

Lighting Torches of Faith

July 30th, 2017

While meeting with one of our leaders earlier this week, we found ourselves **talking about how we can more effectively impact our area** with the love of Jesus.

- How we can more effectively make Him know in our area.
- And as we were talking about that, **for whatever reason, I kept thinking about Fort Nonsense,**
- A fort commissioned by General George Washington in Morristown in May of 1777.

Now, for those of you who don't know, Washington arrived in Morristown in January of 1777 after victories at Princeton and Trenton.

- In fact, with the worst of winter on its way, Washington decided that the Continental Army would remain here till spring.
- But, before leaving Morristown in May, Washington ordered a number of troops to remain in the town to protect its citizenry and stores.

But he also ordered the construction of a fort on a hilltop overlooking Morristown...

- where the troops stationed here could retreat to in the event of a British invasion.
- Because it looked out over the valley, Washington could easily spot any movement coming from NYC, where the bulk of the British army was stationed.
- But the British never came and, in spite of the time and resources required to build it, the fort was never used... which is probably why it was called Fort Nonsense.

So, we're talking about how we can reach this area with light and love of Jesus... and I keep thinking of this fort.

- In fact, I felt God saying that He's going to rename that Fort.
- So, that evening, Joyce and I and a handful of others went up to Fort Nonsense to pray and to seek God's heart for our area.

Now, the first thing that strikes you when you're up there is how much of Morristown and the surrounding area you can see. **[SHOW PIC]**

- From here, especially when the leaves are down, you can see so many of the churches in central Morristown... nearly all of which were built in the 1800s.
- The most prominent of which, was the Presbyterian church that started in 1733.

During the Revolution, this church served as a **hospital for soldiers** (small pox epidemic)... and a **burial site** for many who didn't make it.

- It was also the place Washington chose to worship as it was only a few minutes' walk from his headquarters at Arnold's Tavern*, which was located on the western corner of the Green.
- All those who worshipped and served in these churches... they no doubt prayed, ***not only for protection***, but that the light of the Gospel would shine over this area.

(From 1779-1780, Washington would again make Morristown his headquarters, except this time at Ford Mansion)

Almost as soon as we started to pray, a verse from Habakkuk 1:5 came to mind...

- *“Look! See! I'm going to do things in your day that you wouldn't believe even if I told you.”*
- And suddenly, the words “Witness Hill” came to mind.

He said he was going to rename Fort Nonsense... and that was it, “Witness Hill”.

- It was to be a place where we would “witness” God doing the unexpected...
- Where we would see the fulfillment of **all the prayers of all of God's people** who have prayed for this area for generations.

You see, we're here, in part, because those brothers and sisters who lived here in the 1700s,

- like **Timothy Johnes** who, from 1742, pastored that Presbyterian church for 52 years,
- passed along to someone else, the torch of faith that was first passed on to him...

- Probably from the likes of Theodore Frelinghuysen and Gilbert Tennent who were seeking revival through northern NJ in the 1720s & 30s.
- Or George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and John & Charles Wesley who, at the same time, **served as catalysts** for what we call today, "The Great Awakening."

You see, we're here today because brothers and sisters like these, simply chose to give away what was given to them.

- We're all here because someone chose to pass along the torch of faith lit in their own life by someone else.
- We're all here because, from the Day of Pentecost and that first group of Jesus-followers... till today,
- **someone chose to pass the torch of faith** from one person to the next... from one generation to the next.

But, with all the opposition against those early Jesus followers, **you have to wonder how the Gospel** even made it past that first century.

- **How did it survive Rome...** the strongest Empire in the world... who would never have allowed a movement like this to get so out of hand?
- How did it survive the **Jewish rulers and elders** who had Jesus arrested and crucified...
- who did everything they could to **prevent those early Jesus-followers** from even speaking the name of Jesus?

And yet, **just two months after the resurrection** of Jesus, these early believers poured into the streets of Jerusalem...

- **proclaiming that they were eyewitnesses** to the fact that Jesus was crucified and that he was resurrected just three days later.
- And, as a result of this message being passed along from one person to the next, the city of Jerusalem was turned upside down.

