

Sermon for February 11, 2024

Passing the Torch

So, Elijah, the most influential figure in Israel after Moses, is about to hang up his prophetic staff, and after some fiddling around, he asks his protege, Elisha, what he can do for him before it's over. And Elisha, who was **told** to stay behind but shoved his way in anyhow, says:

'Yea, Pops, I wanna be twice the prophet you were!'

I guess we know where the concept of 'chutzpah' comes from, eh?

Ambitious kid, that Elisha.

Ambition sometimes gets a bad name, at least if you're a lazy scriptwriter. But when I was a kid, sometimes I'd hear my parents say of someone 'He's got no ambition!'. I guess it depends on what you're ambitious **for**.

Anyway, Elijah goes away in fire and light, and if you're reading ahead in Scripture, well, it turns out Elisha does get a double-dose of prophecy, though he never ends up quite as famous as Elijah, I'm sure there's some reason for that but I'm not enough of a Biblical historian to tell you what. But, Elijah **passes the torch anyhow**, with suitable fire-and-flame special effects.

Fast-forward 800-odd years. Jesus, starting to make a name for himself, grabs the three closest disciples and marches up a mountain, and there he's clothed in light, and there are Moses and Elijah, and God, who tells the lot of them that this is his Son, pay attention! It's another **torch-passing moment**; again with the light and the special effects; Moses and Elijah to Jesus. And I'm not sure it gets more ambitious than Jesus, though it seems like it might be pushing it to call him an ambitious kid, so I won't.

This does happen. I'm **passing the torch**, professionally, right now. Clinical microbiology is a small field, there are a couple hundred of us nationwide. Thirty-five years ago I didn't know anybody, but in a small group you get to know people, who's doing the cool things, who's supportive, who keeps their eye on the big picture, and who's crazy in which particular way. I developed relationships with mentors and peers. About ten years ago, I noticed hardly any of my mentors were at the meetings. Last year I noticed hardly any of my peers were; and last week I was the oldest person in the meeting. Hey, it was a small meeting. Of course, one of my trainees was running it, so .. all good.

This is a summer Olympic year. They'll be carrying the torch this summer. The Olympics Web site describes the relay like this:

“The Olympic flame is the flame which is kindled in Olympia under the authority of the IOC. In the context of the modern Games, the Olympic flame is a manifestation of the positive values that humanity has always associated with the symbolism of fire and thus makes the link between the ancient and the modern Games.

A few months before the opening of the Olympic Games, a flame is lit at Olympia, in Greece. The location recalls the link between the Ancient Olympic Games and their modern counterpart. From there, the Flame is carried for a number of weeks to the host city, mainly on foot by runners, but also using other forms of transport.

Throughout the Torch relay, the flame announces the Olympic Games and spreads a message of peace and friendship between peoples. The Torch relay ends at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. The final runner (or sometimes runners) enters the stadium and lights the cauldron with the Olympic flame. The Games can then begin!”

I read that in the modern era the torch has been carried by horses, camels, ships, planes, and spacecraft, and Lord knows what else. This year the French have the Olympic and Paralympic torch relay programmed to go all over the country for 68 days, with 10,000 torchbearers traveling about 2000 kilometers.

In our household, we're big Olympics fans. We've all got our favorite events; for *some* reason figure skating seems to be excessively popular. But I could watch any of 'em. It's amazing what people can do if they set their minds to it. Amidst the competition for medals that the TV people push, it's sometimes hard to remember that the *last-place* finisher in every event has probably dedicated their whole life up to now; admittedly a short life by my elderly standards, but still, to doing this one thing *incredibly well*. Ambitious kids.

One of my favorite Olympic memories comes from figure skating many years ago; like, 30 or so. Even then the competition was dominated by the jumpers. The women at that time were doing double-axels and triple-toe-loops and I've no idea who was competing for the gold; maybe it was Katerina Witt? I looked it up, that means 40 years ago. Don't tell anyone I'm reminiscing about things that long ago, they'll take away my medical license.

There was a young woman that year who wasn't in the run for a medal at all, and I've no idea what her name was or where she was from. She didn't have a double axel or a triple toe loop to her name, but by golly she could *spin*. It wasn't what the judges were looking for, I think she came in 14th, but it was just an amazing thing to watch, because she didn't give a rip that she wasn't going to win a medal, she just

went out there and showed the world how much she loved to spin, and she was the best in the world at that. Ambitious kid.

The torch got passed to Christ by Moses and Elijah. Who do you think Jesus passed the torch to? I guess the disciples, right? And then who? It's kind of an Olympics torch relay over time. So...I guess now it's... us. 80 generations or so later. I wish they'd asked for double-prophetic power, and then each successive generation did the same, because then we'd be up to 2 to the 80th power beyond Christ, and we would not have all these problems. 2 to the 80th power is so much...trillions and trillions and... oh never mind. I like math. And apparently, stupid conjectures.

Back in the day, it wasn't a gas powered torch with a refillable cartridge, it was a piece of wood wrapped in fiber dipped in fat, and it burned up and was gone. The only thing passed along was the flame; nothing physical at all, just the *idea* of the torch.

But we are what we are; not 2 to the 80th power times, or let's be realistic, even anywhere near Christ, but we've gotten the torch anyway, and whoever thought *that* was a good idea. And we didn't get any special effects or even a physical torch or a double-dose of prophecy; just the flame, the idea; passed from one generation to the next, and the hope that the next generation will get a **bit** more prophetic oomph than we did.

Last week we had our parish meeting; and it wasn't great news. We're spending money faster than we're getting it, and struggling with our mission and our relationship to the school and our community and...I could go on. But there were young people there with interesting ideas, too, and older folks not ready to give up and using their experience and wisdom to look forward, not backward.

I'm not sure we're what the judges want in this leg of the relay, it doesn't seem like it. Feels like we're a bunch of ambitious kids out there, spinning for all we're worth while the judges are looking for triple toe-loops. We do have to *be* ambitious kids; though; regardless of our age or where the judges are going to rank us, because the torch we bear goes back to Moses, and Elijah and Christ. We don't have to win any gold medals though, we *only* have to be a light to the nations.

Let the Games begin!