

About 3 months ago, my cousin Eric called me from Washington D.C. to tell me his father had died. He also told me that he recently had been diagnosed as having multiple myeloma or bone marrow cancer. I hadn't seen Eric or talked with him in over 30 years. From our conversation, it became apparent to me that he wasn't a member of any church, and that he was really hurting. I told him that I would catch a flight out of Flint to Washington National, and be there for the funeral. He was kind of shocked that I would do that. My friends, that phone call was like an alarm clock from God saying, "This man needs to know his Savior, this man needs hope". When I got to Washington, my cousin took me on a whirlwind tour of Washington. We went to see the Vietnam War Memorial, the Pentagon Memorial from 9-11, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Air Force Memorial. My cousin may have lost a parent, but he still wanted me to experience Washington. What is interesting is when we visited these Memorials, it led me into a natural witnessing of my faith to him. War Memorials remind us of someone or a group of people who have given up their lives so that our country can remain free. As a result, we never want to forget what these individuals have done for their country. As soldiers give up their lives for us on the battlefield, so Jesus Christ gave up his life for us on the battlefield of the cross. Now we have freedom from sin, eternal death, and the devil. While in Washington, I actually shared the salvation plan with my cousin, and encouraged him to join a Lutheran church in his neighborhood. I was able to give him real hope for the future. Today I am standing in front of a very special group of people whose lives are filled with hope. We live each day with the hope of future glory that Jesus has promised us when he said, "I am going to prepare a place for you." We live with the hope that in every tomorrow we will see and experience more of God's unfailing love and mercy. We live with the hope that our risen and ascended Lord and Savior has the power to take problems in our lives and turn them into blessings.

Today God's Word encourages us to be prepared to give an answer, the reason for the hope that is within us. Just think, this could be the week the Lord gives you the opportunity to share this hope with someone who does not have this hope. This could be one of the best weeks of your life.

Opportunities will come to us. Peter encourages us to always be prepared. If the conviction is in our hearts, that Christ is Lord, it will result in opportunities to confess with our lips. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The motto of the US Coast Guard is "Semper Paratus" which means "Always Prepared." If a fishing boat overturns in the stormy seas off the coast of Alaska, the Coast Guard is ready to drop people into icy waters to attach a life line to them and pull them into the helicopter. People we interact with every day are perishing without Jesus. Someone needs to bring them the hope of being rescued. God has not chosen angels for this job. He has chosen people like you and me.

Most of us here this morning would not have the skills to rescue people who are caught in a rip tide off Santa Monica Beach, but all of us are equipped to share the hope that we have in Jesus, the hope of eternal life. You have all the rescue equipment you need with the simple words of Jesus, "God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." You can talk about the problems in our world and the great problem of sin or falling short of God's glory. You can talk about how God gave his Son, how Jesus was born, and how he took our sin upon himself, and what it means that he died and rose for us. You can talk about not perishing in hell forever, but having everlasting life with the Lord. As we sing in the hymn, "If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul, You can tell the love of Jesus. You can say he died for all."

Notice it says that we are to do this with gentleness and respect. The guidelines for sharing what you believe are very simple. "Speak the truth in love." Talk to people, but don't talk down to them as if you are superior. I once saw these words in a church bulletin, "I am a nobody, telling everybody about somebody that can save anybody." Sometimes we feel like real nobodies. It hardly seems possible that our lives can give a good testimony to what we believe, especially when we are going through hard times and low moments. Then it is good to remember Job. From the lowest time in his life when he poured out his anger against God and wanted to die, he suddenly speaks the amazing words, "I know that my Redeemer lives." What about the Horation Spafford, the man who wrote the hymn "It is well with my soul". He lost his business in the Chicago fire, and his children died when a ship in which they were traveling sunk off the coast of England. When the ship he was traveling passed over the spot where many had drowned including his children, he looked up at the stars and thought of the Father's love for him that had not changed. In the dark hour of grief he was able to write of his great hope, "It is well with my soul..." It is in the darkest night that the candle shines brightest. Opportunities will suddenly come to you when you least expect them, whether facing hard times or good times.

What gives us courage to share the reason for our hope? It is the blessings we have in Christ that fill our lives and lead us to overflow in confessing what we have with others. Listen to how Peter reminds us of how blessed we are and how much we have to offer people. "For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." We may have to suffer for doing good. That suffering does not atone for our sins or make us worthy of God's love. Jesus made us worthy by his death and suffering. He died, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous. Oh, dear friends, don't you love these words. Jesus died once for all. Some people believe that after you die, you need to suffer for you sin in a place called purgatory before the Lord finally takes you to the place he has prepared for you. No, it does not say Jesus suffered once for some or once for a partial payment. It says clearly he suffered once for all.

