

November 17, 2024  
As You Are Going: Passing the Torch  
Acts 20:13-38  
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro... There are events that happen in our past, specifically our childhoods that, for whatever reason, stick out in our memories. One of those moments for me was when the Olympics came to Atlanta in 1996. When I was in the third grade, my family and I moved to Georgia, and as a kid, I can remember that having the Olympics coming to town was a big deal. Because everything was happening so close to home, we were really paying close attention to everything because we were so familiar with all the places. But, one of the things that I remember the most about those Olympics was when Muhammed Ali lit the Olympic flame signifying the start of the games. At that time, Ali was 54 years old and 12 years into a Parkinson's diagnosis, when he received the torch that had made it's way around the world, being passed from athlete to athlete starting from Athens, Greece until it reached Ali in Atlanta on the opening night of the '96 Olympics. Ali raised the flame high into the air, visibly shaking because of the Parkinson's that ultimately took his life years later, and lit the flame to deafening cheers from the crowd. It's funny how different memories stick in our minds.

Why do I tell you this story? Well, we have been making our way through the book of Acts this year, with our theme being, As You Are Going: The Church on Mission. And in this wonderful book, we have seen the Spirit-led expansion of the Church through the preaching of the gospel. The flame was lit by the power of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 and the gospel fire spread through the preaching of the apostles starting in Jerusalem, and then to Judea and Samaria and then throughout the entire Roman Empire.

From ch. 13 on, we have been following the missionary journeys of Paul and how God used him mightily to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. As we come to ch. 20, Paul knows that he is coming to the end of his ministry. Paul, and his companions, are on their way back to Jerusalem not knowing what lies ahead. And in our passage today, we see Paul's handoff, a passing of the torch if you will, of the ministry to the Ephesian elders before he departs for Jerusalem. And though he speaks to the elders here, I think there's a message to all of us because we're all involved in the same mission, the expansion of the gospel. If you're able, please stand with me as I read God's word this morning. [Read Acts 20:17-38]

Now, we didn't read vs. 13-16 for the sake of time, but let me summarize it for you as it sets the stage for the passage we just read. Luke, who, if you remember, has now joined back up with Paul and is now an eyewitness to these events, records for us, in great detail, Paul's travels from Troas, where we left off last week, to Miletus and this meeting with the Ephesian elders.

There's a couple of things to notice here. First, in vs. 13-14, Paul sends his friends by ship on ahead to the city of Assos while he decided to walk the 21 miles before meeting back up with them there. We are not told why he chose to do this, but some scholars speculate, and I agree, that it was most likely a purposeful time alone with God before taking the journey back to Jerusalem and the possible dangers that were ahead. Much like we see in the life and ministry of Jesus when he would seek solitude to spend time with his Father and pray, I think Paul was looking for a chance to do the same.

And another thing to notice, is that after meeting back up with everyone, vs. 16 informs us they all purposely sailed past Ephesus so as not to spend too much time there and eventually

make their way to the port city of Miletus to wait there for a ship on its way to Jerusalem. On the surface, this seems strange because Paul spent so much time with the Ephesians, and if this truly was the last time he would possibly see them, why would he not want to stop by Ephesus? But we get the sense from the surrounding context of our passage that the reasoning was Paul was trying to make it to Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost and he knew if he stopped in Ephesus he would most likely be delayed even more than he had been already either by more riots or the ministry needs of all the people there.

So, in vs. 17, he calls the elders of Ephesus to him at Miletus, just another short walk of about 63 miles. Now these elders were more than likely the pastors of the area, each representing a different house church community and Paul is saying his final goodbye to these leaders. He had spent three hard, and yet, wonderful years with them. But now he's leaving and he wants to encourage them one last time, to pass the torch if you will, and although it's not recorded in scripture, I'd be willing to guess that Paul had several of these conversations with leaders of other churches as he left every area for the last time. And it might have even been much of the content of his "prolonged speech" in Troas that we looked at last week.

Paul begins to speak in vs. 18, and he uses how he lived with them as the example of how to minister to one another, namely through his message, the gospel. And in vs. 19-21, he explains what he means. Ministering means, as he says, "serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials, boldly teaching everyone publicly, and from house to house, of repentance and faith."

It wasn't only what Paul said when he preached the gospel, but also the life he lived that proved the truth of the gospel. What Paul is saying here is when he was with them, these Ephesian elders didn't see an inconsistency in his message compared to his life. That means how we preach the gospel matters because it's possible to unsay with our actions what we preach with our mouths. Paul fought hard not to do that and we should work hard to do the same by God's grace.

He also mentions tears and trials in vs. 19. Jesus sent Paul out to preach and plant churches, and Paul obeyed, investing his life to the point of tears. And Paul doesn't regret these tears. He speaks of them here as a proof of his ministry. It sounds strange, but one sign that God is moving is the presence, not the absence, of tears. Not because of some false emotional high, but actually the opposite, we begin to feel what others feel and weep with those who weep. It means our heart's being transformed, that God's doing the work of restoration and healing within us.

The fact is, the tears Paul is speaking of here are the result of trials, and Paul faced plenty of those. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:32 that the Ephesians were like "beasts to him." But he endured. He embraced it for the sake of Christ because everything good and worthwhile is also hard and difficult. When we're serving the Lord, we embrace tears and trials because Jesus is worth it.

But why is he worth it? Back to the truth of the gospel message. Salvation only comes through faith in Jesus and everyone needs to know the truth of this message. That's why Paul preached the gospel all the time, both in word and deed, as he says in vs. 20-21, "I did not shrink away from...preaching repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

You see, Paul's message was this, when our eyes are opened and we see ourselves as sinful as we really are, when we come to grips with the reality that we have no hope outside of a relationship with Jesus, then we're finally ready to accept the love and forgiveness God gives. So, our sinfulness leads us to repentance, and repentance comes by faith.

