

Hand-Me-Down Faith

Psalm 71:17-19 & 1 Timothy 4:11-16

Blessing of the Backpacks

Pastor Jo Ramsey ~ September 8, 2019

Ok, you Harry Potter fans, can anybody remember in the first book, Harry Potter & the Sorcerer's Stone, how Draco Malfoy recognized Ron Weasley? As Draco introduced himself to Harry, he glanced disparagingly in Ron's direction, "No need to ask your name," he sneered, "Red hair and a hand-me-down robe? You must be a Weasley."

Probably most everyone here has, at one time or another, worn a hand-me-down. Most of us have sorted through a big garbage bag full of someone else's old clothes, although it probably didn't include a cast-off wizarding robe. Sometimes, you find a batch of clothes that are worn, faded, ill-fitting and not your style. You know what I mean. Maybe you even remember wearing a garment you never would have chosen, or something completely embarrassing, dated, faded, too short and goofy.

For siblings in the same family, it's the younger ones who really suffer. A friend of mine was organizing a family scrap book, lining up school pictures, when she realized that her five brothers wore the same sweater in the same grade for every school picture. In fifth grade, they all wore the brown sweater, in 6th, the green plaid. All those years, she'd never noticed. While hand-me-down outfits helped her put the pictures in order, she felt kind of bad for her littlest brother, who always had to wear those faded, old sweaters last.

Of course, ideally, hand-me-downs are clean, fit well, look new and are either classic or still fashionable. Our own family has been the beneficiary of dozens of boxes and bags of such clothes through the years. Fiona has sported many an outfit first worn by Maezie Williams, Joella and Annika Miller or Julie Smallwood. Ben has received clothes from Matt Borczyk, Clemente and William Runas—and he's still wearing several pairs of Sam Smallwood's khaki cargo shorts! For us, hand-me-downs have been a huge blessing and have helped us seriously stretch our clothes budget! We're still excited when we find a bag of clothes in our car after church!

I grew up the same way, and with the last name Hanby, our family called them "Hanby-downs." Since we were raised by a single mom, my brothers and I relied

heavily on hand-me-downs. Whether you call them--hand-me-downs, castoffs, used, vintage, recycled, or previously owned--the bottom line is, they can be a big help!

The same can be said for our faith. In the psalm we read this morning, David makes it clear that our faith is a hand-me-down, passed along to us from those who have gone before us, as real as Joseph's coat of many colors. We can wear, use, enjoy this faith throughout our lifetime. Ideally, it becomes ours—not just some secondhand garment. Our faith is meant to grow and change with us.

Then we, in turn, are called to pass along the stories, songs and traditions of our faith to those who will come after us. Over and over, the Bible tells us “to proclaim God's might to all the generations.” Paul's letters to young Timothy echo with the same message: teach, preach and practice as I have, so the next generation will follow us in faith.

This cycle of teaching and learning flows both ways. Our children and youth teach us too! The ongoing growing and flowing mustn't stop or we'll become stagnant. The Biblical authors understand that the church is always one generation away from extinction.

That said, how do we practice hand-me-down faith? How do we share the faith of our fathers without it seeming as out-of-date as the fashion of our fathers? We can't just say, ‘Church was good enough for grandma, it should be good enough for you!’ Or ‘Here, just put this religion on. I don't care if you like it.’ For surely, like an ill-fitting, worn-out wizarding robe, our kids will rip it off as soon as they leave the house. Nor can we offer them a faith so quaint and fancy that they save it only for special occasions--so fragile it won't stand up to everyday use. But we also can't just keep quiet and hope our kids will get faith by osmosis, or pick it up at church, or figure it out on their own---that really doesn't amount to handing anything to anybody!

But passing on our faith isn't exactly like handing someone a bag of used clothes. So how does it work? Pastor Mike Khandjian sees it this way, “Hand-me-down faith is like a story, a story that emanates from the voice of God through the scriptures, a story that is recited in creeds and confessions, conversions and church communities, retelling itself over and over again through generations, in the lives of people.” We tell

that story through what we say and do, how we serve and sacrifice, by the questions we ask and the answers we seek.

“Our hand-me-down faith isn’t new and yet mysteriously, it isn’t static either. It is a tale as old as time, older even, that continues to unfold – one we enter into through faith, only to discover that our place in the narrative was written for us and others long ago.” It’s the story of God great love for us, and our love for God, and it is still coming true.

On this Backpack Sunday, as we think about all the essential things we choose to carry each day, I invite you to pack a few faith hand-me-downs too...Perhaps,

- A Bible story or passage that inspires you
- A song lyric that lifts your spirit
- A prayer that you recite by heart

Even as you consider what faith essentials you would take with you, put on and pass along, you might also want to leave a few behind. Things like

- A nagging fear or anxiety
- A negative or critical spirit
- A burden of guilt or shame

Those hand-me-downs don’t fit anymore. It’s time to throw them in the rag bag!

So, let us give thanks for our hand-me-down faith, and for our parents, grandparents, pastors and teachers, and even our children, who have passed it on to us, for those who have gone before us and made a way in the wilderness. May we take our place in their ranks, for we, too, are part of the unfolding, still-flowing, never-ending story of God and God’s people. And may we discover time and again, that even as we try to “keep the faith,” it is the faith, our beautiful hand-me-down faith, that is keeping us.

In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!