

D.J. Reed
September 11, 2011

8:30 & 10:30 Worship Services
Sermon Series: "Gotta Go Through It"

Chilson Hills Church
Howell, MI

"Closed Doors"

Exodus 14:19-31

Several years ago, my friend, Matt and I decided to run in the Dallas marathon.

He gave me several pointers about how to hydrate, how to pace myself, how to run the hills, and how to stop.

That last one was a little confusing to me because I thought that the goal of a marathon was to keep going, to never stop and push through the exhaustion you inevitably feel.

But Matt said, "No, you're going to stop. It's going to happen. The question is will you be able to get going again."

And he told me about the time when he ran a marathon in the blistering, sticky heat of New Orleans. He was physically and mentally spent as he reached mile 21 where he stopped at the water station. He grabbed an orange cup took a swig and then mustered himself to begin again.

But he couldn't go. He wanted to go. But he couldn't tell his legs to start churning once again. So, he said that at that point he turned to one of the guys passing out water cups and he ordered the man to tell him to get going. And the man barked at him to

get moving and Matt says that he suddenly found the strength to get moving once again.

Learning how to stop is one of the most important lessons a long-distance runner can learn.

The passage we just read is the epic story of the most challenging "stop" found in The Bible (with the exception of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus).

The thousands of freed Israelites, led by Moses and his brother Aaron, find themselves facing a sea in front of them and an angry army of Egyptians approaching from the rear. They sense the doom and so they cry out to Moses, believing they have come this far only to be killed by their former captors in the breaking waves of the impassable sea. After all they had been through, was it really going to end this way?

It had been a wild ride to this point that's for sure.

The very first book of the Bible is called, Genesis. And in it we find a God who is quite active at the beginning, but seems increasingly distant by the end of the book.

When Exodus, the next book of the Bible, begins, the enslaved Israelite people are wondering whether or not God is listening to them at all. He quietly blesses and guides, but the people seem to think that God has abandoned them.

And then we hit Exodus 3 and suddenly God decides to do whatever it takes to accomplish God's will. God decides to defy natural law and use natural law to free his people and break the hold of the most powerful country in the world at that time.

It begins with a bush that burns but does not consume the leaves and branches. And then it's a staff that God turns into a snake. Then it's a river turned to blood, an army of frogs, an attack of gnats and a swarm of flies. Pharaoh, the bull-headed tyrant of Egypt would not relent and let the people go.

Then comes an illness on all livestock and boils for their human masters. Pharaoh would agree to let the people go, but would once again renege on his promise.

God then opens the sky to release hail on the Egyptians. God enlists a host of locusts to cover the land, and then covers the land in a blanket of darkness. Same result: Pharaoh confesses his guilt and returns to his

tyrannical ways when the plagues dissipate.

Finally, Pharaoh exhausts God's patience. An angel of death passes over the land and each Egyptian household loses its firstborn son. And it's this horrible plague that finally breaks the will of the world's most feared leader.

God, went toe-to-toe with a ferocious champion and like Harry Potter going against Voldemort, he pulled out one spectacular display after another to defeat this ancient superpower. It was human power versus God and God won.

There's a story you've undoubtedly heard of a U.S. Ship out in the open water. In the distance they spot a light they assume to be another ship moving in its direction. So, the radio operator attempts to contact the other ship. Here's how the radio conversation proceeded:

US Ship: Please divert your course 0.5 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Reply: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

US Ship: This is the Captain of a US Navy Ship. I say again, divert your course.

Reply: No. I say again, you divert YOUR course!

US Ship: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS CORAL SEA*, WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE US NAVY. DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW!!

CND reply: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

I won't deny the fact that reading about God causing plagues, hardening hearts of people and sending an angel of death to kill firstborn sons isn't disturbing. I don't think I can justify God's actions here, and honestly I don't think God needs me to.

But, one of the points of this account is to let us know what happens when humans, powerful humans, decide to stand against the will of God. And the result is not good.

We are finite humans who listen intently to our souls that want to live forever and transcend all boundaries.

But Exodus re-establishes the forgotten God that created the heavens and the earth, scrapped it with Noah's flood and then began again. God's power knows no limits or boundaries; it's your call whether or not you want to test such power.

If you choose to live violently, bully weaker people, behave unethically,

and act unjustly, there will be consequences. And the plagues show us that it won't be pretty.

But there's something else to note about the stories found in Exodus. God keeps promises.

In Genesis we read about a God who makes promises with people. Not just promises, covenants, sincere and heartfelt vows that are life and death commitments.

God promises to never flood the earth and God promises to make a nation.

But in Exodus, the enslaved Israelites wonder, "Will God keep the promises he's made? How far is God willing to go to keep these promises?"

In Exodus we see how far God is willing to go: God will do just about anything to keep promises.

God will build a pillar of clouds to guide his people by day, and will light up another pillar of fire to guide them by night.

God, it says in Exodus, will fight for us like a soldier who serves his or her country.

"Do not be afraid," Moses says as they stand before the sea, "Stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you

shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

But, the people of Israel wonder, will a closed door like an impassable sea keep God from keeping a promise?

Promises anymore, are so fluid. The promise to have and to hold, in sickness and in health can easily be broken by irreconcilable differences.

The promise to honor boundaries and land treaties can be broken by a need for natural resources.

