is the added element of the actual Passing of the Baton, as we just saw in this exciting and historic race. And this offers us a metaphor for life. A generation is often thought to be 20 years and an ‘average’ life span might be 80 years. So an average life might consist of FOUR generations, or FOUR legs of that race of life. God’s faithfulness is “from generation to generation—” Grandparents to their kids to their grandkids and even great-grandkids.

Passing of the Baton, as in a relay race, is certainly a place where we find ourselves as a church family. We have already acknowledged this today among our lay leaders, as several Board members have completed their terms and have ‘passed the baton’ to new leaders. Indeed, the same is true of our senior leadership with Pastor Ken’s retirement and the lovely Farewell Dinner and Program for Ken & Laurie last night after over 18 years of service with us at Faith. I am glad to ‘stand in the gap’ for these next three weeks until Pastor Bill Orris begins his ministry in full, preaching July 9. While most Relay Races see each athlete run an equal distance, it’s not quite so in our senior pastoral passing of the baton. Pastor Ken’s 18 years is like a marathon! And we hope that our next senior pastor that might come to us, perhaps next summer sometime, might also run a marathon of however many years God gives. Pastor Bill for the next year, by comparison is running the Mile and me… I get the 50 yard dash! 😊 (I’m better at biking than I am at running, anyway!)

Passing the Baton is not unknown in other sectors of life and leadership. A week ago, as I was pondering this topic that we’ll consider for these three Sundays, I learned of two other leadership changes of interest and significance. On a more mundane level, a week ago Wednesday, I was caught by surprise when my daughter’s school, the University of Oklahoma, announced that their Head Football Coach, Bob Stoops was retiring from coaching after… 18 years at the helm --same as Pastor Ken! Stoops won 190 games, the most ever in a coach’s first 18 years at a school. His teams played in a Bowl game EVERY single year he was at OU. And in fact, he is the ONLY coach to ever win the Fiesta Bowl, Orange Bowl, Rose Bowl, Sugar Bowl AND National Championship.

Referencing his retirement, Stoops quoted from the book of Ecclesiastes saying, “The Bible says, ‘To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven.’ And then using the exact same imagery as I had picked out for this series weeks before, he said, “The coaching life is like a relay race and I’m thankful for my turn and am confident as I pass the baton.” And the person who receives the baton, as the new head coach was his Offensive Coordinator, Lincoln Riley, who at all of 33 years of age becomes the youngest coach of any major university program in the country today! But it is also the
age that we understand was that of one itinerant preacher in the regions of Galilee and Judea a couple of millennia ago who proved to be the consummate leader and ‘Life Coach’!

Closer to our own life as a church, one of our ministry partners for at least the ten years that I have been at Faith, also had a passing of the baton in senior leadership. Dennis Weidler’s is a face many of you recognize as he has been here at Faith FIVE times in the last 10 years serving up fresh Alaskan Salmon benefitting our Covenant radio station in Nome, AK, KICY. But in May he stepped down as Station Manager—interestingly, after... 18 years! When the KICY Call Letter came two weeks ago, I learned that one-time CA school-teacher and long-time KICY volunteer, Patty Burchell had been named the new Station Manager.

As these two examples illustrate—together with the background image on the slide itself—godly leadership knows no barrier of AGE, GENDER, nor ETHNICITY!

There are many biblical paradigms for the Passing of the Baton of leadership, beginning in Genesis with the Patriarchs—the word, patriarchs, on this Fathers’ Day meaning... Fathers! Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph and the 12 Tribes of Israel. Later in the O.T. story there is the passing of kingly rule—which quite frankly didn’t go all that well—from Saul to David to Solomon. Two weeks from today, we want to look more closely at a New Testament example of the Baton Passing from the Apostle Paul to his young disciple and protégé, Timothy. But for today we want to consider this passage from Joshua chapter 1 and the figurative Passing of the Baton from Moses to Joshua as Leader of the Israelite nation amid GREAT transition—even as we find ourselves!

This Moses is nothing short of a monumental figure in the biblical story! For starters, he is the author of the first five books of the Bible! So in his era, it was really the ENTIRE Bible! Doing a little math, in Pastor Ken’s 18+ years with us at Faith, conservatively, he would have written over 800 sermons! Moses was also the one who delivered God’s people out of slavery in Egypt. And if 18+ years seems like a long pastorate, which it is, Moses shepherded God’s people through the Wilderness for 40 years! For the vast majority of the Israelites gathered on the East Bank of the Jordan River, Moses was the ONLY leader they had ever known! For the High School Grads that we recognize today, they would have been born the same year that Pastor Ken came to Faith. As such, he has been the ONLY pastor they have ever known, and obviously, this would be the case for ALL of our kids and pre-college students at Faith! It’s hard for them to even imagine another pastor. All the more so, how could the children of Israel even begin to imagine life without Moses’ leadership. Chapter 34, the last of Deuteronomy, describing the death of Moses, was obviously written by someone else subsequently. The very last verses give us this summary statement of the man who is so often referenced and revered in the New Testament 1,400 years later as well. “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt... For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.”

