**Homily, Nov. 26th, 2023 Ephesians 1:15-23 “Above It All, Yet Within It All…”**

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

It was the summer before I went to seminary, the summer of 1986.  I was doing magic shows at a theme park in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and assisting backstage with the ice-skating show in between magic shows.  And I still remember the energetic fire, the excitement at the apex of that ice show, the big splashy solo number for the female lead skater.  Just two short years after the runaway hit film *Footloose*, she skated to this pulsing top 40 hit made most famous in that movie:

***Where have all the good men gone, and where are all the gods? Where's the street-wise Hercules to fight the rising odds? Isn't there a white knight upon a fiery steed? Late at night I toss and I turn and I dream of what I need, I need a hero!***

 ***I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night…He's gotta be strong, and he's gotta be fast, and he's gotta be fresh from the fight! I need a hero!***

 ***I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light…He's gotta be sure, and it's gotta be soon, and he's gotta be larger than life.***

As you probably have guessed, the skater in question was highly athletic, skilled, sexy, beautiful, the whole enchilada.  And that solo always just left us all, audience, cast, and crew, breathless.  And I remember thinking, as I was seminary-bound just a few weeks after the summer season closed, that I wanted to really inspire church folks that well someday, wanted to bring them the same kind of heart-pounding joy released by that ice dancing.  A tall order, to say the least.

But I was not remotely the first to want to get people all worked up about God and Spirit, as these opening lines from the letter to the church in Ephesus demonstrate.  Such verbal fireworks, so much linguistic athleticism!  To hear the grand scope of God’s love and care, and to so clearly hear our human place right in the middle of it all, well, it can leave you breathless.  And it ought to, it is designed to do that very thing!  These few dozen verses have had hundreds of volumes penned about them, so I think it’s safe to say we won't be launching a full-scale assault of this text in the next five minutes…instead, I would invite you to focus on just one tiny facet of this literary tour de force, the facet that holds all of the past month’s themes together.  For whether we were sweetly and solemnly naming the saints three weeks ago, or seeking the comfort of the sacrament that same day, or expressing our stewardship – just last Sunday!... we do all of these because we *have*, and *cultivate*, hope.  That hot ice dancer may have been holding out for a hero, but we are holding out for hope.

Hope is one of those things that is much easier to feel than to describe.  Which seems strange, since its opposite, hopelessness, is so easy both to feel and to describe.  So if we are gonna hold out for hope, I think we need to have some easy way to remember the qualities of that star that drags our tender hearts across the sky and back.  Here's how I remember hope, H.O.P.E...it stands for Healthy, Optimistic, Patient Expectation.

**H** is for healthy...robust, efficient, not burdened with excess or impediment.  It does involve having at least one toe tethered to the ground, because ungrounded hope can be pretty unhealthy. Since we are cultivating an emotional response here, a healthy hope is one that is both realistic and would be recognized as sensible by most folks.  There's a difference, isn’t there, between a novice runner wanting to run their first marathon someday, and that same runner wanting to run their first marathon next week!  And that difference is the healthiness of their thought.

**O** stands is for optimistic.  Hope cannot *be* hope if it is gummed up with negativity, bound by chains of self-defeating gloom.  It can win the label of despondency, but that is a different text and a different sermon entirely.  A healthy way of assuming the best possible scenario leads us into hope. Besides, as the witty guru Wayne Dyer said, “Nobody knows enough to be a pessimist”.

**P** is for patient, the most hard-won of the qualities.  Hope without patience becomes rancid and petulant very quickly.  This is because the things for which we hope at the soul level are big-ticket things, and they take their sweet time developing.  Hope is hampered and hobbled by impatience.

The final letter is the most important, and the most metaphysical.  **E** is for expectation, our individuated mental stamp upon the face of reality.  What do we expect, deep down, at the most real level?  Because that is what will prevail, every time.  It is a big theological bite, and you may scoff initially, but I have become persuaded that expectation determines outcome.  I have graduated from my previous hedging that expectation only influences outcome. It is **determinate**, God’s response to our deepest spiritual longings and needs. Expectation doesn’t bear the whole freight alone, of course; planning and skill and a host of other factors play their parts.  But the guiding energy of Life is expectation.

Approaching life with healthy, optimistic, patient expectation is the very description of a person practicing hope.  And as promised earlier, hope is the key that unlocks each of the themes that have been our focus these last three weeks.  What do we hope for on an All-Saints Day?  We hope to feel our loved ones closeness, their presence somehow; if we are really honest, we hope to see them again someday.  In health we balance our grief; with optimism we allow for possibilities beyond our current reality; with patience we wait, all the while expecting eventual togetherness.  And the promise of scripture is that our hope will be rewarded.

And what about coming to the Lords Table?  We desire to feel the presence of Jesus, to know ourselves forgiven, accepted, and loved, and to share that delight with the other diners.  Hope is the key element that allows a ritual to become a sacrament.  Without a healthy, optimistic, patient expectation of these rather subjective realities, we just queue up with the other cattle and shuffle through another ritual meal.  It *can* be so profound, but not without hope…

Last Sunday I could have veered off and shared that hope is the very ground of all our stewardship.  Our generosity must be healthy, a balanced giving of time and energy and talent and money.  And we give these gifts optimistically, in order that good may be done because of our efforts.  We are patient in all of this, knowing that the dispersal of all this wonderfulness takes time.  And finally, we have expectation of actually improving the world and feeling the peace and reward of a job well done.  The scripture says that God loves a cheerful giver, but a hopeful giver is even better!

Finally, then, we come to Christ the King Sunday. This is surely a day framed by healthy, optimistic, patient expectation as we participate in bringing about the world’s readiness to receive its Lord. We proclaim Jesus Lord in advance, and strive to live as if it were truly so, because expectation determines outcome, right?

The unreflective, rolling-full-tilt-downhill world will *always* be holding out for a hero, craving an external fix for an internal mess.  But the spiritual person sets their sights considerably higher.  We already have a hero.  We know his name; it is the name sealed on our brow by the waters of our baptism.  We, then, are not holding out for a hero, we are holding out for hope.  And as we approach our daily lives with healthy, optimistic, patient expectation, our hand slips so comfortably into Gods hand, and we travel together into a radiant future.  Amen!