April 7/8, 2018

Passing the Baton

Hebrews 12:1-2

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Good morning! If you are visiting with us this morning, you just need to know this isn't a normal service for us. Every once in a while a church has to have a little family time and talk about some things that are specific to us as a family and some changes that are coming. So we are really glad you are here and next week will be as normal as we get. *(laughter)*

So I think everybody understands that this life is full of change and transitions. You can't avoid it; it's part of all of our stories. I think some people roll with it fairly easily and I think other people tend to face change with a degree of anxiety and fear. But however you respond to it, the bottom line is life keeps changing—and I would encourage all of us to learn to face it with courage and faith. One of the big struggles is that when change and transition in your life creates fear, fear makes us selfish. Once you move into fear mode, all you think about is yourself and, "What about me?" and "How is this going to affect me?" That's not a good foundation from which to make good life choices. I think if we face it with courage and faith, then we are in a position to think of others as more important than ourselves and make better decisions related to whatever the transition is that you are going through. I believe every person here this morning—you've been made on purpose, for a purpose—but it's always good to remind ourselves it's not a singular purpose. If we were going to use the imagery of a race, nobody runs an individual race. Nobody is running just a sprint or a marathon; it's always a relay. What I mean by that is your purpose is an invitation into something that is bigger than all of us. It's about something that will last forever. So I get the baton; I run my part of the race; I pass the baton on, and I've been involved in something that is way bigger than me—and that's true of all of us. We have to see it that way. Whenever I think of that, one of my favorite passages is Hebrews, Chapter 12. I just want to make a couple of comments out of that passage. Starting in the fall, in September, we are going to work our way through the book of Hebrews. So at that point we will dig into the details. I just want to make a couple of comments out of chapter 12, verses 1 and 2:

> **Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**
>
> (*NASB, Hebrews 12:1-2)

Now there is so much there we need to talk about, but for this morning just a couple of points. The **therefore** is in reference to Hebrews chapter 11, often referred to as the *Faith Hall of Fame.* It's about great steps of faith by Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and these great heroes of the faith. **Therefore**, in light of their race of faith and courage, it then moves into the discussion in chapter 12. When it's talking about **witnesses**, I think the writer is using that term the same as he used it in chapter 10, *eyewitnesses*. When he's talking about **surrounding**, I don't think there is any doubt he is talking about the Roman coliseums. So, basically, the idea is those who have gone before us—the Old Testament saints, Peter, Paul, John, the great saints down through history—they have run their race with faith and courage, but at some point the baton gets passed to you, gets passed to me, and we are expected to run our leg of the race with the same faith and courage. The

idea is that they gather in the bleachers, but not as spectators; they gather in the bleachers as teammates. This is a relay race and whether or not they win is also dependent on how well I run my race. So they are cheering me on because they have skin in the game; this is part of their race. Now I find that incredibly inspiring. I find it very motivating to think these great saints of old sit in the bleachers and they watch me carry my leg of the race and they're cheering because they want to win the race—and my leg of the race is a part of that story. So that's really helpful imagery to think about. All of our lives connect with a bigger story—what's gone before—and then we run our race and pass the baton to those who will run after us. So whenever we're thinking of a relay, there is this critical moment; it's about trying to put the four fastest runners on the track and win the race. But there is also this critical moment where the baton is passed from runner to runner to runner and, according to the rules, if the runner doesn't cross the finish line with the baton, you don't win. Now it seems so simple; just hand the baton to the next guy. Imagine training, working out, dreaming of this moment in the Olympics. You know you have the four fastest runners on the track. You've dreamed of this your whole life! This is your gold medal moment, and something like this happens. Check it out:

(Video of the Olympics 4 X 100 relay where the American dropped the baton in the final lap)

