

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Looking Up*, No.4

Always a Way

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Exodus 14:5-7; 15-28 (NIV)

⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" ⁶ So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. ⁷ He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them.

...

¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. ¹⁶ Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. ¹⁸ The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

¹⁹ Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, ²⁰ coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, ²² and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

²³ The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. ²⁴ During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. ²⁵ He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." ²⁷ Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. ²⁸ The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

In the practice of homiletics – the preparing and delivering of sermons – there are many forms, but two really have dominated through the years. One is more of a narrative approach, where you sort of let the point of the message unfold as you tell the story. The other is more direct; some have put it this way, "In a sermon, you tell them what you're going to tell them, you tell them, and then you tell them what you've told them."

I nearly always go with the first sort, the narrative. But today, for some reason, I'm going with the second. I'm just going to tell you that the main point of this morning's message can be boiled down to the old saying, "When God closes a door, He always opens a window."

If you remember anything I'll say today, remember and believe this: "When God closes a door, He always opens a window."

Now you *know* that phrase; you've *heard* it; you've very likely *thought* it or *said* it to encourage someone else, or maybe have even *claimed* the *truth* of it for *yourself* at one time or another.

But where did it come from? Have you ever wondered?

Some think it's from the Bible, but it isn't – at least not in so many words.

Years ago, someone did some research and found that there is only one sentence in the Bible that even *contains* both the words "window" and "door," and it's only in the King James version of Genesis 6:16, which says, "A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it."

That's the only sentence in scripture that includes both the words, "door" and "window," and it has nothing at all to do with our saying.

So where did it come from?

Here are four possibilities – see if you can guess:

Option 1 – Oscar Hammerstein, the Hammerstein half of Rogers and Hammerstein.

Option 2 – British King "Ethelred the Unready" who became King of England in 978 A.D. when he was 10 because of the murder of his half-brother, King Edward.

Option 3 – Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone.

Option 4 – Helen Keller, the blind and deaf inspirational American educator.

Do you have a guess as to which one originally said, "When God closes a door, He always opens a window?"

The answer is Option 5: all of the above.

Hammerstein inserted a version into *The Sound of Music*.

King Ethelred said it in Old English parlance.

Alexander Graham Bell said it almost word for word as we know it, except He left God out of it.

Helen Keller put it this way, she said: "When one door of happiness closes, another opens," and then she added, very perceptively, "but often we stare so long at the closed door that we do not see the door that has been opened for us."

And she's right, isn't she? The reason we're typically so slow to recognize the window that God has opened for us is because *we want the door!* We don't want to give up the door, so we're not really interested in the window, in another way, a different way.

In fact, often we only embrace the window when we have *absolutely no other alternative*.

That's part of what the fall did to us: it made it hard for us to want, or to accept, or even to see the open window that God offers, because *we want, and are still focused on, the door.*

And yet, God still provides a window. Our stubbornness doesn't change God's grace toward us.

In His mercy, God always offers His children a way forward. It may not be what we want or wish at the moment, but with God there is always a way.

That's what Israel, as a nation, had to learn. And if you think it's hard for just one person to learn that lesson, it's a super-hard lesson for a *whole nation* to learn.

And God knew that, so God had to do something *super-sized* in order to demonstrate it, to show Israel that they could trust Him even with life's closed doors.

And that super-sized lesson is what we see there in Exodus 14 – the miraculous parting of the sea. You could turn back there in your Bible if you'd like. Exodus 14.

What Israel faced here was a closed door – and one that was intentionally *closed by God Himself*.

Now, no matter what you might believe about God *causing* or *allowing* things to happen – no matter how you might parse those two concepts, there is no doubt that God *caused* this event to happen, because God Himself led His people precisely to this geographical point and place.

In their exit from Egypt, He did not lead them by the simplest and shortest route, which would have been along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and through the land of the Philistines.

Now it's true that that route would have been heavily guarded by Egyptian forces, and Israel was in no way ready to face that sort of military power.

But that's not the real reason God did not choose it.

God took them, chapter 13, verse 18 says, "*in a roundabout way*" that led them *precisely* and *intentionally* to an *unescapable* spot.

Just as God's battle plan for the capture of Jericho was ridiculous in human terms, so was this escape route from Egypt.

No doubt that, to at least some of the Israelites and certainly to Pharaoh who watched the twists and turns that Israel made in the wilderness there, the directions that Moses was getting from His divine GPS seemed completely senseless. It would be like you and me traveling from Wilmore to High Bridge by way of Winchester.

And so, it was as confusing and disheartening to the Hebrews as it was thrilling to Pharaoh, as they all watched the nation of Israel wander themselves right into a corner, with the sea in front of them and Egypt's armies behind them.

But it was all part of God's plan. Verse 3 there tells us that God told Moses, "*Camp here – and when you do, Pharaoh will think you're confused and trapped in the wilderness – but I have planned this to display my glory...*" (Ex. 14:2-4).

You see, God could have just as easily divinely intervened on that shorter, easier route along the Mediterranean Sea. He could have fought for them against this or that Egyptian outpost. He could have led them through the door that seemed most open.

But hey, if you're going to divinely intervene – then you might as well intervene as divinely and spectacularly as possible, huh?

On a 1-to-10 scale of impressiveness, why do something that's a 3 when you can do something that's a 12?

That's style, you see?

But it's not style without substance. Far be it from God to ever do that, especially when human lives are involved. This isn't mere showmanship here. God had a purpose for this.

By leading Israel to where He did, God had allowed an undue confidence to grow up in Pharaoh, such that when the Egyptians saw their escaped slaves and labor source backed up against the shore, they were smiling. They were laughing at how stupid the Israelites were and at how stupid the God of the Israelites was, you see, to put them in this indefensible, impossible position.

