

✧ *In the Name of Jesus* ✧

See if you can figure out what all these things have in common: the budding of maple trees, a cluster of crocus blooms, the appearance of pelicans and coots on Lake Pepin along with the first grain barge heading downstream, and the rumble of motorcycles. Did you put it together? To me these are all signs of spring. The weather is warming. Outside activities are increasing. I suspect things like this give you a special joy. But are you sure it's just joy, or is it something else that gets underneath joy and lifts it up, something that begins with the letter H?

Yes, it's an H word that I want to discuss with you this morning. Let me give you a longer hint at it. I try to watch at least one newscast daily. You can see the same pattern in every newscast. The news stories are consistently negative for most of the show, but each newscast ends with some kind of positive story. What's that about? Bad news is more interesting than good news. But if every newscast were only bad all the time, lots of people would tune out. The newscasters seem to feel strongly about giving people at least a little bit of positive. Why? It has to do with that H word.

Tie all this in with COVID-19. The bad news has been so heavy lately that there's a noticeable shift in the newscasts, a palpable hunger for anything positive. That's the H word showing itself. "Is the death rate dropping? Are the drug therapies working? Do people with

antibodies have immunity from catching the virus again? How soon till we can get vaccinated?" What are all these questions driving at? "How soon until it's safe enough to get back to our normal way of life?" We keep craning our necks for positive signs? What is that? What is the H word I've been trying to get you to say? Okay, okay, I can hear some of you shouting it at the screen. The H word is hope.

Think about how important hope is. If you have hope, you work at making things better. How many people have you heard proclaim, "I never give up!" Only those with hope don't give up. Hope is one of your main reasons for social distancing: you hope to help stop the spread of this virus. Hope is driving our scientists to search for ways to treat this virus.

So what is it that gets you to return to hope when you're down? Some of you love sports or gardening or fishing or cooking or hunting or puzzles or another kind of competition. You keep watching your team, or you keep trying again yourself, hoping to win. And every so often you or your team do win—just often enough to keep you coming back. You've gotten a taste of hope, and you want more.

But is hope enough? What about when people lose hope? If you don't have hope, you have no reason to keep going, no energy to keep trying. Every decade your health gets a little worse. Your energy gets a little less. Your body moves a little slower. The older you are, the more likely

you are to have a severe case of COVID-19. It's out there, getting closer. No, not the virus. Death. It's coming for me and my loved ones, for you and your loved ones. How can we maintain hope in the face of our destiny? Is all you've got some earthly ways of distracting yourself from the inevitable? Are you that good at practicing denial? You know, watch a wedding—there are few joys in life better than someone who loves you and who lets you love them, and we love it when someone else gets married and has a chance at happiness. So a wedding is a hope-filled distraction from the disappointments of life. Or maybe you look for videos of babies, even zoo babies, or puppy videos or kittycat videos, because, you know, with all their cuteness, they remind you that life goes on. But then the reality part of you whispers, “Yeah, someday life is going to go on without me.” Where can we get some hope, hope that won't fade, even in the face of death?

Imagine the apostle Peter stepping forward: “I'll show you a reason to hope that never fades. Believe me, I have tasted despair. I was planning on being Jesus' #1 disciple. But then I denied I knew him. And then he died. Why didn't I just say, ‘Yes, I know him. He's my master, my Lord?’ Maybe my truthfulness would not have prevented his death. Maybe they would have crucified me too. But that would have been better than to have denied knowing the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16). Has any of you known despair as deep as mine? But then I saw Jesus alive. And he forgave me. Show me a better

reason to hope than that our Lord has promised to forgive our sins and raise us from the dead.” **PRAISE GOD FOR A LIVING HOPE.**

Here's how Peter actually said it: *3Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy ...*” We need God's mercy. We keep doing the opposite of what he wants. God gave us our mouths so we could praise him for his goodness and so we could build others up. But how easy it is to tear others down or to use God's name just to express strong emotion. Maybe you've noticed how easy it is to get distracted from giving your full attention to God's Word now that you're watching worship through a screen instead of being here in person where others would shush you for conversing during church. It's hard to put God first. We need his mercy.

But that's just it. In Christ we have God's mercy. *3“In his great mercy he has given us new birth...”* Everyone you meet has been born once, but we believers have a second birthday, the day the Holy Spirit moved us to believe in Jesus as Savior. We are now part of God's family.