..."Stick-dropping woes continue,"...that's a great line! It seems so simple—just pass the baton—yet at that level, the baton was dropped. There are a lot of churches like that; it's not as simple as it may seem. So it takes a lot of thought, takes a lot of prayer, and then we trust God with that. Lincoln Berean church is 56 years old. There have been 2 senior pastors, which means we have passed the baton once in 56 years! So it's not something we are good at; it's not something we have practiced very much, so it's all the more important to be thoughtful and prayerful about how we're going to go about doing that. As we think about this kind of in the big picture—staying with a racing metaphor—think of it like this: Especially at the college, the Olympic level, the goal is not merely to enter a team in the race. They are not interested in a participation ribbon; they want to win and so they are going to do everything possible to put their four fastest runners on the track and maybe they win lots of races. But nobody stays at the top of their game forever, so one of the challenges the coach has is to continually assess and make necessary changes. There are times when certain runners have to come off the team and new runners have to go on the team or the team won't continue to win races. Now those are difficult decisions for a coach, but let's up it just a little bit. Let's imagine that the coach is one of the runners. So now he has loved being part of the team; he's been really fast; he loves the applause; he loves the adrenaline; he's loved all that they have experienced together. But, as time passes, he's not quite as fast as he used to be, but he's unwilling to face that. He loves the applause; he loves the adrenaline; he loves being part of the team. He gets slower and slower and slower. Pretty soon, no matter what the other three members of the team do, no matter how hard they train, no matter how hard they work, they're not going to win any more races until the player/coach is willing to look at himself and realize it's time for a change.

I would consider myself a player/coach. Here's what I mean by that. Our church is run by an elder board, so I'm part of that board but I'm in submission to that board. If the elder board decides today, "Bryan, you are fired," I am fired. But let's be honest. What's the chance that that's going to happen? I've been here since 1993. God has blessed the ministry; we've experienced a lot of really amazing things together. So what's the chance that the board is going to come to me and say, "You know, you need to step off the team." Probably not too high. What is the chance that the staff is going to come and say, "You know, we've been watching the race; you're off the team, fella." *(laughter)* Probably not. As a matter of fact, I would say to you when it gets to that point, where it's obvious to the elders, it's obvious to the staff, it would be obvious to you, then we've waited way

too long. At that point, we have been losing way too many races; we've lost all our momentum and now we have a big problem on our hands. It actually has to come down to me to have the character and the integrity to assess when is the time when I'm no longer as fast as I used to be and it's starting to affect the team's ability to continue to win races and make a necessary change.

Nobody on the elder board is initiating this conversation; nobody on the staff is; I don't think behind the scenes anybody is talking, saying "Who is going to tell him?" *(laughter)* I've initiated it, but I'm in the best position to assess my own energy and when is the appropriate time to make a transition. I want to win races; I want to keep winning races, and I want to make the change while we are still winning races. I don't want to wait until it's obvious to everyone. I've always thought, "I want to leave while people still want me to stay." I don't want to be that guy where everyone is saying, "Who is going to tell him he needs to be done?" Now I've been watching this for years. I'm a baby boomer and a lot of people are really hard on the baby boomers—and a lot of that is true. But I would also say that the baby boomers—a remnant of the baby boomers—have changed the world! They have changed the world for good, and amazing things have happened. God has raised up churches all over the country that have been lead by baby boomers, and amazing things have happened. But I've wrestled with this question: "Will the baby boomers be able to let go? Do they fall in love with the applause, with the adrenaline, with everybody fussing over them and will they be able to let go and trust the new, young generation to take the baton and run the next leg of the race?" My prediction is, "Mostly, no." They will hang on and the churches will decline, and new young, fresh churches will emerge with new young, dynamic leadership.

Over the years, I've asked senior pastors here or there, wherever I go, about this and I ask them if they have considered this. You know we get in this weird season where we are in our early 60s. It feels too late to make any kind of a change but it's too early to retire and I ask them this question and the majority say, "What would I do?" I always tell them the same thing: "That is the wrong question! That is a question that's flowing out of your own fear and insecurities; it's not all about you!" And the question that I tell them it should be is, "What is necessary for the church to continue to thrive, to continue to win races into the future?" No church exists for the comfort and the convenience of the staff. It exists to accomplish the mission. Paul says, "If you're going to run a race, run to win!" That has always made sense to me. Why run in the race if you aren't running to win and, at some point we have to keep making decisions so that we can continue to aggressively accomplish the mission.

