

“Several Stories of Sort of Successful Succession”

When I was young, **my family often read the Bible together** after supper, first, by using children’s Bible story books, working our way right from the opening chapters of Genesis, to the closing words of the Book of the Revelation, and then as we grew older, by using chunks of the King James version (yes, really!) of the Bible itself. Over the years, I’ve greatly valued this early introduction to the entire Bible as it has given me a reasonably good recollection of most of its stories.

So on this final Sunday, **I’d like to briefly tell you a few of the stories in the Bible that relate to succession**, stories of people passing on their faith, calling, and commitments to others. In a way, the entire Bible can be seen as a series of succession stories, of one generation telling another of “the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders” that God has accomplished in the various situations and challenges of life (Ps. 78:4). The reason I’ve called these “**sort of**” **successful stories** is that the people involved weren’t perfect – indeed, no one, except Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, is perfect – and, therefore, but for the grace and goodness of God, these stories of succession might have turned out in a much different, more disastrous ways.

The first story I’ve selected is the story of **Jacob blessing each of his family with the blessing of God** and giving them some “last words” before he dies (Gen. 48-49). Blessing one’s family and sharing what is most important in life is a good thing to do, as often as possible, and especially, if one has graciously been given the time to do so before one passes from life to death.

Jack Layton did this nobly just over a week ago when he penned a carefully considered and moving letter addressed to those who would have the responsibility of carrying on without him; and, most particularly, to others who also struggle with cancer; to the members of his party; to the members of his parliamentary caucus; to his fellow Quebecers; to young Canadians, whom he, too, wanted to engage in the political process; and, then, to all Canadians, just a day or two before he died; and, in so doing, he described the decisive and courageous, compassionate and hopeful, optimistic manner in which he’d conducted his entire political mission and life. Regardless of our politics, his last words are good words for each of us: “**Love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we’ll change the world.**” So also, at the end of his life, **Jacob** wanted to pass on his faith and life commitments to his family, to all his sons, including in the case of his favourite son, Joseph, his two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh, each of whom would later, along with Joseph’s brothers, become the leaders of twelve tribes of Israel. He wanted to affirm them in their particular gifts and strengths; and he also wanted to remind them of their various weaknesses, so that they’d be able to forge their way ahead in the world in the best manner possible, relying on God’s grace.

Friends, **you’ve been my church family** for these past eighteen years and although I’m not about to “shuffle off this mortal coil,” **I am** about to leave you as your pastor, so **I’d like to**

bleed you as you go forward into the next chapters of your life with Pastor Blair. I'd also like to bless Pastor Blair and his family, and to affirm his gifts of faith and learning, experience and wisdom, and heartfelt commitment to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Blair has many fine gifts, skills and strengths. He is well educated, attending one of the finest seminaries on the continent. (I think Blair might even be smarter than me; he certainly knows how to use modern technology better than me!). He's up-to-date. He also knows The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and has some good ideas as to what it needs on the local as well as national level. He understands that the local congregation is where the real action is. He has a passion for the gospel and for reaching the next generation for Christ. Of course, Blair isn't perfect (need I remind you that I'm not either?); he'll make mistakes (as I have done and still do!), but you will compensate for these as you have graciously compensated me for mine. I know that Pastor Blair will lead you well, and he will quickly learn to love you, as I have loved you too.

The second story is the story of **Moses passing on his faith and commitment to God's Law to the people of Israel**, whom he has led for over forty years out of Egypt, through the Red Sea (likely the Sea of Reeds), and into the wilderness, **and passing on his leadership**, as the people finally get ready to cross over the Jordan into the Promised Land, **to Joshua**. Moses brings Joshua to "the tent of meeting" and everyone hears God's affirmation and commissioning, saying, "Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them [and], I will be with you" (Deut. 31:14-23). The writer of the last chapters of the book of Deuteronomy then describes Moses' next words to the people in terms of a **renewal of the covenant that God has made with his people**.

