### “Gather Up All Things” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 14, 2024

**Ephesians 1:8–14**

8With all wisdom and insight 9he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 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.

**Mark 6:10–16**

10He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” 12So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” 15But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” 16But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

One of the themes of today’s sermon is hope. Have you noticed how important hope is to living? When you were young, you spent years hoping and looking ahead toward certain goals. As you grow older, your hope changes. You begin hoping more about your children and grandchildren, or even about your neighborhood or your country.

The Ephesians passage gives us one of the most hopeful of insights. Christ was part of God’s plan “for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). The gathering up refers to a perfecting, a *completing*. In this, God “accomplishes all things according to his . . . will” (1:11). God will bring things to a completion. I think this means that human evolution has a goal, a destined perfection. And we have a role in this completion. We “obtain an inheritance” in Christ; we “set our hope on Christ,” and we will “live for the praise of his glory” (1:11–12). And our glorious destiny is sealed with the “promised Holy Spirit” (1:13). The Spirit foretells the redemption of “God’s own people” (1:14).

You can see how hope plays a big role in this. We believers set our hope in Jesus, and we live for him. We thrive on hope for obtaining a spiritual inheritance in Jesus’ kingdom. We enjoy the Spirit in our lives, and this Spirit confirms our hope by foretelling our future redemption as a whole people of God. All of this is God’s will, which God, in his wisdom and insight, has made known to us (vv. 8–9). God bolsters our hope and anticipation. He wants us to thrive on hope, as well as love. And then he wants to give us even more than we can imagine.

We move from this passage now to the gospel excerpt, which presents us with some of Jesus’ advice to his traveling apostles. If any place rejects you, wipe the dust of that place off your feet. Forget about them. So the apostles go out and preach repentance; they cast out demons and heal many who are sick. That’s an amazing and hopeful story. It says let go of resentment and worry. Be assured in your status within God’s love.

Now, when Herod hears of Jesus’ fame, he leaps to a very superstitious conclusion: “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised” (6:16). This is not logical, since many people could have testified to John and Jesus being contemporaries and even holding conversations with each other. Herod is simply reasoning from a place of fear. He is guilty-minded, and afraid he is going to be confronted with what he did.

Hope and fear are opposing mind-sets, and lead us in very different directions. Hope is deep breath, and an open blue sky above. Fear is a choked and gasping breath, with a lowering black cloud above. Hope is health in the limbs; fear is an ache in the bones. Hope is warmth; fear is chilly. Hope is knowing; fear is not knowing.

Why do we have fear as a potential feeling? Undoubtedly it is meant to alert us to danger. We had *better* feel fear when we see a lion through the bushes. Fear sends adrenaline pumping through us, so that we can run like the wind if we need to. But this normal and protective feeling mostly is counter-productive in society. It clouds our judgment; it can prompt us to lash out, to think we are surrounded by enemies. When selfish people become afraid, they seek to avoid the consequences of their actions, to circumvent the moral law of the universe. They become vindictive and cruel, in trying to fend off the world.

Herod annoyed many people. He divorced his wife, a Nabataean princess, prompting the Nabataeans to attack him. He survived this embarrassment, but not the intrigue that happened when his nephew Agrippa fell into gambling debts; Herod attempted to help him, but the two quarreled, and the quarrel continued when the new emperor, Caligula, who was Agrippa’s friend, came to power. Agrippa convinced Caligula that Herod was plotting against him. Caligula confiscated Herod’s property and banished him to the outer reaches of the empire, where he died in the year 39. He reaped what he had sown, and died powerless and lonely.

None of us will experience such a hateful and selfish life as Herod, even for a short period. We have a hope that is based on belief in God’s love, embodied in the life of Jesus, and in the reality of the Spirit, our foretaste of heaven. Our hope can be further boosted by believing that God will accomplish all things according to his will, by letting Christ gather up all things in heaven and on earth.

We live for his glory, for his glory heightens and preserves everything that is good, true, beautiful, loving, and harmonious. Trust that God is gathering together all things in Christ, for an eventual day when God “is all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), throughout the universe. Proverbs tells us “the path of the righteous is as the dawning light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day” (Prov 4:18 ASV).

Go forth with trust, anticipating your life in a “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb 12:28), as Hebrews says. Know that God’s love and your endurance within his domain are certain. You will have a spiritual inheritance.