We're told that within just a few weeks, 5000 men alone... *not to mention* all the women and children... had become part of this new community of Jesus followers.

- But **those religious leaders who had Jesus crucified** would not have it.
- Intent on putting out this light, they **arrest Peter and John...**
- releasing them the next day with the order not to speak the name of Jesus. But they did!

In fact, **Peter & John gathered all the believers together** and do you know what they prayed for? They prayed for even more boldness!

- So, now **the religious leaders arrest ALL the disciples...** throwing them in jail. But an angel shows up and lets them out!
- And, where did they go? Did they go into hiding? No!
- They went right **back to the temple** to testify to everyone around them that Jesus was raised from the dead!

The temple **guards were sent to re-arrest them...** and the disciples spent the night in jail. But, before they were released the next day,

- they **were all whipped...** one after another... and when the last one was flogged,
- we're told in **Acts 5** that they **left rejoicing that they were worthy of having suffered disgrace** for the name of Jesus.

We're here today because **rather than let fear derail them**, those early believers gathered together and prayed for boldness.

- None of these brothers and sisters saw themselves as heroes.
- In fact, **I'm sure they were scared...** I'm sure they **felt incredibly inadequate.**

But, they had been apprehended by the Risen Christ who called them in Matthew 5:16 to "*Let your light shine before others!*"

- **And so, they continued on, filled with the Holy Spirit...**
- Bearing His message and continuing His ministry to the world around them.

You see, we're all here because **someone lit the torch of Christ to someone else...** who then lit the torch to another.

- Think about who it was who lit that torch in your life. Maybe a family member or pastor or friend?

- Whoever it was for you, **somebody risked rejection...** somebody made a sacrifice... **somebody nurtured your faith.**
- Somebody **saw gifts** and potential in you. Somebody **took the time and prayed** for you. Somebody **cheered you on.**

In every generation, from Abraham's to ours... in every generation... somebody passed the torch to somebody else.

- **Not a single generation was skipped.** That's why we're here today.
- But it didn't have to be that way. **Somebody** could have kept quiet. **Somebody** could have hidden the light Christ had ignited in them.
- **Somebody** could have decided that the risk was too great.
- **Somebody** could have decided that they just didn't have the time to give away this light that was given to them.

You see, **you** carry something precious... something that's already been carried with such care and at such a price across the generations...

- Something the world around you is desperate for.
- As a church community, you're just what Jesus was talking about **when He referred to His church** as a "City on a Hill" and a "Light to the World".
- And this light, John says in John 1:5 "*shines in the darkness.*" it's meant to make a difference.

When I think about this church, I'm almost overwhelmed by the possibilities.

- I mean it when I say that this church can change the spiritual landscape of this area for generations to come.
- Yes, there will be challenges along the way... **but these obstacles will only serve as opportunities** to light even more torches of faith.

I think about our church... And, I think about the half a million people who live within the small boundaries of Morris County alone...

- And, all I can do is thank God that we, as a people **apprehended by the power & presence** of God,

- That we've been given an opportunity to stand up as our predecessors have.
- To face this unique moment of time as His **torch-lighting... hope-bearing... freedom-giving... joy-releasing... life-infusing... Holy Spirit-driven** people.

Now, maybe you're wondering if I'm referring to the person sitting next to you. Well, I am...

- But I'm also speaking to you. I'm talking about your part in this as well.
- Listen... 2000 year ago, Jesus had a chance to build a team of superstars... **a dream team** of uberly gifted and talented people.
- But who did He choose? Did He choose those who were **highly educated** or **rich** or **resourceful** or **powerful** or **influential**?

No! Peter was impulsive. Thomas was a doubter. Judas was greedy. John & James were opportunistic ladder-climbers.

- There was a **man named Simon** who was a Zealot, which meant he hated tax-collectors.
- There was another guy named Matthew who was a tax-collector, which meant that he hated Zealots. What a mess!

So why did he choose these twelve? I don't think they had any idea... and I certainly don't have any idea.

- I have no idea why He chose us! I only know that **He was big enough to touch the world** through them...
- and He's big enough to touch the world through people just like you and me.

