

[BLANK] [PRAYER] It is a joy to be with you here on this beautiful Summer day, a day when the very earth seems to shout out about the riches of God's glory. [FIELD] You may remember a few weeks ago when I showed you this photo of a field that I pass on the way to church. Back then, there were shoots of corn just a few inches high, struggling to grow. [FIELD 2] Now, this week, you can see strong, green stalks of corn shooting up, measured in feet, now, not inches. The earth is shouting out with joy for everything that God gives us.

[BLANK] I wish that we could do that in our own lives. I wish that every one of us could wake up in the morning, and open our eyes, and say, not, "Good God, it's morning!," but, instead, "Praise God! It's morning!" It's easier said than done, isn't it? We can look at our own troubles, our own aches and pains, and the troubles of a world that seems determined to destroy itself, and we can lose track of a way of life that saves us, a way of life that keeps us from being eaten alive by cares and concerns, a way of life that will always have purpose, and hope.

In the early days of Methodism, this kind of life was offered to people in what Methodists called "a saving faith." It was an appropriate idea for the times, and, much as we want to think that American progress has moved us past those days, it seems clear to me that most people's ideas of progress are an illusion, compared to the progress that God invites us towards in a saving faith. We have all sorts of technology, now, all sorts of information, all sorts of human comforts and conveniences, but what we see as a constant in the world is our own ability to deceive ourselves with our sense of progress.

Two hundred years after Methodists first called America to a saving faith, we still have wars, poverty, illness, hatred, ignorance, cruelty, injustice, and staggering addictions. Americans got good at putting our need for a saving faith aside for a more general, emotional, and intellectual approach to God, one that wouldn't interfere with our notions of progress that gave us a comfortable lifestyle, a comfortable story about how our lives would turn out, no matter who might suffer because of our notion of progress. We got good at thinking that salvation from God through faith in Jesus Christ was an empty phrase, just another piece of decoration in our American culture of progress.

Salvation from God, through faith in Jesus Christ, is not an empty phrase. It is the cornerstone of all human hope. A saving faith is the fertile field from which the riches of Christian hope must spring. And in our Methodist traditions, a saving faith is, indeed, about progress, but a progress that does not leave God's world behind for the sake of our selfish desires. In Methodism, a saving faith is God's invitation to a life in which we are measured not only by our faith, but by what fruit our faith produces, for the sake of God's kingdom. A saving faith is a faith that prepares us to invite the whole world into God's salvation story, to be healed by God's grace, and to be saved from the destruction of human will.

For the next several weeks, we will explore just how great a saving faith can be, through the eyes of early Christians who never knew Jesus when he walked on this earth. Like us, they had to come to a saving faith by trusting that God's story, revealed in the life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, could become their story, through the living presence of God's Holy Spirit. They were the first generation of Christians who saw the full picture of what God had revealed in Jesus Christ to the whole of God's creation, through a saving faith.

And what the letter to Ephesians reveals to us is that early Christians in that important city, and other places, had the riches of a saving faith in abundance. When we read earlier letters to early Christians, we see divisions, conflicts, and apostles like Paul trying to convince people of what the church was supposed to be and to become. Those earlier letters are like that first photo of the corn field near my house. There was growth, but it wasn't clear that this thing called Christianity would grow, or what it would look like. By the time of the Ephesians letter, the church is like that second photo - growing strong, and tall, not complete, yet, but clearly taking form, and becoming what it was meant to be.

A saving faith in Jesus Christ was working. Against all odds, a ragtag group of fishermen, carpenters, artists, and religious rebels had planted the riches of a saving faith across many nations, and faith had taken root. [WORDS] Today's reading from Ephesians describes what was already happening, not what might happen. People who have found a saving faith are already blessed. They are already destined to become something more through their faith. They are feeling deeply how their saving faith has already ransomed them from sin and death. Their hearts, already sealed by the Holy Spirit, are receiving a priceless deposit of their full, eternal inheritance from God, through faith in Jesus Christ.

These are riches beyond imagining, glorious peace in the middle of chaos and violence, a sense of purpose and hope that endures in a hopeless and pointless world, given something more precious in their hearts than life itself, something that transforms life, and that puts us at peace with everything that is beyond life.

[WALL STREET] Many years ago, my career brought me to a company that sold financial information to banks and brokerages. Our offices were at the very tip of Manhattan, just up the street from the New York Stock Exchange. If you've ever seen the movie "Wall Street," you've seen my old company's products at work. It was an exciting time to be there. Technology was changing how people made money, and there was lots and lots of money being made. Until things changed. [GRAPH]

On Friday, October 16th, 1987, all of a sudden, the technology that had driven up the value of stocks to new heights told investors to change course. By Monday, October, 19th, the American economy, and then the global economy, was in free fall. It was the steepest drop in American wealth since the Great Depression. That evening, just before the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange, I walked up the street towards the exchange. It was scary. The streets were completely empty, except for one poor man, who looked like he had seen a ghost. When I got to the exchange, it was in a complete panic. The riches had vanished. [BLANK]

I took a train home, prayed, and walked in the doorway of our little home. Christopher and June-Ann were there, ready for dinner. I gave them a hug, and a kiss -

and I knew then, forever, where riches really lie.

How rich is a saving faith? Far richer than what the world has bet on. The world bets on us fighting God every step of the way towards the grave. The world bets that we'll have the kind of faith that will leave plenty of room for us to compromise, to fudge it, to "heart" God, but not to really love the Lord our God with all of hearts, and with all of our mind, and all of our strength, and to love everyone, including our neighbors, as ourselves. The world bets on us not betting on a saving faith, a faith that knows deep in its bones the only one who can save us from sin and death, and refuses to let go of that faith. The world bets that the church will die, because people have given up on a saving faith. But saving faith hasn't given up on us. Ever. Jesus is ready for us, always, to have us receive the grace of saving faith, in God's Holy Spirit.

[GUIDE] In your bulletin, you'll find a study, prayer, and discussion guide to help you follow along with this sermon series on the letter to the Ephesians. I urge you to take it home, and to read it, and to read this letter in your Bible. We have free Bibles in the entryway if you need one. Pray the prayers. Discuss it with people in your family, in our faith group meetings, and before worship. [BLANK]

There are lots of ways to make progress in this world. There are lots of ways to find success in our lives. For your sake, for the sake of God's world, and for the sake of the riches that are available to us in God's kingdom, now and forever, I hope and pray that you will use these weeks ahead to consider how a saving faith can help you to change your life, and to change how we view progress and success in God's world. Your lives depend on a saving faith. Your families' lives depend on a saving faith. And, through God's grace, a saving faith may yet help to save God's world. God is not done with us, and will never be done with us, until we have had every chance to find and to use a saving faith. Amen.