I don’t really need to tell you that once again FUMC is in the midst of transition from one senior pastor to another. Many of you have experienced this type of transition before, from Jim Wright to Bob Ward, from Bob Ward to Bill Ritter, from Bill Ritter to Jack Harnish, and now from Jack Harnish to Gary and Laurie Haller. Such transitions bring a mixed set of emotions: grief for the departing pastor with anxiety concerning the new pastors. Some of you go even further back to Dr. Runkel and Ernie Thomas. The point here is that FUMC has been blessed by a series of senior pastors, each with their own unique gifts and graces, and therein lies the hard part. Senior pastors are not clones of each other, as much as we might sometimes wish. The future is not the same as the past. We are called to embrace our new leadership whether we grieve the loss of what was, are reluctant to embrace the what is, and are anxious about the what will be.

What makes this transition somewhat unique is that most of the staff was hired since Jack Harnish became senior pastor, so they are experiencing this transition for the first time. Some of you have only known Jack Harnish as your senior pastor. Others have known Ritter or Ward or Wright, and therefore have the benefit of experiencing pastoral change for the second, third or fourth time. As for me, this is my second major leadership transition at FUMC, first from Bill Ritter to Jack Harnish, and now from Jack Harnish to Gary and Laurie Haller. I, for one, want to state that I am excited about this transition while I grieve the loss of a good friend and colleague in Jack. Quite frankly, throughout my life, I have thrived on leadership changes.

From the business world comes a wonderful set of books by Price Pritchett and Ron Pound on survival guides re: the stress of organizational change. They contain wisdom that is applicable to you whether you are an employee or a parishioner experiencing a leadership change, when you had become comfortable with the old and now must embrace the new. As Jack Harnish was so fond of saying, “The only person who likes change is a baby!”

Werner Erhard offers this advice: “Ride the horse in the direction it is going.” We all know instinctively that organizations must change, but in our hearts we are comfortable with the status quo. However, an organization—yes, even the church—is going to change if it is to survive and prosper. So rather than banging your head or wringing your hands over what is changing and thereby bruising your spirit, invest your energy and attitude in accepting the new direction.

Garrison Keillor, one of my favorite pundits, has imparted wisdom on this subject from his Prairie Home Companion show:
Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have got it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.

We are not here to clone a beloved past senior pastor, but to embrace a new form of leadership. Arnold Glasow has wisely noted: “The trouble with the future is that it usually arrives before we are ready for it.”

As I was reflecting on my eight years working with Jack, I realized that after 51 straight years of working, I had reported to 25 different bosses. As some wag responded, “I guess they couldn’t put up with you,” or perhaps vice versa! In my 18 years in the banking field, I had 14 bosses. In the US Navy, it was four in four years. In the church, seven in 25 years, so I guess I am slowing down or have learned to work with new bosses. That, in fact, is further from the truth, as it just reflected the times of corporate churning where you moved every two years (as did your bosses) while they/you climbed the corporate ladder. So I have experienced new bosses who suddenly appeared unannounced and others who were logical successors. I have worked for many wonderful men, whether in the Navy, the bank, or in the church. If I am honest, I have also worked for some I was not as enthusiastic about, but I learned early that I didn’t pick my leaders, I was expected to serve.

The gospel makes it clear we are expected to serve Jesus in cooperation and collaboration with the leaders God has sent our way. Thus, for me, tomorrow is another exciting day of transition where I expect to be challenged and learn new things while keeping my ministry fresh right to the end. I have witnessed effective transitions and not-so-effective ones. I hope you can embrace this change of leadership in the spirit of grace and excitement.

For me, the best example of a transition was the Change of Command Ceremony in the US Navy where the outgoing commander turned over the ship/command to his successor at an elaborate ceremony. I experienced a similar feeling when installed as Rector of the Church of the Heavenly Rest where, at my first service officiated by the Bishop, I was presented with the symbols of the office: a stole, a Bible, water, bread, the cup, and a Book of Common Prayer. We too have set a ceremony of transition with the placing of our stoles on the altar and a staff worship service tomorrow celebrating the new ministry of the Hallers in our midst.