Moses also recites and teaches a song describing the greatness and goodness of God in spite of the people's faithlessness (Deut. 31:30-32:47). He wants them all to never forget who God is and what God has done for them, and that they need to continue to be faithful to God. Moses then blesses the tribes of Israel, one by one, by name (Deut. 33).

Although I'm no Moses, like him, I'll have to grant that **I haven't accomplished everything I hoped and planned to do**. For example, I didn't make all the pastoral visits I would've liked to make; frankly, that's a never-ending job! Neither have I led you into the new worship and ministry centre about which we've dreamed and for which we've prayed and planned together for such a long time. But I'm sure that Blair will be able to lead you farther along the way. Blair is commissioned by God to conduct a gospel ministry among you and he will do this well. God's words to Joshua are also God's words to Blair, and to you: "Be strong and bold, for ... I am with you." Today, with Holy Communion before us, **you can also re-covenant with God** to pursue the purposes God has set out before you as you seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ with Blair as your new leader. When leaders change, people get a bit antsy; some people decide to make a change and go somewhere else. While there's certainly freedom to do that in today's world, this is a good time to indicate your support of Pastor Blair and the elders, as together, you walk into new and, I trust, delightful paths of adventure.

I will only refer to a third succession story briefly. A time came when **King David had to pass on his kingdom to his tenth son, Solomon**. And it was Solomon, his second son by

Bathsheba, who got to build the new temple (1 Kgs. 2:1). David's words on that occasion are memorable:

I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do, and wherever you turn. Then the Lord will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: "If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel" (1 Kgs. 2:2-4).

Faithfulness is the name of the game. I understand and accept that **none of us will likely get to finish all of our plans and projects**. But **there will always be others who can carry on**. They may not do things in exactly the same ways we may have planned, but they will do good things, perhaps even better things, than we would have done. And that's okay. That's "the way of the world." **The most important things**, after all, **are not the projects we plan, but the faithfulness we display in our faith in God, the purposes of God, and the values and the commitments we take on because we know and love and want to serve him**.

The fourth story I have chosen is the story of **the prophet Elijah passing on his prophetic task and mantle to Elisha** (as found in 1 and 2 Kings). Apparently, at the pinnacle of his powers, Elijah, a wonder-working prophet who successfully confronted the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel with God's assistance, was instructed by God to anoint Elisha to "take [his] place" (1 Kgs. 19:16b). I suspect Elijah might've trained Elisha a little bit as he took him with him to visit "the company of prophets" (2 Kgs. 2:3). But we don't hear much about that; the Bible doesn't tell us everything in a story. Finally, as Elijah is about to depart, the Bible records that **Elisha** -- whose name means, "God is Saviour" -- **asked Elijah for "a double share of [his] spirit."** Elijah replied, "You have asked a hard thing; yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted to you. If not, it will not" (2 Kgs. 2:10). Then, "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" (2 Kgs. 2:11-12). Poof! **Elijah disappeared!** Pretty dramatic stuff, eh? Did he see him go or did he not? We'll never know. But we do know that **Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle as his own** and he presided over more of God's mighty wonders, too, for over 55 years of his own personal wonder-working and effective ministry!

I'm leaving the ministry I've enjoyed at Calvin Church. But, I trust, **I'm not leaving in such a dramatic way as Elijah left!** But, I've got a couple of extra "mantles" to take with me. Some years ago, **the Rev. Dr. Ollie Nugent**, a longtime Superintendent of Missions for Alberta, and later, of British Columbia, who -- with his wife, Jean -- were beloved members at Calvin Church for years, **gave me his black doctoral robe** when he moved into Vancouver to live with his daughter and son-in-law. Mind you, Colleen had to take about eight inches off of

the bottom of the robe, as well as a good portion from the sleeves, as he was a much taller and larger man!

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris, the Dean of St. Andrew's Hall, gave me his father's -- **the Rev. Dr. Allan Farris'-- honorary doctoral hood** when I also received an honorary doctorate from the same institution as his father had received, the Presbyterian College in Montreal. Dr. Farris had been Professor of Church History at Knox College where I'd studied many years earlier, and Stephen knew he was one of my favourite professors.