Now in this case, we are the team; all of us are the team. I'm looking at people that dedicate time, talent, treasure; they dedicate themselves to accomplishing this mission with an expectation that we as the leadership are going to create an environment where we can win together! I have to be just completely candid with you. What's motivating me is *not* what's in the best interest of Patti and me. If that was the motivation, I would seek to convince you, "I tell you what, how about letting me jog around the track during my leg of the race until I'm 65 or 70. If you don't mind, keep giving me a paycheck and just let me jog. I can jog until I'm 70—the least amount of disruption, that would be great." But you do understand what we're agreeing to—and that happens in churches all the time. It goes something like this: "You know, he's been here a pretty long time. God's done really great things in our time together; I kind of like him; let's just let him jog. Then when he's ready to be done, then let's let him be done." But what we are agreeing to, if that's going to be the thinking, is "We are done winning races; let's just get participation ribbons. Let's not take the mission seriously; let's just coast and maybe at some point in the future some young generation leaders will rise up and maybe, or maybe not, they will be able to recapture the momentum."

If we made that decision, it would absolutely break my heart. That has nothing to do with what we have experienced together over two decades. We have been about a sense of urgency in accomplishing the mission. It's about winning races and making necessary changes to keep winning races, and what motivates me is trying to figure out, "What is in the best interest of the church, so we can continue to thrive together?" So where does that get us today? I'm 59; I'll turn 60 in January. Now that's still pretty young so, for starters, I'm not retiring! I know a lot of people want to use that terminology. I'm not retiring; I'm only 59; I'm way too young to retire. I don't have any interest in retiring and besides, just to be honest, I couldn't afford to retire at 60. Some of you are thinking, "How much are we paying this guy that he's retiring at 60?" *(laughter)* Well you've been very generous, but not nearly enough. (*laughter)* Like most people in the room, I couldn't do that; I don't want to do that; I've no interest in that. But a transition out of my role as senior pastor is something that we're talking about and planning for and processing. So you know 60 is like relative to what we are discussing. If you are a sixty-year-old Olympic runner, that's old! If you are a sixty-year-old NFL quarterback, that's really old and some of you are thinking, "That's old no matter how you look at it." *(laughter)* For other people, in other vocations, with other stories, that's not young at all.

Part of my story is I do have health problems; most of you know that. I had open heart surgery—pretty radical surgery—when I was thirty-nine. I had it again in 2013 and it wasn't a procedure. It was full blown open-heart surgery and they did a lot of stuff. I will have to have it again, sometime around like 2025. That will always be part of my story and I have to reckon with that. Now I just want to be clear on that. I'm not fragile; I'm not hanging on the edge of death. I still can work really hard; I put in a lot of hours when I'm home on the acreage. I do a lot of heavy, physical work—I'm fine! But there are issues that go with my heart condition that do affect my energy level on a daily basis. It's part of my story, and that is a part of what drives the decisions I need to make. So right now—currently—I would say I'm still pretty fast. I still work a lot of hours; I carry a full load; I deal with a lot of stress. I thrive on that; I always have. I'm every bit as passionate about the mission as I've ever been. I think as the team, we are still winning races and I think I'm still making a contribution to that, but I'm aware of the fact that I cannot keep doing that indefinitely. Some of you know what I'm talking about. You just start to feel the energy drain, "I don't have as much as I used to have." So in moving forward, we think about, "How do we go about making a transition while we are still winning races so that we can maintain the momentum and keep winning races?

So, with all of that in mind, over the last year the elders have talked a lot about: what does this mean? What are we looking at? How do we go about this? What's in the best interest of Lincoln Berean? We have landed on a plan that we think is very clear; we are very comfortable with it and we think you're going to be encouraged by this. So it basically breaks down into four pretty clear phases. When you leave this morning, you will get a copy of this that you can take home and keep track of and pray through with us. So, four phases—the first phase is starting tomorrow. One of the reasons we wanted to have this conversation now is starting tomorrow this goes public. We are going to post this position; we are going to begin searching, and we want you to know all of this before that happens. Starting tomorrow we begin the search for who that person might be. We don't have a person in mind but we are going to start with a great deal of diligence tomorrow and we are just going to trust God with that.

The next phase, phase 2, is when we find the person, we hire the candidate for senior pastor and have him serve as an associate pastor. He would have various responsibilities, including serving on the directional team, which is our senior team, and on the elder board. At this point he would only preach a few times—so a couple of things about that. The elder board is the search team. When we

identify someone to come in and to candidate, meaning this is someone we are looking at, then we will involve staff and have ways we can involve the congregation. We want lots of input but once the decision is made, that person will be hired, will be at the senior level, and will be part of the leadership here to get a sense of the culture and the chemistry—who we are and how we function. So that's phase 2.

