

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, September 14, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"GOD PROVIDES THE WAY"

Exodus 14:19-31

Today I am preaching on the passage from Exodus 14 of the Hebrews leaving Egypt and passing through the Red Sea on dry ground to freedom. This Scripture is also being taught in our Sunday school classes today. That reminds me of the Jewish boy who came home from Sabbath School and was asked by his mother what he had learned. "Oh," he said, "we learned about Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt and being chased by the Egyptian army. When they got to the Red Sea they were cut off so Moses got on his cell phone and ordered the Israeli air force to bomb the Egyptian army. Then the Israeli army built a pontoon bridge for the people to walk over to freedom." "My goodness," said his shocked mother, "is that what they told you?" "Oh no," said the boy, "but if I told it to you the way they told it to us, you'd never believe it."

Well, our students won't hear that version of the story today. They will hear it as the Bible tells it. For truthfully the Bible story is more wonderful than anything we could come up with. And for Jewish people, this is the greatest event in the Bible. It was the mighty act of God which established them as a nation and confirmed God's presence, God's power and God's leading in their midst. For Christians too, it is one of the great events of the Bible, though the greatest event is now the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet this event still speaks powerfully to us. It reminds us that God provides the way.

Now recall the background to the story. After the last plague Pharaoh practically begged Moses to take the Hebrews out of Egypt. But once the two million Hebrews began leaving, Pharaoh had second thoughts. How would he replace all this slave labour? He sent chariots and horsemen after them. By now the Hebrews had reached the edge of the Red Sea where Moses had ordered them to camp. But in the distance they saw the Egyptians approaching, and panic set in - people rushing madly about, clutching their children and possessions; Moses yelling at the top of his lungs, trying to make himself heard, arguing with those who questioned his sanity. The Red Sea was in front of them and behind them was the Egyptian army. Humanly speaking they were trapped. There was no way forward and no way back. There was no way.

We've all been in situations like that, trapped between a rock and a hard

place. There is no way ahead and no way back. We just don't know what to do. In fact, there are people in that situation right now; they may not be life and death situations, but they are still very real. A senior says, "I don't know what to do. Should I stay in my house, or sell and move into a senior's condo. When is the right time?" A pregnant teenager says, "Should I keep my child, have an abortion, or give the child up for adoption?" A business consultant says, "Should I move to another province and take that higher-paying job, or should I stay here where my children are settled in good schools?" An executive wonders, "Should we lay off 200 employees to turn the company around now or can we hold on to them and weather the recession?" There are several issues in my own life and even here in the life of our church where, quite frankly, I'm not sure of the way forward and I continue to pray about them.

Being trapped with no way out is the human situation in the deepest sense. This is the how the Bible pictures humankind as a result of the fall. We are trapped by the power of sin which leads to eternal separation from God. Is there a way to freedom?

This dilemma of not knowing the way is especially troublesome in these sceptical times. In an age which tends to dismiss God's intervention and God's power and God's providence we're told that we have to find the way ourselves. We're told that there is no point in expecting someone greater than us to provide the way. We are alone in the universe, and it's all up to us. Then there's a way of thinking which isn't as radical but says, yes, we believe in God, but it's up to us to deal with our sin and make ourselves right with God. We have to find the way to save ourselves.

Another problem in our world today is that there are often too many ways, too many choices. And while we value choice, the number of ways is so confusing and overwhelming. We fear making the wrong choice, and that once we've started down one road, our options are closed and there is no way back. So we are paralysed, not sure which way to go, unable to make a choice. I remember when we were looking to buy a house, we saw so many, that we could hardly keep them all straight in our mind. Some of you have been there and done that. All the choices had disadvantages and advantages. And it's difficult to choose when you have so many choices.

It's the human dilemma. So often we feel trapped between the Red Sea on the one side and Pharaoh's army on the other. Humanly speaking, there is no way.

