

Trapped!

Exodus 14:5-18

October 30, 2005

Free at last! Free at last!

Imagine yourself among that great band of Hebrews, marching out of Egypt alongside brothers and sisters, grandmothers and young children. Is this really happening? Is this really happening?

In such a short time, so much has changed. The tyrant king who never changes his mind, changed his mind and has let you go. You dare believe that a new life in a new home is possible. And the tedium, the indignity, the terror of the life of a slave is already beginning to fade from your memory. You are free!

You have seen such wonders, such wonderful and terrible things. Can it be that this God, this God of your ancestors, is real and really loves you? You are leaving behind the only life you have known, the only home you have known, but the future beckons! You are with those you love, and you are beginning to believe that God goes with you.

You have come many miles already, from the fertile fields of Goshen where your people have lived for four centuries to the edge of the desert and to the near shores of the Red Sea, the Sea of Reeds. You look back, you turn and look back from where you've come, and you see it ...

You see the glint of bronze in the fading sunlight. You hear the beating of the horses' hooves, faint but growing ever louder as Pharaoh's army -- yes, Pharaoh's army! -- grows ever nearer. How could you be so naive? How could you be so stupid? Did you really believe the peerless king of the peerless Egyptian empire would let you go?

How did you let Moses convince you to leave? You should have known it was too good to be true. Now you and your brothers and your sisters, your grandmothers and your children, will die in the desert! There is no place to go. There is nothing you can do -- the Red Sea on one side and Pharaoh's army closing in on the other. You are trapped.

You are trapped ... Do you know what that feels like?

Perhaps you are trapped by grief ... because something or someone has been taken from you. You can never get it back, you can never get him back, and yet you cannot let go, you cannot move on, you don't want to move on. It is impossible to live a life that is no more, and yet it seems equally impossible for you to live your life without him, and so you are trapped, stuck in a kind of in-between existence, living but not living.

Or maybe you are trapped by routine ... by the routine of work, or the routine your closest relationships have come to follow without variation. The routine isn't working, the routine is a rut, but you don't know any way out of the rut. It's always the same pattern, the same action and reaction, the same game, but change is utterly beyond you. It is too difficult. It is too risky. It would be too painful. You are trapped, but like the Israelite slaves, you find it easier to stay in Egypt than face the dangers of the desert and an enraged king.

Or maybe you are trapped by the past, whether your past has been full of joy or full of sorrow. You may be trapped by painful memories, by past injuries, by past mistakes. So you won't take any more chances, you have retreated into survival mode, part of you has died and will never be revived.

Or you may be trapped by good memories. A church, this church, may be trapped by good memories. Our church has had its up times and its down times, but mostly up times. In 150 years we have seen good times and hard times, but mostly good times, especially in recent years. We live with our good memories, but we cannot live on our good memories! Good memories bring warmth and comfort, but they also bring melancholy, because we cannot go back. We can never go back! The times are different, the people are different, the culture is different, our circumstances are different, our challenges are different, our needs are different, the world is different.

Good memories hold us fast. We are unready and unwilling to make something new, to undergo radical transformation, to become a new church, a new people of God. We are suspicious of change, we are afraid of change, we reject any change out of hand that seems to us to betray our good memories. And so we are trapped. We can't go back, we won't go forward, so we just stand still. But when the Red Sea is in front of you and Pharaoh is behind you, standing still is not a good thing!

The Red Sea was in front of them and Pharaoh was behind them. They were trapped.

No. They were not trapped! Finish the story! God brought the people of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea to safety on the other side, leading them forward on the next steps of their journey to the promised land. There are three words in this summary to which I want you to pay very close attention!

The first word is God. God brought them through. They were trapped, but God brought them to safety. There was nothing they could do, but much God could do, much that God did do. The descendants of Abraham -- then and still today after three millennia of telling the story -- know that God brought them out of Egypt, not Moses, not superior wisdom or strength or good fortune, but God. It is with God's help and God's help alone that they escape the clutches of Egypt. That doesn't mean they have nothing to do, but it does mean that the first and most important thing they have to do is trust God.

The second word is through. God brought them through the sea, not over it, not around it, but through it. God didn't provide an escape route or make the obstacles that stood in their way disappear. With God's help, they faced the threat, they walked forward into the unknown, they braved the peril, and they came through to the other side.

And the third word is forward. With God's help they went forward. They did not run away and they did not turn back. They did not turn back to fight the Egyptians, but went forward, always forward, in the direction of the promised land. On the other side of the Red Sea, the problems, the obstacles, the challenges are hardly over. There will be much more pain and anguish and loss for them -- some of it due to outside dangers, the desert itself and the peoples who live on the other side, but most of it of their own making. But on the other side of the Red Sea, with God's help, they are moving forward, and with God's help, they will one day reach the promised land.

They were not trapped ... and you are not trapped.

You are not trapped by grief. With God's help you can move forward, through the grief, not ignoring it, not denying it, not pretending it is any less potent, any less dispiriting than it is, but moving through it. With God's help you can embrace your new life. It is not your old life, but it is life! And you can embrace it with faith and with hope because God is there with you. You have a past and you have a future. Even death itself is an obstacle you may face with courage, because Jesus has already come through it to the other side!

You are not trapped by routine. With God's help, you can move forward, making choices, taking risks, enduring the pain, facing the threat, working through the conflict, and finding on the other side something new, something good. Don't give up! Don't resign yourself to things as they are! Don't die before you die! Believe that God can take you through a sea of troubles, a river of frustration, a desert of failure, to the promised land!

You are not trapped by the past. With God's help and with God's forgiveness, you can move forward into a life of new opportunities and genuine blessings. And with God's help, we can move forward as a church into a new future with courage and expectation. The promised land is ahead of us, not behind us. We don't know the way and the way is sometimes daunting, but we do know who to follow and we do know who goes with us. After 150 years, God is still speaking. After 150 years we still have places to go and things to do, new places to go, new things to do, new people to welcome into our family, new people with whom to share our common work for the sake of the kingdom.

Before the descendants of Abraham left Egypt and crossed through the Red Sea, they had lived as foreigners in Egypt for 430 years. That's a long time! And after a long time, it is hard to change your ways. It is hard to change your expectations, to hope for anything different, anything new.

As we grow older, as people and as a church, it is hard for us to change our ways, hard for us to expect anything different, hard for us to welcome anything new. But to stand still is to die. We must go forward, and with God's help, we will!