How do I know this payment is mine? I see my name written next to it because it says, "he died, the righteous for the unrighteous." There is no doubt when we look at how we behaved this past week or some of the words that came from our lips or thoughts in our hearts that we are among those who are called "Unrighteous." That gives us confidence to look at what Jesus did and say that's mine. He died for the unrighteous and that is me!

Jesus was put to death in the body, but raised by the Spirit. Early on Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit, and made a trip to hell, where he preached his victory speech to the souls in hell. What a sad sermon those souls in hell heard, knowing it was too late for them now. But its not too late for our friends and relatives. Just as Jesus triumphantly proclaimed or preached about his victory to the spirits in prison, we have the royal privilege of announcing to people that the work Jesus did of rescuing people is complete. The proof of that lies in his resurrection from the dead.

And you know when we think about our baptism, we are further motivated to share our hope with others. What can a few dribbles of water do? If guests arrive unexpectedly at suppertime, you can stretch the soup with a few dribbles of water. A few dribbles of water will moisten the lips of someone dying of thirst, but probably wouldn't be enough to save the individual. A few dribbles of water certainly wouldn't be sufficient to put out a house fire. What can a few dribbles of water do? Not much it seems Yet King Louis IX of France once said: "The three handfuls of water with which I was once baptized are more precious to me than the crown of royalty which I now wear upon my head."

The first thing we need to understand about baptism is that it is not play-acting. When

political hopefuls in Japan campaign for office, they wear white gloves. They do this to show that their politics are pure and above reproach. Of course the wearing of white gloves doesn't actually make these politicians pure or above reproach; it's just a symbol, a picture these politicians want to project. Baptism is not like that. The application of water is not just a picture of what Jesus' blood has done to cleanse our hearts from all sin. Something really happens when the water of baptism is applied, more than the removal of dirt or breakfast crumbs that might still cling to the one being baptized, says Peter. The waters of baptism literally save us just as the waters of the flood literally saved Noah and his family when it lifted the ark high above ground that was being ripped apart as the waters from the deep erupted from beneath the earth's surface. While the waters of the flood saved Noah from a world gone bad, from what exactly do the waters of baptism save us? Well, Peter says that baptism gives us the "pledge of a good conscience toward God". In other words, baptism saves us from a guilty conscience. Baptism, says Peter, dissolves a guilty conscience. How can a few dribbles of water do this? It does this because in baptism God gives us the forgiveness of sins. Oh, we're not earning forgiveness by being baptized. Jesus earned that forgiveness through his perfect life, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. Through baptism, however, we receive credit for Jesus' work. That's why Peter says that baptism saves us "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21b).

Perhaps we can think of it like this. What can you do with week-old cookies that aren't soft and chewy anymore? You can put them in a tin with a piece of bread. The dry cookies will absorb the moisture from the bread and become soft and chewy again while the bread itself will become hard. Something like that happened to us with the water of baptism. We, who were hardened by sin – the sin of groaning when Mom and Dad said it was time to get ready for church; the sin of letting our mind wander during the Scripture readings; the sin of pride when we secretly hoped someone would learn about the big offering we've planned to give today. These sins have hardened and dried us out so that we're no longer the delightful people God wants us to be. But in the waters of baptism we "absorbed" the righteousness that belongs to Jesus. He in turn became hard and was tossed aside by his heavenly Father at the cross for our sins.

Having been given credit for Jesus' righteousness we are now more delightful to God than a tin full of chewy chocolate chip cookies. God actually calls us his children!

The blessings of baptism remain ours forever because God made a vow of allegiance to us at the font and he never goes back on his promises. But should we continue to run away from God in impenitent living or unbelief, we will not enjoy the benefits of having been adopted into God's family. We will instead suffer. Not just here but eternally and the fault would be our own. That of course isn't what God wants for us. That's why he gave us baptism – a visible reminder of his love, like the engagement ring a guy gives the girl he has promised to marry. So when you are feeling unloved. When you are unsure of your status with God because of your sins, think of your baptism. Don't think about how strong your faith is or what you've done for God lately. You won't find any comfort there, just feelings of guilt for not having done enough. Baptism, on the other hand, frees us from a guilty conscience because it's a vow of allegiance, God's allegiance and promise of forgiveness. It's no wonder that Martin Luther said that on Judgment Day he wanted to stand before God dressed in his baptismal gown.

What can a few dribbles of water do? If these dribbles of water are connected with God's promise in baptism, they do a lot! They offer the forgiveness of sins. They save us from the devil. They give us eternal life. Man, are we Christians blessed people. Joy-filled. Positive. Upbeat. So then, look around. Share the Reason of the Hope you have!