



## “Hockey and Patriotism, Medals and Miracles: An Easter Message”

Chapel Talk by Head of School Lee Burns '87  
Wednesday, March 25, 2026

Like many of you, I watched some of the winter Olympics hosted by Italy this February. It's nice to see an event that brings together so many countries for intense competition yet with an underlying spirit of respect, and it's curious to see such a diversity of sports—curling and the luge and big air snowboarding, to name a few.

Despite the range of sports, including many new ones, I found myself most drawn to a more traditional one: ice hockey. And I was especially eager to follow how the United States men's team might fare, especially against the mighty Canadian team, arguably the most talented team in the world.

Both the Canadian and U.S. teams fought their way to the finals, and on February 26, the day after the US women earned a dramatic sudden death gold medal against the Canadians, the men squared off in a highly anticipated battle.

As I watched the game, full of NHL stars on both teams, I marveled at the speed and agility of the players as they passed with such precision, checked with such ferocity, and skated with such strategy and strength. To my untrained eye, the Canadian team seemed a bit better. And yet the United States struck first, as Matt Boldy split two Canadian defenders and slipped the puck past Canadian goalie Jordan Binnington early in the first period for a 1-0 U.S. lead.

The Canadians would tie the game in the second period on a goal by Cale Makar, and throughout the second and third periods, the Canadians would have a multitude of shots on goal, but each time they were stopped by the incredible play of U.S. goalkeeper Connor Hellebuyck, who finished the game with an astonishing 41 saves. For most of the game, the Americans were holding on to hold off the Canadian offensive onslaught.

Almost miraculously tied at 1-1 after the third period, the game goes to sudden death overtime, with the first goal earning the gold medal. American Jack Hughes, who minutes before had his front tooth knocked out, takes a pass from teammate Zach Werenski and scores from the left slot.



Bedlam ensues, as the American players throw off their gloves and masks and sticks and pile on each other in a red, white, and blue heap of hugs, smiles, and tears. Chants of USA reverberate throughout the arena, and the team sings/shouts the national anthem, off key, with tears in their eyes.

It was, to be sure, an extraordinary hockey game, an instant classic, an iconic moment in Olympic history for the United States and a point of great national pride.

Yet there was still a more iconic moment than that one in Milan, Italy, last month.

This one was last century, set in the small town of Lake Placid, New York, set against a very different national and global backdrop.

The late 1970s was an especially difficult time for the United States; many might call it depressing or dispirited or desolate...a time of limited or low confidence. The American economy struggled with high unemployment and high prices. Millions of Americans struggled to find a job or afford groceries or were unable to buy a house. Inflation and interest rates reached about 15%. Overseas, a group of Iranians overthrew their government, overran the American Embassy in Tehran, and took 66 Americans as hostages. Our Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union, invaded Afghanistan. Both domestically and internationally, we were struggling, losing, and didn't seem to have the confidence or capability to change it, let alone win.

In February 1980, teams from around the world gathered for the winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. Included in these countries was of course the mighty Soviet Union—modern day Russia plus some other countries now split off from Russia. They were not just our athletic or economic competitors; they were more than just a country with a different form of government, with a different world view; they were our adversaries, our enemies, with missiles pointed at us, and vice versa. And they trafficked in repression and fear-mongering as they espoused world domination.

Their hockey team was the most dominant hockey team in the world. Their skill and style of play was unmatched. No other hockey team in the world was close, especially not the U.S. team.

U.S. hockey back then was not nearly as strong as it is now. Even more significantly than that, the way we constituted our team was dramatically different. Unlike today, professionals could not play in the Olympics. The Soviet team, however, was a professional team that trained and played year round, around the world. They were in their mid to late 20's; some older. They were the best hockey players in the world. The Soviets called them amateurs so they could play in the Olympics. In reality, they were better than any professional team in the world.

Meanwhile, a few months before the Olympics, U.S. Coach Herb Brooks, coach of the University of Minnesota, had tryouts among college players for our Olympic team. He built a team of 18-22 year-olds who had never played together before. They had no chance to win the gold medal; the Soviets would do that. They had no chance to even win a medal. Perhaps they could win a game. Maybe.