But remember what happened to the trapped Hebrews. The pillar of cloud

that was going before the Hebrews moved behind them, lighting up the night sky, blinding the Egyptians and preventing them from drawing close to the Hebrews. Then at God's command Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove back the sea by an east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. So the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground and walked to freedom, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. And when the Egyptians tried to follow their chariot wheels clogged in the mud. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea again, and the waters returned to normal depth, drowning the Egyptian chariots and their drivers. The Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and his servant Moses.

You see what happened. When there was no way out, God gave them the way out. When there was no way forward, God opened the way forward. When there was no way for the Hebrews, God provided the way. And God provides the way for us, too. God provides the way.

Indeed, the whole Bible story is that of God opening up the way for his people to follow. God didn't just lead the people to freedom and leave them on their own. Out in the wilderness on Sinai, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments as a covenant between God and the people. It was God's gift, God's way for living as a community under God, God's way for obedient living. You see, God does not leave us in the dark. We don't have to figure it all out on our own, for in Scripture God provides the way out of our moral confusion. Of course, we have to read the Bible, study it with others, listen to how the church reads and interprets Scripture. but if we do these things we can discern the way of God which leads to life - the way of love and justice and mercy and obedience and forgiveness. The young people have a phrase which I've heard several times in our home. "Build a bridge and get over it." That is the way God provides for us in the area of our relationships - the way of forgiveness and reconciliation - build a bridge and get over it.

And we don't have to figure out how to save ourselves. Why? Because in Jesus God has provided the way out of our fallen human situation. God has built a bridge from heaven to earth. God has given us his eternal Son, to become flesh, to live with us, to suffer death upon the Cross for our sins, to rise again from the dead to live forevermore, the returning Judge and King of all. In his love and mercy God has set us free from our bondage to sin's power. God has provided the way for us to avoid eternal death and gain eternal life and that way is Jesus Christ and trust in Him. Jesus said, "I am the way." Jesus is the way we come into a new and everlasting relationship with our Heavenly Father. God provides the way. God provides *the* way for us.

We can trust that in our confusing world, God is providing the way out of our personal and corporate dilemmas. If you're in that place right now, unsure of the way forward, you can be sure that God is opening the way for you, And in due course, God will open your eyes to see it, and empower you to walk in it.

In so many ways, God provides the way for us. There was church that was founded in the 1870's and in the 1920's, grew rapidly and undertook an ambitious building program. Then came the stock market crash of 1929 and the depression. The trustees saw no way to make the mortgage payments. The bank was about to foreclose. Then the women's group proposed that at 10 AM each day every member of the church stop and pray for God's help with the overwhelming debt, and that's what the majority of the congregation did. Now they undertook fund-raising events as well. But mostly they asked for God's help. And little by little the mortgage was paid, as money came from unexpected sources and events made more profit than they dreamed possible. When the mortgage was paid off they had a great service of praise and celebration. But they never credited themselves. It's was God's work, they said. God provided the way. All they did was raise their hands in prayer.

I read of a woman who struggled for years against anorexia. She finally cried out to God and was saved from this potentially deadly disease. How did it happen? She writes, "I believe, without a shadow of doubt that God led me to the right doctor at the right time. For within six months I had changed from wanting to die to wanting to live, and I had learned that there were things about me that were worth loving, in spite of what I did and what I looked like."

God provides the way. But there is one needful thing on our part. When we see God's way we must be willing to move forward in it by faith. It must have frightening for the Hebrews to move forward on the dry land, but once they did they found freedom and victory. Sometimes the hardest thing is to move forward on the way God has provided for us. But if we need the faith and the strength to move forward God will give us that too, if we ask him.

Two weeks ago Hurricane Gustav hit New Orleans. Before the storm people streamed northward out of the city. Did you notice how southbound lanes of the freeway were turned into northbound lanes? It made obvious sense once you saw it. Two million people took the roadway northward. Now some stayed and risked suffering loss and even death in the storm. But those who took the way provided, found freedom and safety.

God provides the way. God has provided and is providing the way for us. So put your trust in God and in His Son Jesus Christ. And when you see God's way open up before you, step forth into God's blessing and God's freedom.

That is what religion is all about. Gospel is very different, but religion says, "It's up to us to blaze a path to God, and let's hope that it's the right one."