And yet, in the heat of the moment, one could argue that Moses’ work was not done. He had gotten them CLOSE to the Promised Land, but did not get them INTO it! There was still a formidable river, the Jordan, that separated them from the Promised Land. And beyond that were walled cities like Jericho, and adversaries like the Canaanites in the Land. Here at Faith, we could certainly name our share of tasks and visions waiting to be fully realized. A great Building Proposal, waiting full funding; A
Strategic Plan adopted, waiting full implementation; An emergent generation growing up around us who are increasingly ‘disenfranchised’ from faith, needing to know the God of grace and glory.

But God’s people were NOT left leaderless. Moses had finished his leg of the race and it was now time to Pass the Baton to a godly leader who had a different gift mix who could move Israel not only ‘further down the road’, but across the River, who by faith and obedience would see enemy walls come crashing down! Enter Joshua. Without going into lots of detail, here are just a few references from the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy which show that God was preparing Joshua for the leadership role that He would have.

Exodus 17—We first meet Joshua on the pages of Scripture clear back in Exodus 17. Fresh out of Egypt, having crossed the Red Sea just a couple of chapters earlier, Joshua is the one who led the people in battle over the Amalekites. He was a Man of Battle. But in Exodus 24, already described as Moses’ aide, he goes up on the mountain of God with him as the Covenant is confirmed. He was a Man with a deep relationship with God.

Perhaps the most famous place we find Joshua outside of the book that bears his name is in Numbers chapters 13 & 14, where he is among the 12 Spies who undercover sneak into the Promised Land to assess Israel’s chances of taking it. As many of you will recall, it was only Joshua and Caleb who, though the odds were great, believed God that He would help them take possession of it. “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid.” (Numbers 14: 7-9)

Joshua was a Man of faith, who already had the vision of what God was going to do, even though the majority of 10 out of 12 dissented in fear, leading to their 40 year nomadic wanderings. In Numbers 27 Joshua is already designated in advance to be Moses successor and is there described as “a man in whom is the spirit.” (v.18) And finally in Deuteronomy 1 when it is clear that Moses himself will NOT be entering the Promised Land, the Lord says, “But your assistant Joshua, son of Nun, will enter it. Encourage him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it.” (Deut. 1:38) Joshua’s gift-mix was different than that of Moses, one that was suited and needed for this next leg of the journey.

Suffice it to say, God had been preparing Joshua for YEARS in advance and knew what he was doing to raise up a new leader “for such a time as this.” You may have noticed that I have intentionally ‘mixed my biblical metaphors,’ borrowing a line from the story of Esther. The setting in her case in the royal court of Persia is completely different, but the point is that the Baton of faith gets passed to both men and women who are called to be faithful in their leg of the race in every imaginable context. We don’t know who that next long-term servant will be to lead this congregation further into its second century, but based on this passage and God’s faithfulness from generation to generation, we know God has already been preparing that person for this high calling. We hope to announce this coming week the Search Committee that has been established to prayerfully discern God’s will in this regard, likely over the course of the next year.

But we also know that through similar prayerful discernment on the part of our Exec. Committee, Pastor Bill Orris is coming this week and will soon begin his Interim Senior Pastoral service among us. You will very soon hear from his own mouth and life witness how God has been preparing
him to receive the Baton for the next leg of the race. And though I don’t know him well, I know him to be a Man of Faith, a Man of the Spirit and a Man with a Deep Relationship with God.

From Joshua 1 let me just quickly highlight FOUR points that I trust will be of help and encouragement to all of us as we get ready for The Next Leg of the Race! And while we are looking at this through the particular lens of pastoral leadership, we ALL are involved in various transitions of life in a changing world. High School juniors are now leaders on campus as seniors! Grads are Passed the Baton to a life of more freedom, but also more responsibilities. The transition to any new family status—some weddings coming up this summer, becoming parents for the first time, new jobs and retirement itself—ALL imply a new station in life that can be a bit overwhelming, for which these quick principles can guide us and give us a solid foundation.

1) “Get Ready” (v.2) – The book of Deuteronomy closes with a 30-day period of mourning at the death of Moses. That was the cultural norm, but it really wasn’t long given the 40 years that Moses had led the people. But then right away in verse 2, the Lord instructs Joshua, “Now then, you and all these people, GET READY to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give them.” While there was designated time for mourning the loss of Moses, life, the people of God and His Kingdom work moves forward and like Joshua and the Israelites, we don’t sit around passively to see what life will bring. To the contrary, we are called to immediate preparedness for the NEXT big thing that God has for us. Each stage of life is important. Every leg of the Relay Race is critical to seizing the victory. Notice, too, that there is a collective unity of the people—‘you and all the people’ While the shear speed of the runners is critical, the race is often won or loss in those handful of meters in the Passing of the Baton. So as the first runner is finishing his leg of the race, is the second runner just standing around waiting? Not at all! Each subsequent athlete in the relay is very intent in positioning himself for the baton to be passed and getting up to speed to receive it at full speed from the approaching runner before him. A dropped baton or a botched hand-off spells defeat.