Like those of each generation before you, you have everything you need to bring the **life** and **blessing** and **power of Christ** throughout this area.

- Lighting torches of faith amongst your **family**, your **neighbors**, those **you work with**, those you **go to school with**.
- Believe me, He's big enough to use each one of you to pass the torch of the Gospel to someone who lives in darkness & despair.
- We get so focused on our qualifications that we forget about Jesus's...

With **just one word from Him, storms calm** and **winds die** and **fish are multiplied**

- and the **lame leap for joy** and **blind eyes are opened**, and **demons run for their lives**.
- And so, believe me, **Jesus is powerful enough** to use you and this church to bring new life to this area...
- as you **pass on to others the torch of faith that was passed on to you**.

King David embraced this assignment with all his heart. It's why David wrote so passionately in **Psalm 71** about his desire to pass along the torch of faith once handed to him by Samuel...

- A faith passed down to Samuel from Hannah and Eli.
- David says in verse 17-18, → "**Since my youth, O God, you have taught me and to this day I constantly tell others about the wonderful things You do. Even when I am old and gray do not forsake me (don't let me die), my God, until I declare Your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who come after me.**"

"Lord, don't let me leave this world... not even when I'm old and grey... until I've declared your marvelous deeds and lit the torch of faith to all those who come after me."

And so, like David, like those early Jesus followers... we choose to walk down whatever path Jesus leads us on regardless of the cost.

- [**Illustration: Noel Isaacs & Mithu Didi from Kathmandu**]
- **Noel** was simply willing to give away what God had given to him.
- And **Mithu** then began to give away what God had given her.

→ **SHOW PIC OF MITHU**

And today, there are over one thousand believers in four Vineyard churches in Kathmandu, Nepal.

- **Neither Noel nor Mithu are heroes**. They simply chose to say "yes" to God's assignment to give away what was given to them.

- Truth is, God almost never gives easy assignments. But **what I've seen proven over and over again** is that God's assignments are always good... even when they're hard.

→Just read **Hebrews chapter 11** where we read about one person after another **whose lives were interrupted by God** calling them to this **risky partnership** with Him.

God comes to **Noah** and says, *"I want you to build an ark in the face of ridicule and restart the whole human race on earth."*

- God comes to **Abraham** and says, *"I want you to leave everything that's familiar to you."*
- God comes to **Joseph** and says, *"I want you to hold on to your calling even when you're betrayed by your brothers and you're in prison and you're a slave."*
- God comes to **Moses** and says, *"I want you to leave your life of safety-- and go back to Egypt in order to defy the Pharaoh."*

I'm sharing this because sometimes I hear people say something like, *"God would never ask me to do something that I can't handle."*

- But, in the Bible, **God almost always asks people to do something they can't handle**—at least on their own.
- There's almost always a cost of doing what God calls us to do.

There may be times, for example, when the cost of praying with someone struggling at work seems too high;

- **Maybe** you feel too **inadequate to tell a neighbor** about **how the love of Jesus** has impacted your own life;
- **maybe** the risk of inviting a family member to church seems a bit too much.
- Maybe you wonder at times **whether the cost of passing along the torch of faith** is really worth it or not.

When I lived in Tajikistan through its five-year civil war in the 90s, **the emotional price to do what God was calling me** to do seemed too high at times.

- Upwards of 100g people were killed, including two of my friends... one of them just 50 feet from my house.
- New believers were being threatened and even beaten. My #2 guy was arrested and beaten for a month.

There were moments when I'd feel so deflated... when a **10 year old girl I was praying for** weeks died of gangrene...

- When, **out of fear, one of my leaders** handed the local Mullahs a list of people who had given their lives to Christ.
- When someone I really cared for stole money from me... and another robbed my house.
- There were times when I'd just wonder if it was all worth it.

And through seasons like that, crying out to God, I can tell you that **there's only been one answer** that has ever satisfied & calmed my soul.

- It's something that I know I've shared with you before but SO worth sharing again...
- Because it's something that I honestly **believe** in to the very core of my being.
- Something that, I believe is **worth staking the rest of my life on.**
- Something worth your staking the rest of *your life* on.

