



## \*“HD: GOD’S INCREDIBLE LOVE”

**Biblical Text: John 3:1-17**

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We all need it. We can't live without it. \***“It” is hope!** And I admit it “right up front.” I am sold on hope. I am an optimist. I see in every failure, another chance. In every dead end, a turnaround opportunity. Like Nellie Forburch sang in South Pacific:  
\**“I'm stuck like a dope with a thing called hope and I can't get it out of my heart!”*<sup>1</sup>

**Those words were written for me. And they were written for you too, if you believe the Good News.** \**“I know the plans I have for you,”* says the Lord, *“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”* (Jeremiah 29:11)<sup>2</sup>

\*But down deep inside we don't trust that promise. So, we turn to quick-fix solutions, political promises that will never be kept, someone selling 5 easy steps to the perfect life, marriage, kids, or to a thirty-year-old body, or a few hours of forgetting it all, whatever. The problem is - after it all - life is still out there waiting.

**So, how do we find hope that lasts? Only one place I know. Believe the Good News.**

And my first version of the Good News (*long before I met Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*) came from my mother. She was a believer in Norman Vincent Peale's \**“power of positive thinking.”* Her children weren't ever sure whether her sunny disposition came from that or from the \*coffee she consumed from morning to night.

But she taught me this \**“hope is a choice we make.”* God's people have always known this. The Psalmist said, even in exile, darkness and despair. \**“Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God! For I shall yet praise Him, my Lord and my God!”*<sup>3</sup> **Hope is a choice we make.**

We live in an age of cynicism and hopelessness. And the 24-hour news cycle serves to reinforce that message. And the brokenness in the world is real. Since Alyssa Milano started the \*#MeToo hashtag two weeks ago, thousands of women have told stories of harassment and abuse. More than 12 million Facebook replies came the first day and a million tweets. And they're still coming.

\*We can't hide from how broken things are. Amid this outpouring, some have said, *“What can we do? That's just how the world is.”* **But it doesn't have to be!**  
In a scene from the 1986 film, \**“The Mission,”* the truth is told.

<sup>1</sup> From "South Pacific" words and music by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, Copyright © 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 29:11, Holy Bible: New International Version. Copyright ©1973- 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 42:5, Holy Bible: King James Version. The KJV is in the public domain in the United States of America.

The Spanish ambassador says, *"We must work in the world, your eminence. The world is thus."* And the bishop replies, *"No, Señor Hontar. Thus have we made the world."*

**Thus have we made the world.** But we are not powerless. We can choose a different path. \*I love the wisdom of Dr. Christy Sim, an abuse advocate, *"The hard work of recovery is to empower women to claim their strength and their own hope."*

And here's our Good News. \***Our hope is in the Lord our God.** Say that with me. Our culture needs people, men and women, to claim strength and hope, and choose a different future. And you, church, you are **Hope Dealers**. Psalm 33:22 says: *"May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you."*<sup>4</sup>

The Bible is full of reasons to hope, for those who believe. Romans 8 is full of absolutes – unbreakable promise of God. Look at verse 35: *"What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"*<sup>5</sup> What do you think?

The answer **of course** is no. \**"<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."* In all things, you are more than a conqueror in Christ. Nothing, can separate us, nothing can separate you, from the love of God!

That is the source of our hope. \*We were born with the God-given capacity for love and hope, but over the years, we grow worn and weary. There are high points, births, weddings, homecoming parties, graduations, anniversaries. But they soon fade back into the daily news and the daily grind. And we settle. What an unkind word.

\*And, Nicodemus, who we meet in our text from John 3, tells our story. He had everything that would predict success, every chance, every reason to have hope. He was wealthy and influential. But there also was the daily grind of life, the Sanhedrin's uneasy alliance between Church and state. The *Pax Romana* came at a heavy cost to most of his people. And some days he felt the weight of the world on his shoulders.

And something was nagging at him, down inside, underneath the bravado, the quick *"How are you? I am fine"* conversations. Something was missing. And he couldn't shake the words of a young prophet from Galilee he overheard one day, *"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"* (Mark 8:36)<sup>6</sup>

\*So, he went to see Jesus by night, in secret, and in this morning's text we overhear his conversation with Jesus about the state of his soul.

<sup>4</sup> Op. Cit. Psalm 33:22. Holy Bible: New International Version.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Romans 8:28.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Mark 8:36.

Jesus said to him, \* ***“...I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”***<sup>7</sup> Born again, born anew, born spiritually - there are lots of ways to translate it. \* But the meaning is clear, Nicodemus needed something he didn't have. He needed what we all need - something that hadn't been his for a long time – a lightness of the spirit – a reason to hope from a source deeper than his own life.

And Jesus made it clear that the source comes only from God and not from us. (John 3:16) \* ***“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”***<sup>8</sup> And it's not just for us!

\* Somehow we have misread Jesus words, filtered through 500 years of reformation history - diluting the radical, grace-filled essential message of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Roger Williams, Martin Luther King. Somehow the gift of God's saving grace - his love for all the world - became a *conservative* message of personal salvation or a *liberal* re-pop of the message of salvation by our own good works.

But the Good News is infinitely more than either one. John 3:17. \* ***“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”***<sup>9</sup> God loved the world so much, and the people in it that he refused to give up on it and on us, even when we are ready to throw in the towel. And if we believe, we have hope! And more – we are **hope dealers**.

Kayla Wiltfong, one of our young adults, closed her amazing blog this week with the words of John Green: \* ***“The world may be broken, but hope is not crazy.”***<sup>10</sup> She's right. Hope is not crazy. Not when God is involved, the same God who loves the world. In fact, placing our hope and trust in God is the pathway out of brokenness.

Psalm 33:22: ***“May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, as we put our hope in you.”***<sup>11</sup>

All around, people are struggling. **But, our hope is in the Lord our God.**

Bad things happen, they do. **Still, our hope is in the Lord our God.**

But good things happen to if we notice them. **Our hope is in the Lord our God.**

And **in all things**, all things, God is at work. **Our hope is in the Lord our God.**

Today we choose to hope. **Because, our hope is in the Lord our God.**

**And God loves the world. We are hope dealers, and the world needs us. Amen.**

<sup>7</sup> John 3:3. New Revised Standard Version Bible, Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. John 3:16, New Revised Standard Version Bible.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. John 3:17, New Revised Standard Version Bible.

<sup>10</sup> John Green, Looking for Alaska, Copyright © 2005, New York: Dutton Books (a Penguin Publishing Group company.)

<sup>11</sup> Op. Cit. Psalm 33:22, Holy Bible, New International Version.