As Christians, these times of transition are in-between times, times when we let go of the past and embrace the future. Today we are on the boundary between yesterday and tomorrow. Our model for these times is Holy Saturday, the least acknowledged day in the Christian calendar. Imagine what it was like for the disciples after Jesus was crucified and buried on Good Friday. They had lost their leader, and the next day they did not know what to expect, perhaps explaining why the gospels say very little about them following the crucifixion. Were they in hiding? In grief? Just plain scared about the future? It was truly the day between the days.

We have the benefit of hindsight so we know that for every Good Friday there is an Easter; however we must first experience the anxiety of Holy Saturday, the day in between, the day of Holy waiting. My theology is centered in the Good Friday/Easter story. Life throws us Good Fridays, some more severe than others. I have learned with patience that after entering the Holy
Saturdays of life which follow the terrors of Good Fridays, after a period of anxious waiting, there will be an Easter resurrection. That is the promise we stand upon, as the great hymn “Standing on the Promises” proclaims. Hope! Embrace the loss, wait patiently, then embrace the future.

Holy Saturday can seem like a time devoid of the presence of God, a time of dislocation, uncertainty. Between the cross and the empty grave was a day a day of emptiness, defeat and despair. But we know the rest of the story, as the late Paul Harvey used to proclaim. That death, dislocation, despair are not the last words, but the in-between words. The church is both a Good Friday community and an Easter Community—“both/and,” as I like to say. But let’s not forget Holy Saturday, a time when our connectedness in community sustains us in times of uncertainty and change, because we are people of the promise that there is always a new day that the Lord has made.

I have often wondered why there was so much resistance to Jesus from the religious authorities. I think it was because he represented radical change in outlook and action.

What does today’s scripture offer us in thinking about leadership transitions? This story from the book of Kings tells us how the mantle of prophetic leadership was passed from the great prophet Elijah to Elisha. We learn that Elijah set out to find Elisha. I like to think that is somewhat like the Bishop and the Cabinet setting out to find a successor for FUMC. I loved the fact that Elijah found Elisha working in the field. I like to think all our pastors, past and present, were found working in the field where the harvest was plentiful but the laborers few. Elisha immediately dropped what he was doing to follow Elijah, somewhat reminiscent of Jesus’ call to his disciples when he found them working their nets as fishermen. Once again, we are told in ministry that we leave our mothers and fathers to follow Christ. Elisha made a complete break with his prior life by celebrating his changed status with a feast with his people, even though this passage is not clear about what the future holds for Elisha and is therefore somewhat enigmatic. Elisha then followed his call.

People are prepared for the passing of the mantle when it is understood that the change is meaningful and bearable because God is in charge and is the ultimate author of change. This passing of the mantle underscores the importance of continuity of office. Later, in 2 Kings 2:13-15, we learn:

Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. When the company of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.”

Although the mantle had been passed earlier to Elisha, signaling his appointment as Elijah’s successor, the actual transfer did not come until later when we learn that as Elijah ascended to heaven in the whirlwind, Elisha picked up the mantle that had fallen. In our contemporary terms, this act tells us that Elisha accepted the call. Much the same is our appointment process. We
learned in February that the mantle would be passed to Laurie and Gary Haller, but the actual taking up the office does not occur officially until tomorrow when we will celebrate Communion with the staff heralding their arrival.

You may have observed last week that Jack and I dropped our mantles of leadership, symbolized by our stoles, and placed them on the Bible on the altar. The Hallers, like Elisha, will pick them up on Sunday, July 7, and the story goes forward. Please join me in embracing the beginning of a new chapter in the story of the community of the faithful known as FUMC Birmingham.

Since we have been speaking of transitions, let’s transition into a Fourth of July mode and sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”