You see, **one day**, you and I will **stand before the One** who sits on that throne; the One whom we've set our hearts to walk with our entire lives.

- And, on that day, **He will look you in the eye.** And, when He does, **every question or doubt** you've ever had will be blown clear away...
- And you will know that it was worth it... And you'll know it was worth it *for one reason.*

Not because what He called you to was easy; **Not** because it led to great accomplishments; **Not** because of anything you got out of it...

- But you will know that it was worth it all because at the center of human history and at the center of your life stands a Lamb that was slain. You see, that Lamb is worthy.
- He is worthy of every act of obedience ever **expended**.
- He is worthy of every bit of sacrifice ever **offered** to Him.

He is worthy of every tear of repentance ever **shed**. He is worthy of every ounce of labor ever **given**.

- He is worthy of every drop of blood that every martyr has ever shed through these last 2,000 years. He is worthy.
- He is **worthy of my life**. He is worthy of **your life**. He is worthy.

I remember early on while living in Tajikistan... feeling the weight of **the reality that the Gospel I'm sowing** into these beautiful people's lives could get them killed.

- I was in my office one day, and a **young man whom we had just recently baptized** came in crying (this is the guy who, a year earlier, had stolen money from me)...
- His father had beaten him badly because of his faith... and while walking through the local bazaar, many of the men started yelling at him for giving his life to Jesus.

I wrapped my arms around him and sat him down. I opened the Tajik Bible next to me and read from Matthew 5.

- *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God... Blessed are the persecuted, for theirs is the Kingdom."*
- Somehow we both started laughing... he was on his knees thanking Jesus for the opportunity to suffer for His namesake.
- They called him a traitor... **Kofir**... but, he embraced that. In fact, he began telling people to call him by that name.

Probably the hardest moments overseas were seeing our local believers facing persecution.

- It always made me wonder **what it must've been like for the Apostle John**... forced out onto the island of Patmos...
- knowing that there was nothing he could do to help **the vast numbers of spiritual children he had** as they faced such intense persecution and suffering.

I only know that **on one particular day, John looked up**... and with spiritual eyes, He saw a Lamb at the throne of God.

- And in the Lamb's right hand was a scroll that was sealed with seven seals.
- And even though no one can know with certainty all that was written in this scroll,
- At the very least, **we know that it contained God's judgment for all that's been...** and His plan of redemption to restore fallen humanity back to Himself.

But almost out of nowhere, John says that a strong angel shouted with a loud voice, → **"Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?"**

- Who is worthy to open the scroll? Who is worthy to rule the earth? Who is capable of setting things right?
- Who is able to answer all of my questions? To settle all my doubts & fears?
- But the answer comes back: *nobody!* Is there *no one* in heaven or on earth who could open and read the scroll?

And so, John begins to weep bitterly. What good is the promised Kingdom if there is no one to usher in that Kingdom?

- What if our lives have no ultimate meaning?
- What if the risk of passing along the torch of faith isn't worth it?

You see, John **weeps** for the beauty of the world that *could be*, but is not.

- He **weeps** for all life's suffering that will never have meaning.
- He **weeps** for his own failure because he himself was not worthy.

John's tears stand for the **tears of all God's people** as we cry out, "*When will Your kingdom come? When will Your will be done?*"

- How will the injustices out there be ever made right?
- How can **the light of faith come to this land** now, Lord?

But then, in **verse 5**, one of the 24 elders comes to John and says, → **"Do not weep for there is One who is worthy."**

- In all the universe, through all of history... *there is **One***, he says... **who has the right** to hold authority and rule the earth... *there IS **One*** who is worthy.
- And then John looks up... and, **again, he sees a Lamb.**
- And around the Lamb are the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders... All of whom have fallen to the ground...

And we're told, in **verse 9**, that they began singing a new song that began with the words... "***You are worthy, You are worthy.***"

- → "***You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seal and open it. For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.***"
- You see, that perfect Lamb... He is **worthy** to redeem the world.
- He is **worthy** of **every ounce** of your devotion and **every beat** of your heart.