Phase 3: Obviously these dates are a little bit subjective, but generally speaking the candidate would assume the role of senior pastor. This would include all of the responsibilities of the senior pastor role, except primary preaching pastor. Bryan would remove himself from the staff directional team and the elder board, but remain the primary preaching pastor for eighteen to twenty-four months. The new senior pastor would preach occasionally. Now there are several pieces to this. One, in bringing in a younger leader, we think most leaders would say they would kind of like to phase into that instead of getting the whole thing dumped on them at once. So, most of what you think of when you think of senior pastor is probably preaching—and that's about twenty-five percent of my weekly job description. The other seventy-five percent is much more behind the scenes and stuff that a lot of people don't see. When you're thinking about evaluating—assessing the next senior pastor—the preaching piece of it, by far will be the easiest to evaluate. It's the other stuff that's much more difficult to evaluate and assess. If you're in a business or in some role where you hire, you understand this is very difficult; it's very complex. Hiring is a difficult process and there are often things that show up that you didn't see, you didn't anticipate. The more senior level, the more complicated it becomes.

Imagine this scenario: somebody with a really strong preaching gift preaches every weekend and the people fall in love with him. But behind the scenes it's becoming a disaster; everything is falling apart; it's not a chemistry fit; it's not a culture fit. Imagine the damage done when we have to somehow deal with that and everybody's like, "Hey, we love the guy. What is your people's problem?" Then we have people hurt and confused and we have created all kinds of unnecessary conflict. One of the ways to think about this is: I would suggest to you that many of the preachers on radio and television, you maybe love their preaching, but I think you might be surprised at what actually goes on in private, behind the scenes. I think you would actually be very disappointed. We at Lincoln Berean simply will not operate that way. Whatever is being said and done on the stage, we expect that in private behind the scenes, with the staff and with the congregation. So this plan is to try to figure out, with the least amount of disruption, is this a good cultural fit; is it a good chemistry fit; does this look like it's going to work? The other piece of this is it does allow me to continue a little bit longer in an area of strength. If I can give up a lot of my load and focus more energy on the weekend, I think that can allow me to operate at a level I would expect of myself a little bit longer. Those are all the benefits of phase 3.

If at that point then it seems like this is good, it's a really good fit, then phase 4. When it is clear to both the elder board and the new senior pastor that this is a good fit for the future of LBC, the senior pastor would assume the primary preaching role and Bryan would transition out of that role. At this point the transition is complete. So, if everything went like clockwork, that would be 2022 and the transition would be complete. I know people are going to ask: then what does that mean for me, and the answer is, "I have no idea!" There are too many variables; there is no way to answer that question. I will just trust that God will be faithful and we will see what happens when that point comes. But hopefully at that point we are still winning races; we'll continue to win races; the transition is complete and we move on.

I have to tell you: I believe with all my heart that the best days for Lincoln Berean are still ahead. I'm very optimistic about this new generation of leaders, this remnant of leaders—they love Jesus! They are passionate about the mission! Just today, look around the church. There are dynamic, committed young leaders all over this church that God has raised up and they are doing amazing things among us! I am fully confident God's going to continue to do that and the best days are yet to come. A change is change. I came in 1993, so when I transitioned into the senior role there was a lot of concern. There were people that had had me as Sunday School teachers, as Awana leaders. There were people that had known me for years at youth camp and there were a lot of people thinking, "What are we doing?" *(laughter)* Maybe even a little level of panic! But here we are two decades later. God has been good and God has been faithful and we've experienced a lot of really great stuff together. We have every reason to believe that God will be just as good and faithful in the next transition. We pass the baton and we keep aggressively, urgently, continue seeking to accomplish the mission! To God be the glory...great things He has done!

Our Father, we do celebrate Your goodness and faithfulness. Lord, I know two decades ago there was a lot of concern, but You have been faithful. Lord, before me this morning are amazing people, and, God, You are going to continue do something special in the days and months and years ahead. So, Lord, we will trust You with the necessary transitions, Lord, that we might be urgently about accomplishing the mission for Your glory. Lord, we commit this to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Final video:

http://www.lincolnberean.org/media/stories/50-years