Even as we have been grieving Pastor Ken & Laurie’s loss for not just 30 days, but the five months since his pending retirement was announced, I commend this congregation for the way you have indeed been GETTING READY for the NEXT thing that God has for us as a church. Our Interim Pastor Bill Orris is in position to receive the Baton. He is a guy who is indeed going to hit the ground running! The Search Committee for the next permanent senior pastor is similarly positioning themselves for the next leg after that. We are moving forward to finish the fundraising campaign for the Building Proposal. Our 20/20 Strategic Plan is moving forward. So God’s call to all of us is to Be Ready!

2) “I will be with you” (v.5, 9) – Secondly, we have God’s promise, “I will be with you” that is given twice in this short passage. But there is some context to that promise. “AS I WAS WITH MOSES, so I will be with you.” Now it would take a whole other sermon to give a litany of ALL the ways that God was with Moses—from getting God’s people out of bondage in Egypt in the first place, the parting of the Red Sea escaping hard-hearted Pharaoh’s armies to providing manna and quail, daily sustenance for 40 years in the wilderness. God showed up in powerful and miraculous ways. He was clearly with Moses and his people. So his promise to be with Joshua is ROOTED in his faithfulness in the past. The landscape will be different in taking the Promised Land, the battles to be fought will be different. The task for Joshua of dividing up the land and settling the Twelve Tribes was decidedly different than for Moses in up-rooting them from Egypt. But God’s PROMISE is the same! “I will be with you!”
I love in the N.T. in Hebrews 13:5 where God says, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” That is actually a quote from God’s words to Joshua in Deuteronomy 31:6 as he is commissioned to lead God’s people after Moses. And of course, as N.T. Christians, we have Jesus’ promise—the one called Immanuel, ‘God With Us’ who says, “Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20) The next 18 years in the life of Faith Covenant Church will look very different than the last 18 years. The ‘battles to be fought’ going forward will not be the same as in the past. There will be a new leader for new times. But God’s promise is sure—HE WILL BE WITH US!

3) “Be strong and courageous” (v.6,7, 9...18) And thirdly, probably the phrase most quoted from this passage, is the admonition to, “Be strong and courageous!” And if the promise that He Will Be With Us is repeated twice, we hear these words FOUR TIMES in this first chapter of Joshua. One thing that tells us, is that humanly speaking, Joshua DID have good reason to feel weak and fearful. Why else would God repeat these words four times in one chapter—on top of three times in Deut. 31. God understands our human emotions and our natural human tendencies. Overcoming our human fears by God’s grace begins by recognizing and naming the apprehensions and anxieties we have. But we don’t stop there!

We’re going to talk about this passage in two weeks, but in 2 Timothy 2, Paul is Passing the Baton to Timothy, a young disciple who is otherwise a bit timid of disposition. He tells him, “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” (2 Tim. 2:1) Now if he had just said, “Be strong,” period, it would be like telling my son in Seattle to ‘Stay dry’ heading out in the rain, without giving him an umbrella. Our strength and courage is not found just in our inner person or by just thinking positive thoughts, but rather it is in the grace that is in Christ Jesus!

4) “Book of the Law” (Holy Scripture) (v.8) – And finally verse 8 says, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.” Amid the Passing of the Baton of leadership, I am confident of the future of this church, because Faith is a congregation committed to the Authority of Scripture. Certainly, it needs to be freshly understood and applied in every generation. But the Word itself does not change. And if Joshua had the “Book of the Law”, effectively the Five Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, how much more are we equipped to ‘run the race set out before us’ with both Old and New Testaments, Genesis clear to Revelation! Notice, there is always TWO parts in rooting ourselves in God’s Word. 1) There is meditating on it—even day and night, as it says! Reading the Bible DAILY. Cultivating that devotional life, personally, with a spouse, with your family. Thinking about what it means and how it might apply to you where the rubber meets the road in real life. 2) But secondly is the call to carefully DO IT! There are lots of other voices in our culture, media and advertising trying to tell us what we should do. But as God instructed Joshua, so He admonishes us today. Stay rooted in God Word, both meditating on it AND doing it!

We don’t know how long this race is—whether in our personal lives or in the life of our church. But we do know that we are at an exciting time, a pivotal time here at Faith Covenant in the Passing of the Baton. It can also be a nervous time, an anxious time. But as Joshua would see the Jordan River part and the walls of Jericho come crashing down, so we look for great things that God will do in our midst in the Next Leg of the Race as we Get Ready, as we remember that He is with us, as we take Courage and find Strength in Him and as we keep ourselves grounded in His Word. Let’s Pray.