Jesus has proven Himself to have the power & authority to **guide history toward His own end**... to guide my life and your life.

- And, because of this, to the **seven churches** suffering there in Asia Minor (in what is now Western Turkey),
- John wants them to know that, **in spite of their suffering & persecution**, it is worth it!

If, as you leave here, you ever wonder if it's worth the cost of passing along that torch of faith...

- John simply invites you **to look with him into that heavenly scene**... to set your gaze on that perfect Lamb of God.
- You see, **at the center of human history** stands a Lamb... and it's because He is worthy...
- That He, then, becomes worthy of ALL of all of **your life**... of all **your sacrifices**... of all of **your trust**... of all **your devotion**.

And because He is so worthy... We find ourselves compelled to make **the hero of our lives**, Jesus Christ, the hero of all those around us.

- You see... I believe God is about to do something life changing through this church... and you're meant to be a part of that!

- And so, it's time for those of us who have **been inspired...** to now go and inspire.
- It's **time for you who have been changed...** to go and change.
- It's time for **you who have been so richly blessed** to go and be a blessing to all the peoples in your neighborhoods and at work.

It's time for **you whom God has opened His hand to...** to now go and open your hands **to those who need the love and gifts** that God has deposited in you.

- Are you willing to **risk embarrassment** inviting someone to go to church with you?
- Are you willing to **risk rejection**, sharing with someone the love you've discovered in Jesus?
- Are you **willing to see and respond** to the brokenness & lostness around you?
- Are you **willing to light the torch of faith** in someone else's life that was once ignited in your own life?

→ Title Slide

Illustration: Young woman Lighting Torches in Atlanta

Honestly, I have never known anybody who had a **deep, risky, bold faith** in God that led an **easy, comfortable, challenge-avoiding life**.

- **All through Scripture... God calls.** And, almost always, **people are scared**... they feel inadequate.
- And, in the midst of that, God never reacts by saying, *“Oh, I can see where this would be pretty scary. So... never mind... don't worry about it.”*

Instead, over and over, **God offers us this simple promise**... the promise of His presence.

- So, **God says to a terrified Gideon**, for example, *“The Lord is **with you**, mighty warrior.”*
- Mighty Warrior? Mighty Mouse maybe... but not Mighty Warrior!
- But **God sees in us what we can become** as we walk in His **power, grace, and authority**... as we walk in the Holy Spirit.

There will no doubt be **times when you feel inadequate...** when you feel that **just about anyone could do a better job** at it than you...

- There will be times when the **cost of walking out His calling as a torch bearer** may seem too intimidating.
- But, because He is worthy, because of who He is, are you willing, right now...
- to **offer every part of your life to Jesus?** Are you willing to **invite the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh?**

Are you willing to cry out, *“Lord, would you bless me so I can be a blessing to the world around me?”*

- Are you willing to sing out, *“This little light of mine,”* Jesus, *“I’m gonna let it shine!”*

Because if you do... **if you’re willing to join together as a community...**

- If you’re willing to step into **God’s purpose as torch-bearers...**
- If you’re **willing to pass on to others what has been passed down to you...**
- than know that, together, we **really can be that light in the darkness** that can forever change the lives of countless people in and around this region.

Together **we can be that “City on a Hill”...** that **community of hope in a despairing world.**

- It may not lead to the simplest or easiest life... but, I promise, it will be the best life...
- **a God-empowered life that you’ll never look back at with regret.**

Pray... Invite Worship Team... Invite congregation to stand.

Ministry Time:

Lord Jesus... because You’re worthy, because You’re with me, I’m ready to be a torch-bearer.

- **So, in my life, Jesus... don't give me security...** give me grace, instead, to be **unquestionably obedient** to Your **every last command** and desire.

Don't give me **status**... give me a place to serve.

Don't give me **things for my use**... use me.

Don't just give me a **good job**... put me to work.

Don't give me **comfort**... command me.

Don't give me **pleasure**... give me perspective.

Don't give me **satisfaction**... teach me sacrifice.

Don't give me **entertainment**... enable me.

Don't just give me **good salary**... give me strength to do your will.

Don't give me **safety**... give me a life of significance.