*3“In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”* Regular hope can be a good thing. There are at least 22 million Americans hoping to get back to work soon. I don't want to diminish the value of regular hope for this life. But regular hope has its limits. King Solomon put it this way: *“When a wicked man dies, his hope*

*perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing*” (Proverbs 11:7).

There’s a better hope than regular hope. Peter calls it living hope. A living hope has no limit. A living hope looks beyond death. It says, “Because Jesus is alive, I’m going to live again. My grave will cause my loved ones a heap of grief, and I’m not real excited about dying either. But I will survive death. At first my soul will live on a while without my body. But Jesus will raise my body from death. Death does not destroy my hope. It can’t. Jesus rose. I have a living hope because I have a living Savior.”

When you say, “I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow,” that’s different from saying, “I hope Jesus takes me to heaven someday.” Hoping in Jesus is actually confidence. The only reason we call it hope is that we don’t have heaven in our hot little hands yet.

*3In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope ... 4and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you...* I hope you did or will inherit something from your parents. Why did your parents write you into their will? Because they love you. They wanted to give you what they couldn’t take with them. | God wrote you into his will because he loves you. He wanted to give you what you can’t get unless he takes you to be with him. God’s inheritance can never perish, spoil or fade. If you inherit a car, the car can rust or wear out. Inheritance gone. Many people lose their inheritance because con artists

convince parents to buy a dream. But the inheritance God wants to give you remains un-perished by death, unspoiled by evil, un-faded by time.

How? Because it’s “*kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power.*” Satan can’t have your inheritance and will do anything to keep you from getting it. But God keeps beating Satan back. The apostle Paul wrote, “*The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom*” (2 Timothy 4:18). That’s what a living hope sounds like!

*... through faith [you] are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.* “Wait. Wasn’t salvation already revealed?” Yes, in what Jesus accomplished on the cross for us. But there’s so much more to heaven than we know. A living hope keeps us looking forward to what God is ready to reveal to us in the last time.

*6In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kind of trials.* Apparently Peter was writing to Christians who were undergoing persecution for claiming Jesus as Savior. They were maintaining their joy even in the midst of persecution. They could tell their persecutors, “You will bring me pain and suffering for longer than I want to endure it, but after I die, my Savior has a wonderful life waiting for me, me who sinned against him. My hope is that when I am gone, the Holy Spirit will bring you to

faith in Jesus too. I would be delighted to spend eternity with you, my persecutor.” That’s what a living hope sounds like!

*7*These trials and griefs have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine. Gold is precious. I wish you had a sack full. But gold doesn’t usually come out of the ground pure. So you’ve got to put it into a hot fire. “Doesn’t the fire hurt the gold? If you put your finger in fire, it will hurt your finger.” Fire is how you make gold better, more precious, more pure. The parts that aren’t pure, the impurities, melt off in the fire. | Our faith is even more precious than gold, but our faith is rarely pure. It’s got impurities, sinful habits, nasty attitudes. When God sends trouble, it’s like putting our faith in the fire. Suffering often strips sinful habits or nasty attitudes away. When the suffering is gone, we end up with a faith which holds tighter to Christ and looser to this world.

God sends troubles so that your faith *7*“may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Praise, glory, and honor for whom? The wording here suggests that God will praise, glorify, and honor us when Jesus Christ is revealed. We won’t claim to deserve any of that praise, glory, and honor. We will certainly praise, glorify, and honor God for keeping us connected to Jesus by faith. But that dinner on the Final Day is going to be given so that God can share his glory with us.

No wonder *8*“*Though you have not seen him, you love him.*” That’s how a living hope responds to God’s mercy. “...and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” This is the kind of joy that the Holy Spirit works in God’s people through repeated and frequent contact with God’s Word so that even on our worst days, we still have that joy undergirding our attitude. I’m not saying it’s perfect. On our worst days, our joy can be hard to find. But then a fellow Christian reminds us of God’s good promises, and all of a sudden, the joy starts coming back. What was the problem? We momentarily forgot about all God does for us. We just stopped thinking about our living hope and what Jesus’ resurrection means for our lives. But now it’s back, *9*“*for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*” You have it in your hand right now by virtue of God’s promises, which he always keeps.

The world says, “You just gotta find a reason to have hope.” We believers respond: “Earthly hope has value, but My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name. On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.” We look forward to something we have not seen, something that was promised to us by someone we have not met. The world calls this foolishness. We call it a living hope. And we praise God for it.