Egypt was filled with undue *confidence* because of how easy they presumed this recapture would be.

But God's positioning of His people also grew up an undue *concern* in the Israelites. They also realized the position they were in, and in verse 10 there you see the flashpoint that captures all the emotion of the moment.

Both Pharaoh and Israel know Israel is trapped; they're sitting ducks, which causes Pharaoh and his armies to laugh – and Israel to shriek!

Now, considering we're talking about looking up, it's interesting that verse 10 there says, "*Israel looked up.*"

The problem was that they didn't look far *enough* up. They only looked up as far as the horizon, where they saw Egypt's armies – the mightiest of the day with the latest in weaponry, the chariot – carrying archers with arrows pointed right at their chests.

So, they cried out to God and to Moses in verse 11 there, "*Why did you do this to us? You've led us to our deaths! It'd been better to live as slaves in Egypt than to die here in the wilderness!*" (paraphrase)

Now, as you and I see this, we might think, "Man, it's amazing how fast Israel always presumed the worst! They'd seen God perform all those plagues, and do all sorts of miraculous things; but still, they're convinced here that all is lost."

We think that, rather critically, about them.

But how often do we do that too?

You and I, we have all this history with God written down for us. We've experienced His faithfulness to us, His provision for us, evidence of His leading of our lives, miraculous things that He's done in days past.

Yet we run up against some situation that, granted, might look bad, and how often is our first thought, "God, why did you do this to me? Why did you let this happen to me? Why did you lead me here?"

The Hebrews aren't the only people who are stiff-necked when it comes to their willingness to be led and to take from the Lord what He gives and to trust Him for His best.

Because, here's the thing: God always has an answer to the question, "Why?"

God always has His reasons.

Now, He may not give it when we want Him to, and we may not understand it when He does – at least not right away. But God always has an answer.

Here at the seashore, the answer came fast.

God led Israel to this point;

God took the harder road out of Egypt;

God made Israel look confused in the eyes of their enemies;

God put the Israelites into a seemingly impossible position;

So that:

His power, His glory and His identity would be revealed and confirmed in such an overwhelming way that people all over the world would still be talking about this event thousands of years later – just as we’re doing today, you see?

This whole logically and militarily questionable thing: this was all on *purpose*. God brought about a situation that Pharaoh thought he would surely win, so that the world would see the glory of God – the weightiness, the significance, the power of the One who triumphed over the world’s most powerful leader (who thought he was God) and the world’s most powerful military force.

God did all this to definitively show that the God of Israel was *not* some insignificant, impotent, little, backwater, tribal deity.

No, God did this to show that He is the God

over all earthly “wanna-be” gods,

over all earthly people who think *they’re* gods, and over even those entities that people believed to be gods or to have power in and of themselves.

You see, don’t miss the fact that God used the *sea* – one of the most feared symbols of *chaos* in that day – to prove Himself, so as to say, “Even the great seas and the harm and turmoil they cause are no match for the goodness and rightness and order and power of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

God put weak-kneed Israel between the two most powerful forces on earth and completely overcame, such that this would become the bedrock event for Israel’s faith.

This is the event that Israel leaned on its whole existence, the climax of the deliverance that they would refer to over and over again in their festivals, their holy days, their stories passed from generation to generation.

This is the foundational event whereby they called themselves, “The people whose God led them through the sea.” It is the biggest, most significant divine happening on earth until the resurrection of Jesus.

And it all started out looking, from human eyes, like a jumbled, confused mess.

It was a firmly, hopelessly closed door.

But then God opened a window – as He always does when His people are following Him.

“When God closes a door, He always opens a window.”

For those who are following Him – for those who are looking up to Him for direction – there is always, always a way.

That’s what I felt the Lord would have me say today, and so now, I think we all would be wise to consider how our lives and what we’re feeling (the position we’re in) intersect with this text.

Even though you’ve been trying to follow the Lord, do you feel you’re stuck in a corner between forces more powerful than you?

Do you feel you’ve been led on a needlessly complicated path?

Are you unsure of how to deal with the hand you’ve been dealt?

If so, I invite you – God invites you – to look up, but all the way up – past the horizon and past all that seems conflicting and even hopeless to you. Look up to God, and take heart, take confidence. If He’s led you to where you are, He has a reason.

He has a window in mind to open for you at just the right time, a window that will bring Him glory in your life and in the world around.

But someone might say, “Well, here’s the thing: I know in my heart that God did not lead me to where I am. I led myself into this mess I’m in. Is there hope for me?”

Absolutely there is hope for you! Even if you’ve gotten where you are by your own decisions and mistakes, there is still hope – loads of hope, if you’ll look up to God, and if you’ll receive His forgiveness through His Son, Jesus, and if from this point on you’ll follow His direction and guidance.

See, here’s the thing, and this is an important qualification: We won’t experience God’s deliverance unless we’re doing God’s will – unless we’re following God’s way.

Israel followed God to a dead end, they thought, but He opened a window for them.

Egypt did not follow God, and what they thought was an open door was slammed closed upon them.

We have to follow God to receive His deliverance.

But we can start following Him even today. That’s how immense His mercy is.

He’ll save us from ourselves.

He’ll turn darkness to daylight.

He’ll work things together for good – for those who love Him and trust Him and follow Him.

For those who will seriously trust and follow God through trusting and following His Son, Jesus:

- there is no sea in your life that He cannot part – no amount of chaos that He cannot order,
- and there is no army – no opposing force – that cannot be defeated.

For those who will seriously trust and follow God through trusting and following Jesus, with every closed door there is an open window.

We’ve all been there at one time or another, staring at the closed door, looking for the open window.

If that's you today, will you look up to Him and trust Him for whatever it is He's up to – and for the open window in His time?
Prayer

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *He Leadeth Me*

Benediction

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