

“Among the Saints”
Ephesians 1:11-23
Rev. Liz Kearny
Longview Presbyterian Church
November 3rd, 2019

11In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,12so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.13In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;14this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.17I 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,18so 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,19and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.20God 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,21far 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.²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church,²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

As a junior at the University of Washington, I was working with an organization that provided shelter for women who were survivors of human trafficking. A group of friends and I had planned to go into all the dorms at UW with plastic containers to collect students' spare change, as much as we could, so we could write a check that could provide Christmas gifts for the women at the shelter. My memory is that as the day for the loose change drive got closer, more and more of my friends had to cancel on me. The night came for the drive and I remember that it was dark, and it was raining hard as I walked the mile or so to campus. I was so grumpy. Wet, disappointed in my friends, and wondering how stupid I would look to students whose doors I knocked on, alone, asking for their dimes, nickels and pennies. I felt small and lonely. Hope felt silly and almost impossible in that rainy, discouraging moment.

The first hearers of our text today knew what it meant to feel small and alone. While most of the folks living in Ephesus and Asia Minor towed the party line that Caesar was the reigning Lord of the land, this weird little community of Jesus-followers clung to the wild notion that God had come to us as a carpenter from Nazareth, living, dying, and rising again, reigning now as Lord of all. This made the first believers vulnerable. Stories started to spread about the threat posed by this little upstart group who entrusted themselves not to Caesar, but to a God who they

claimed had been born as a baby to flip empires upside down. I imagine as they looked around them at a culture so inhospitable to their faith, it must have seemed impossible to hang onto hope.

I wonder if you have had your own moments of feeling hopelessness press in on all sides. I wonder if you've had your own lonely walks in the rain, wondering how you will continue in this job, in this season of life, in this relationship, in this community when there is so much that feels inhospitable to your clinging to Jesus along the way.

The writer of Ephesians has something to say to all of us who have found ourselves feeling small and overwhelmed by the weight of the world. You might think the writer would speak directly to the particular struggles of the Christians in Ephesus, but instead, the writer does something surprising to encourage us. In this passage, it's like the writer is grabbing the Ephesian believers, and us, by the hand, guiding us up the hill, up out of the weeds of our pain just for a moment, to get a better view of what God is up to - a view of where we have been, where we are going, and most importantly, who we are in the midst of it all.

I can almost hear the writer pointing down to the twisting, turning switchbacks on the side of the mountain, orienting us to the world as God sees it. Look back, the writer says, to when you first heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. That's when you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. And look ahead, the writer says - that promise of the Holy Spirit is pointing you towards the inheritance you are promised, when at the end of all things all will be well. Look back, to God's power at work raising Christ from the dead and seating him not at the right hand of the thrones of this world, but beside the throne of the God

who embraced every inch of our brokenness to make us new. Look ahead, for Christ is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also up there, ahead, in the age to come.

And as we look to and fro at all God has done and will do, the writer steadily reminds us of the most important thing of all: our identity as *God's own people*. Think of those words. Before we are anything else, we are God's own, God's beloved, God's little ones held close in Her arms. And I am not just God's own *person*, but instead, the writer is careful to say that we, together, are God's own *people*, plural. It's like God knew how lonely we might feel, and so God gave us this family, the Church, to bear this life with us. We are all members, the writer says, of "the church, which is [Christ's] body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Our identity is rooted in the fact that God made us in and for and surrounded by community. So as the writer points out the path we have taken and the road that lies ahead, they insist that there have been and will always be companions for the journey, the other members of the body of Christ. It seems that the only way we truly know God's power and fullness is TOGETHER, WITH ONE OTHER, AS ONE INTERCONNECTED BODY. This passage helps us zoom out and gives us new perspective. Christ goes before us. Christ is waiting up ahead. And we are surrounded with siblings in faith, an embodiment of Christ's own presence, for every step of our journey.

At the end of my weary walk that rainy night on UW's campus, was the glowing lobby of one of the large campus dorms. I suspected I would enter alone and pick the first door of many for knocking - a long night of sad, solo

loose-change-collecting. But as my eyes adjusted from darkness outside to the light inside, I saw faces I recognized - Bethany and Luke. And I saw faces I didn't know, friends they had brought along for this strange journey. There they were, all damp from their own walks to the dorm, smiling at me and energized for this odd work I thought I'd be doing by myself. The rest of the night was filled with awkward interactions as sweatpants-clad college students dug through desk drawers and emptied their pockets for us. And the collection we took really did add up, miraculously, to plenty of money to buy Christmas gifts for women at the shelter. But what I remember most about that night, what sticks with me, are the faces that were waiting for me in that dorm lobby. In that moment, the eyes of my heart had been enlightened, as the writer of our text had hoped for. And in the faces of these faithful fellow co-conspirators, I saw enfolded, embodied the hope to which God had called me: God's power made real in community. In that moment, it was like I had been pulled up onto the mountaintop looking to and fro, realizing that my path was actually full of siblings in Christ who had gone before me, who were right here with me, and who were looking ahead with me at the path still to come. In this gathered community that welcomed me in from the rain, I got a taste of the riches of that glorious inheritance which, it turns out, really was there waiting for me "among the saints".

You may or may not know that this past Friday was All Saints Day, which we are recognizing in worship today. It's the day when we head to the mountaintop ourselves and gaze backward and forward and all around us, to remember those who have shown us in the past what lived faith means, to pray for those who will come after us to carry the torch of Christ's Church,

and to celebrate in this moment those who surround us on the journey, embodying Jesus to us as we walk through the uncertain valleys of this life.

So before we continue in worship this morning, I invite you to close your eyes.

Which person from your past comes to mind when you think of someone who walked the hard road of life with you?

SILENCE

Which person comes to mind when you think of someone God is raising up to carry the torch of faith into the future?

SILENCE

Now, open your eyes, look around. Here are the saints, ordinary and showing up and in the messiness with you. You may be small. We are all small. But we are not alone. Come up to the top of the hill and check out this view. We are swept up in a bigger story. So many have come before us. With hope, we pray for those who come after us. And we revel now in the present cloud of witnesses who surround us. We are part of a body, the body of Christ, the Church, the fullness of Christ who fills all in all. Thanks be to God. Amen.