A political promise made by a candidate wanting to be elected is really conditional upon whether or not the elected candidate can play the political game well enough.

When push comes to shove, if you’ve gotta break a promise – then you gotta do what you gotta do.

And I’m sure that when the Israelites were facing a body of water with a pillar of clouds holding the Egyptians at bay, they wondered, “How much longer can this promise be kept.” Was this it? Had God’s power been exhausted? Had they reached the limit for what God could do? Would God, who had recklessly fought for the freedom of these people, finally say, “That’s enough”?

The Israelites had to wrestle with such a question for an entire night while their leader stood there with his hand outstretched over a wind-blown sea. “The Ten Commandments” show Charlton Heston making a grand gesture and the waters parting like a theater curtain. And in the animated “Prince of Egypt,” Moses dramatically wades into the water and plunges his staff into the water to spark a whirlwind that pushes back the water.

But the text says that wind blew all night to create a water-lined trail through the sea. In other words, it took time, a long time. Plenty of time for complaining, doubting and wondering to take place. Plenty of time to question whether or not God would let a sea stand in the way of God keeping a promise.

It would not.

God would do just about anything to keep God’s promise. Nothing would stop God.

Up until that point, the people knew that God had created the world, could destroy the world and even demonstrate some care for the world.

But now the people knew, at least for the time being, that God meant what God said.

Many of you know that I love the stories of Dr. Seuss, and reading this account in Exodus made me think of one particular Dr. Seuss character: Horton the elephant.

In “Horton Hears a Who,” Horton stands against a whole jungle of nay-saying animals, chases after a vulture, climbs a mountain and searches through an endless field of clovers to save a microscopic civilization of creatures called “Whos.” But through it all, Horton keeps in mind, “A person’s a person no matter how small.”

And in “Horton Hatches an Egg,” Horton the elephant cares for an egg through furious rain, freezing cold, thieving poachers and laughing crowds, all the while saying, “I meant what I meant and I said what I said, an elephant’s faithful one-hundred percent.”

Now, I don’t know if Dr. Seuss was writing with God in mind, but I do believe that Horton exhibits the traits of God in his relentless fidelity to the small and the vulnerable.

God meant what God meant and God meant what God said, God is faithful one-hundred percent.

That important truth was put to the test in the book of Exodus, but after the Israelites crossed the sea, they knew it was true. God’s faithfulness

would not be extinguished by long odds. God will break through any closed door.

But do we believe this?

I’ve noticed that many times when we are faced with difficult life decisions – like finding a job, choosing the right place to live, or making the right business decision – we often times pray that God opens doors. In fact, we often times claim that we know we made the right decision because God just “opened doors” and made it possible.

But, I wonder if we place too much value on the open doors and clear paths and not enough value on the closed doors.

There are some of you who could stand to have a door slammed in your face. You’re due for a door that won’t open. Life has been easy, faith has been easy – questions and doubts have hardly pursued you.

And there are others of you who are standing in front of a closed door now. You’ve received another “no” after another job interview. Another college has said “no,” another potential spouse has said “no.” You’ve lost another deal and another customer. Another round of treatments has failed, another dead-end has been reached.

And whether you're due for a closed door or standing at a closed door right now, I know that you will be tempted to ask God to "open those doors."

But I would urge you to pray differently. Pray instead that God would use this closed door to teach you and shape you into the kind of person God wants you to be.

Ask God, "God, what do you want me to learn from this closed door?"

How is this closed door shaping my faith?

Does God want me to back down from this challenge or to push through?

Is this closed door locked or just difficult to open?

Let's just say, before the Israelites began their journey to The Promised Land, they got together and prayed,

"God, we just pray that you would give us a safe journey, that you would remove all obstacles from our paths and just open the doors to make it possible to reach our journey."

And let's just say that the Egyptians never had the heart to take up the chase and by the time the Israelites got to the sea, the waters were already parted.

Well, first of all that would be a boring story, and second of all, they would never have experienced the power of God, and their faith, subsequently, would have been a spoiled faith – a weak faith.

Phillip Brooks once said, "I do not pray for a lighter load, but for a stronger back." Lighter loads may make things easier, but they don't make us any stronger either.

Closed doors make life more challenging, but they also spark our creativity, enrich our faith, and allow us to see the power of God in our lives.

So, if you want a faith that is predictable, tepid and weak, pray for the open doors.

But if you want a faith that is rich, bold and vibrant, pray for closed doors, cry to God for strength and then wait for God who pulled out the stops to help Israel reach The Promised Land. Wait for God and see how God helps you burst through those closed doors.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS
For Sunday, September 11, 2011's Sermon
Foundational Scripture: Exodus 14:19-31

Featured Scripture Reflection:“But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.’” – Exodus 14:13,14

Opening Icebreaker: Share about a time when “all hope was lost” but then God seemed to open a door.

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read Exodus 14:5-18. Did you notice anything new about this story? Did anything stand out to you? What did you notice about Moses? What did you notice about the people?
- Read Genesis 14:19-31. What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? What does this passage tell us about God?
- Read Matthew 17:14-21. Think about what you’ve just read. How does it compliment what was read in the previous passages? Talk a little about the role of faith in the life of a believer.

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the “Good News” in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages affect me?
- How are these passages troubling or confusing?

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, help us to find courage in faith, knowing that we can trust you when we face closed doors or open doors.