These verses show us that Paul believed the gospel was the only hope for the world. So, he gave all he had. Do you believe that? Do you operate your lives the same way? Paul felt the urgency, and not because he worked it up within himself. He looked to God and God sent him into the world because the gospel message gave him his mission.

And what was Paul's mission? When God chose to use Paul, he had a mission to spread the message of the gospel, whatever the cost. He abandoned all earthly pursuits to reach for what only God could do. He tells the elders in vs. 22 that he's going to Jerusalem, "constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen, only that imprisonment and afflictions await." But it's worth it to him because he's running his race for the Lord. It's just another part of his mission.

He says he was "constrained by the Spirit," meaning he didn't have the attitude, "What do I want to do?" But he had the habit of asking the Lord, "What do you want me to do?" Paul allowed God to lead him because he loved and trusted him. Do you love and trust God? Would you say that your life could be described as being "constrained by the Spirit?" Is your attitude that of Paul's, asking the Lord, "What would you have me do?" Or are your affections and hope placed in other things?

You see, every day you and I face an onslaught of other things calling out to us to worship them instead of Jesus. And they look appealing because they offer ease and comfort. But they always fail to deliver on their promise and cannot give any lasting reward. God, on the other hand, promises us life to the full and eternity with him in his kingdom if only we persevere with him until the end.

When we come to faith in Christ, our mission with him begins. But that doesn't mean what God asks us to do will be easy. God the Holy Spirit tells Paul to go to Jerusalem but only tells him enough to know it'll be hard. I've been thinking about this. How many of us would like to know the details of our trials? But God doesn't tell us. Why do you think that is? Because if we knew what God knows, we wouldn't go through with it. We'd think, "there's no way I can do that!" We'd hesitate and make excuses. So, God in his grace leads us step by step, through the trials, and we learn to trust him with the details. And when we've walked the hard road, we'll look back in amazement at what he's done in and through us, and he gets all the glory.

And when we join God's mission because we believe with all our heart the gospel message, we find that we can say, along with Paul, vs. 24 [Read] This is the glue that holds this whole passage together. Jesus is not asking us to give our lives to him when we feel like it. He's asking us to give our lives to him regardless and trust his sovereign plan. And if we'll learn to follow God in this way, we'll come to the end of our lives and think with Paul, "Life was hard, and it cost me everything, but it was worth it all. I served Jesus, and I shared the gospel and I saw him save and change people. And I saw his glory."

Paul believed the message of the gospel and didn't shrink away from the mission the Lord gave him. And he's urging the Ephesian elders, and us today, to do the same and follow his example.

Finally, in vs. 28 and following, Paul, symbolically, passes the torch. The gospel message gave Paul his mission it led to the passing on of the gospel ministry. The ministry didn't stop with Paul. He had been teaching and discipling these leaders for three years and now, with his ministry coming to a close, he was handing it off to them. And really, the beauty of it is, it didn't end with these leaders either, but it has been passed on through generations to us today and it has become our ministry to proclaim the gospel.

The church is not just some random group of people who have joined together for a good cause. We're a family of believers who have been purchased by the blood of Jesus. We've been

set apart for his work in the world, showing what God's kingdom will look like. At our pastors meeting this past Thursday, Pastor Bruce and I were having this conversation with other area pastors. The bible says we're ambassadors for Christ, as it says in 2 Cor. 5, who have been given the ministry of reconciliation, and every church is an embassy in the world representing the kingdom of heaven and is meant to be a safe haven for the lost and broken to point them to the savior. May the Lord forgive us for taking this task to lightly.

Now, this is no easy task. Paul says to these leaders in vs. 28, "pay close attention to yourselves and to the flock." Why? Because every flock faces the danger of attack. Wolves come in the front door and the back door. Some come into the church from outside and some rise up from inside to twist God's words and draw people away. So, we have to pay attention to the gospel we believe and the mission we're on. We have to keep a close watch on how we think about God.

This requires alertness. Paul uses hyperbole in vs. 31 to communicate the urgency of it all saying he "didn't cease day or night to admonish everyone with tears." You know, we are so frail, so fragile, prone to wander from God. We need the truth of God's word all the time, and we need one another to remind us of it. Paul was like a tender father, watching out for his children in the faith, ensuring they have everything they need.

How can we do this? The same way Paul did. In vs. 32, Paul points the elders to God and to his Word. Though Paul is leaving, they're left with the same resources Paul had: God and his word. They needed to hear this because they are being asked to pour themselves out for the flock.

That's why Paul reminds them of Jesus' words in vs. 35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Jesus perfectly displayed these words for us by giving up his own life for us. Mark 10:45 says, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." And he has called all of us into this same ministry with this same attitude of service. So, what is God calling you to do?

Paul closes things out with them by praying for them and when he is finished they all embrace one another and then they all begin to weep. Why? Because they've formed a deep friendship. They realize they will never see one another again in this life, and that's a sad reality. Luke uses a word here "sorrowful" in vs. 38 and it means "to experience deep pain." Ministry is painful. But there's a beauty in it that nothing else provides. There's a rawness and realness to it that brings tears. Did you notice that tears are mentioned three times in this passage? Isn't that something? Life is filled with tears. But they are nothing to be ashamed of. They are the sign that something meaningful has taken place. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. We also weep. But no matter how many tears we shed, God will one day wipe them all away from our face. And one day, we'll stand in glory, looking with a smile and say, "it was worth it all."

Paul's message was the gospel. His mission was to spread it, whatever the cost. And this same message and mission has been passed down to us. And so, as we are going, let's be the church on mission and continue to spread the gospel flame that has been handed to us. Let's pray.