Coach Brooks worked hard to build a team. To foster brotherhood. To help them see common purpose, to sacrifice for each other. He worked them extremely hard. He held high standards. He was demanding. He coached them hard, pushing them further than they thought possible. At one practice, after an exhibition game they had tied, he had them skate sprints. It was a brutal workout after a long game. After each sprint, he would ask a player who he was. The player would say his name. Coach Brooks would say, “Again,” and again they would sprint...to the point of utter exhaustion. Finally, when he asked a player who he was, the player said, “I play for the United States of America.” That ended the workout. Team not individual. That player, Mike Eruzione, would become captain of the team.

While the team surely bonded and got better, no one gave them any chance. The week before the Olympics, the US team played the Soviet team in an exhibition match in Madison Square Garden. The Soviets won 10-3; the score could have been worse.

In the first game of the Olympics, the Americans secured a tie with a last second goal against Sweden—a moral victory some people might say. Building on that momentum, they surprisingly won games against Czechoslovakia, Norway, Romania, and West Germany in the coming days, earning a game against the mighty Soviets in the semifinals, with the winner advancing to the gold medal game.

The American college kids vs. the Soviet professionals. Democracy vs Communism. Good vs. Evil. David vs. Goliath.

In the movie “Miracle” based on the American hockey team, Coach Herb Brooks, portrayed by Kurt Russell, says this in his pregame talk with his team in the locker room.

“Great moments...are born from great opportunity. And that’s what you have here tonight, boys. That’s what you’ve earned here tonight. One game. If we play ‘em ten times, they might win nine. But not this game. Not tonight. Tonight, we are the greatest hockey team in the world. You were born to be hockey players—every one of you. And you were meant to be here tonight. This is your time.”

And with that, they skate onto the ice in a packed arena of American fans waving flags and chanting USA, with a country glued to their TV sets, hoping for a miracle.

The Soviets score an early goal. It would have been easy to get discouraged. Yet American Buzz Schneider ties it with a long slap shot. The Soviets answer right back. 2-1. With one second left in the first period, American Mark Johnson ties it with a rebound off the Soviet goalie. Could it be?

The Soviets dominated play in the second period, with most of the action at the American end, with goalie Jim Craig showing splendid play in turning away a barrage of Soviet shots. The Soviets only score one goal and lead 3-2 going into the final period.

Early in the third period, Mark Johnson scores again, and then, with 10 minutes left, captain Mike Eruzione fires a slap shot from the slot past the Soviet goalie for a 4-3 American lead. The arena is going berserk. 10 minutes from arguably the greatest upset in sports history.

I remember watching that game with my parents as a fifth grader. They were the longest 10 minutes of my life. The Soviets over and over attacked and assaulted with all their skill and precision and professionalism. They nearly scored. Then they nearly scored again. And again. They were relentless; we were resilient. Goalie Jim Craig was in the zone, defending the net with a reckless abandon. He would have 39 saves to only 16 shots for the Americans.

The minutes ticked away. The seconds ticked away. And with five seconds to play, ABC announcer Al Michaels made one the most famous and beloved lines in broadcast history: "Do you believe in miracles? Yes!"

And with that, the American players erupted onto the ice in as raw and pure a display of unbridled joy as you will ever see. The joy and hugs spilled over into the stands and into the streets, where horns honked all over the country, where spontaneous singing of the national anthem sprung up in living rooms and restaurants and street corners.

It was a miracle on ice. It was a moment America needed.



That team, that moment, that miracle, that gold medal they won, not only brought smiles and tears and joy to millions of Americans, but it brought unity and pride to a struggling country.

America circa 1980, of course, isn't the only country throughout history in need of hope, confidence, and optimism during a difficult season. And Americans as individuals also are not the only people in need of the same.

2,000 years ago, the Jewish people, and the once flourishing nation of Israel, were dispirited and desperate. As a people, they had lost their nation, their independence, their ancestral home. They were oppressed and persecuted by the Roman Empire, whom they could not possibly overthrow. And yet they had been promised for thousands of years that God would send them a messiah, a savior, who would surely restore their dignity and pride in conquering the nations and empires that had so long dominated and diminished them. They would have their miracle in the middle east, and they would establish their victorious dynasty, led by their messiah.

The Jewish people expected and sought in their messiah a strong political leader—a mighty man, a warrior, who could project and advance power to overthrow governments and reshape the political and military landscape to their particular advantage. He would lead Israel to a gold medal.

God, though, didn't send them a Soviet-style, professional, warrior messiah for their narrow political or patriotic purposes. What He sent, on the surface, looked much more like an undersized amateur hockey player facing an overmatched opponent. God often sends us what we need in unexpected ways that don't fit our ideas.

Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe to be the Son of God and The Messiah, didn't look the part and didn't seem to fit the apparent plan. He was born into a poor family in an obscure town, without power or prestige. Though fully God and fully man, He seemed to hold back His power. He talked a lot about service, sacrifice, and forgiveness, about mercy, justice, and grace. He was hungry and tempted, abandoned and tortured. He hung out with all types of people, especially the downtrodden and neglected. His message and love extended beyond borders and nationality and patriotism. What kind of a Messiah is that?

Yet He lived a perfect life. Not a single sin. He lived in perfect obedience to God, whose will He perfectly fulfilled, even to His death.

He came to earth, from the majesty of heaven, because of His unfathomable love for us, to tell us and show us more clearly how much God loves us, what our purpose in life is, and how He wants us to live. More than saying and showing that, He came to tell us that we are cut off from God because of our inherited sin nature and sinful actions, but that He is here to rescue us and restore our relationship with God through His sacrifice. He came to die in our places, to take the punishment for us, to give us His perfect record, so that we are reconciled to God, at peace with Him now and in His blissful presence forever in the future.

It is this sacrifice, His death on a cross, that Christians especially remember around Holy Week.

Yet His death is not the end of the story; it is a participial phrase not a paragraph, a prelude, an opening chapter, the first inning. For his disciples and followers at the time, however, it was a staggering defeat. Their leader—gone. Killed. Darkness. Grief. Fear. Confusion. Depression. Where do they turn?



Where do you and I turn in the struggles and stresses we encounter? How do we respond to being cut by a team, dropped by a girl, or rejected by a college? In the chaos, anxiety, and uncertainty of adolescence, where do you look for clarity and comfort? Where do you find strength and courage amidst fears and tragedies? Where do you find meaning, identity, and hope?

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It's common to look for these in ourselves, in the people around us, and in our institutions like a nation or government. We are encouraged to be independent, self-reliant, hard working, solving and fixing our own problems. That's good to an extent. We build institutions that support our needs and goals, and we develop great pride and patriotism in them. National pride and patriotism can be good and appropriate, to an extent. Our institutions can sometimes solve big problems and achieve big goals.

Yet we ourselves and our institutions and our leaders cannot ultimately give us what we most deeply need. We can't do it ourselves. Ultimate joy and fulfillment elude us. The happiness from a victorious game gives way to a future loss. Gold medals tarnish. The momentary unity of a nation fractures. Governments are flawed, and they too fracture. The same goes for personal relationships. We fail. We fall. Things break. We break. We are disillusioned. We get sick. We get old. We die. Life is an overwhelming opponent with a depressing narrative.

Yet the pattern can be broken, though not by us. We can be transformed.

Christians not only remember the death of Jesus, but they celebrate Easter, when Jesus rose from the dead three days later. He conquered death. He promises us resurrection as well. He gives us eternal life. Decay and death are undone...miraculous transformation.

And this changes everything.



Coach Herb Brooks gave his team a powerful and inspiring pregame talk that was beautifully suited for the moment.

Jesus gives us a talk that is perfectly suited for every moment. For every person.

Jesus says let me carry your burdens. Let me fortify you for those situations that seem insurmountable, for those teams and times that scare you, for those beliefs you aren't good enough or worthy enough. Let me free you up from your fears and from your failures. Let me forgive your guilt and shame. Let me give you confidence by trusting in me—in my promises, my power, and in my love. Let me show you a purpose for your life...and a way to live.

Let me give you peace—the peace that comes in not having to perform for me or others or the world, not from scoring goals or winning gold medals or building resumes or wealth. Let me give you hope—a future with me. Let me give you a new heart—one with compassion and contentment no matter the circumstances. Let me change you...transform you...do a miracle with you. And let me give you joy—the joy that comes in relationship with me.

I have never seen as much deep, authentic joy as I saw that February night in 1980 among those college American hockey players. That joy, though, is just a foretaste of the ultimate joy that Jesus can give us.

As much as I enjoyed the Miracle on Ice in Lake Placid, the Miracle in the Tomb is infinitely more powerful and important. For that miracle transforms us...now and forever.

Do you believe in miracles?

I encourage you to contemplate the miracle from that first Easter morning and the love and grace that God gifts to us, especially through His Son, Jesus Christ, who can work miracles in each of us.

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