

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel.

Then Elijah said to him, 'Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.' But he said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

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.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

Sermon: Passing the Torch

On the United Church of Christ website the “sermon seeds” for the passage we just read talks about the passage of leadership from Elijah to Elisha

Even in the life of the faith community, there are moments of crisis, when a beloved pastor leaves or becomes ill or dies, and the community looks for new leadership, even in the midst of grieving. The community, in its grief and feelings of loss and being lost, understandably wants a clear signal that this one is The One, and that this one can be trusted. We can hear the grief and worry in the voice of Elisha the Understudy-Soon-to-be-Head-Prophet.

Changes in leadership can mean difficult times for a church. This being the day of the Tricentennial parade, lets think back three hundred years to those first Christian settlers who came and made their home here. From the beginning they wanted to establish their own parish and call their own minister and build their own meetinghouse. It wasn't simply the difficulty of traveling to Woodbury, it was really a question of their identity as a community.

It was definitely a struggle but by 1712 they had called Daniel Boardman to preach the gospel here. Then it took them four more years to meet all the conditions necessary to formally organize a church. On Nov 21, 1716 the ceremony was held to ordain

Boardman as their settled Pastor, and he remained in that capacity until his death in 1744. And that's when they faced a big problem – who could possibly take the place of their beloved founding pastor, Rev. Boardman?

The issues were deeper than just personality – there was a growing movement to tighten up the rules about church membership, about who could receive communion, and whose children could receive the sacrament of baptism. There was also a major challenge brewing against the authority of the older established generation of clergy and town leaders.

This church went for three years without a minister until the Rev. Nathaniel Taylor was unanimously voted in. The reason the vote was unanimous was that all the members who opposed him left the church and started their own congregational church a few blocks away in what now is the cemetery opposite the hospital. It was certainly a crisis that challenged this faith community and threatened their very existence in the future. But, by the grace of God, the church persevered.

The torch was passed, and Taylor became the Elisha to Boardman's Elijah. Taylor was a towering figure in the history of this town and the state. He was complimented by a terrific team of lay leaders and especially close to Roger Sherman, whose influence in the American Revolution and our formation as a nation has yet to be rightly measured.

With the hindsight of history we can see that the first time the torch was passed in the life of this church was, in fact, a golden age of a congregation rising to the challenges of the times. But I'm sure for the people who were in the middle of it, for a long time their primary feeling was one of loss, not of hope.

The late Henri Nouwen highlighted a line in the Gospel where Jesus says to the disciples: it is for your own good that I am going away, because unless I go the Advocate will not come to you; ...but when the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth. Although the disciples experienced a devastating sense of loss at the absence of Jesus, it was only in memory that they could fully learn what he had to teach them, and only in his absence that they would come into their own and into deeper relationship with their Lord. Nouwen says: the great mystery is that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ's coming, but also by his leaving.

Passing the torch happens in churches, nations, towns and families as one generation moves on and another becomes the patriarchs and matriarchs for a time. It's hard to imagine that you can live up to the great qualities of those who loomed so large in your eyes as a child, and then it's sometimes harder still to imagine that the next generation is really going to be ready to take over when the times comes.

But we have the memory of an old, old story to tell, a story stretching back to the days of Elijah and Elisha, centering on the experience of Jesus and the disciples, continuing through three hundred years of Christian Community right here in New Milford. The torch is always passed and the source of our hope is not really in our own capabilities, but

in the faith that God is working in mysterious and amazing ways to lead his children and all people of good will and enduring faith in the path of righteousness towards the day of glory.

In the year 2007 We celebrate an open communion. This sacrament is for all who wish to know the presence of Christ and to share in the community of God's people. Christ welcomes you. Christ recognizes you. Christ invites you into the circle of fellowship in his name.