And, more recently, **Jim Happer**, who serves as executor, **gave me the responsibility to pass on the Rev. Don Carson's, my predecessor's, robe**. I haven't found anyone yet, but I will. I'd readily give "a double blessing" of robes to Pastor Blair, but he has his own lovelier robe, so I don't need to give him another, similar one. I'm sure I'll find a new, young minister to give it to at the Vancouver School of Theology. Nevertheless, I will gladly pray for a "double blessing" of God's Spirit upon Blair's ministry.

Most importantly, I want you to notice that as Elijah suddenly disappeared, **Colleen and I will leave the scene for a while**. We will stop attending, though not supporting, the worship and witness of Calvin Church, so that Pastor Blair and his family can bond more closely with you. While we will continue to live in Abbotsford, I will be unavailable as your pastor. While I have enjoyed serving you immensely and will miss not doing so in the future, I will not take on any more pastoral responsibilities in the congregation. Call Pastor Blair; it's his turn to shine. He is in charge. He will serve you well. In the meantime, we will finally have more weekends "off"; we will visit some other churches on Sundays, and I'll be working part-time at VST, most weeks, from Monday to Wednesday.

The next story of succession, of course, is the incomparable story of **Jesus passing on the faith to his disciples**. That's what I've tried to do with you. And, praise God, you've responded! Jesus spent approximately three years with them. I got to spend eighteen years with you. Then, on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he had some of his most intimate conversation with his friends. He celebrated a meal with them that became what we now know as Holy Communion. It was a very special time together. As John says, **"having loved his own, he loved them to the end"** (Jn. 13:1).

In what we now call **"The Upper Room Discourse"** (found in John's Gospel, chapters 13-17), he told them to imitate him in serving others (Jn. 13:15-17), to "not let their hearts be troubled." (Jn. 14:1). He said that God and he would look after them and provide for them (Jn. 14:2-3). His Holy Spirit would live in them (Jn. 14:15-16), continue to teach them, remind them of everything he said to them (Jn. 14:26), and comfort them. His peace would be with them (Jn. 14:27). And, after some more encouraging words, he prayed for them (Jn. 17). That is what I will commit myself to do for you. I love you. I will not forget you. I will pray for you. I will pray for success in Pastor Blair's and the elders' continuing ministry with and among you. And I know that Jesus Christ will continue to be with you!

Not so long ago I preached a series of sermons on what are commonly known as **Paul's letters to Timothy**. They are also sometimes called the "Pastoral Epistles." They also include a "story of sort of successful succession." Paul wanted Timothy to "continue in what [he'd] learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom [he] learned it..." (2 Tim. 3:14). Mind you, Paul had conceded earlier, in his letter to the Corinthians, that while he may have "planted" and others have "watered, ... God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). Planting Christian faith in people's lives and developing Christ's church is the energetic work of many, including you. Friends, continue in the Christian faith. Keep on serving God. And God will bless you.

Sometime ago, I read a **Management Assistance Group paper on some of the characteristics of "a founder [as well as an organization] that helps or inhibits mutual success transition."** I think that some of these ideas apply here. It's good to "be centred and confident" as a leader, but a good leader will also "**trust others to lead.**" A long time ago, Moses showed the way by calling and commissioning "**elders**" to lead and manage the people of Israel's affairs with him. How very Presbyterian! Throughout the history of Israel, there were always **elders "at the city gates"** with whom the people could consult. Jesus had his disciples. And **Paul appointed "elders in every church."** I, too, have been fortunate to continually have a series of excellent elders working with me. When all is said and done, **ministry is never just about the minister.** It's not about me; it's all about "**sharing power and giving up control.**" It's about "**the willingness to subordinate one's own ego for the good of the organization.**" It's about "**believing the organization's success is the result of joint efforts.**"

That's what I believe and have tried to put into practice: what we've accomplished, we've accomplished together. **By God's grace you will continue to do great things.** And so, I gladly and completely give you into God's, Pastor Blair's, and the elders' gracious care.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
 Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
 August 28, 2011