

March 16 – Trust God and Go Forward
Exodus 14:5-15

As we begin, let's refresh our memories as to why the Israelites were in such a desperate situation with Pharaoh's army approaching and their backs to the sea. The Israelites had journeyed to Egypt during the time of Joseph to escape from the famine that was making life impossible at home. Following Joseph's death and his ability to protect them they had slowly sunk into slavery, making bricks and buildings for Pharaoh. After many years in grinding slavery God had appeared to Moses in a burning bush telling him that he was to be the one who would lead them back home to the promised land. Then there is the battle between Pharaoh and Moses where God sends increasingly devastating plagues on the land of Egypt with each refusal by Pharaoh to let the people go. Finally, after the death of all the first born, Pharaoh releases them. The Israelites quickly pack and leave before Pharaoh changes his mind. But that is exactly what happens. Pharaoh decides that he had been foolish to let his labor force leave and so readies his army with its chariots to bring them back. James Moore, in his book "When the World Takes the Wind Out of Your Sails" writes about four ways people cope when they are in difficult times. By and large these are negative ways of handling the situation. I am going to let you talk about them in your study groups so I am not going to spend a lot of time on them but I do want to lift them up.

Moore says that some will always say, "Let's go back." This is something that Moses will confront often over the next 40 years. When I was in seminary Jenny and I heard a sermon about the "back to Egypt bus" a trip promoted by some in every church and group. The preacher reminded us that God never sells tickets for that particular bus trip. No matter what the reason for our being in the current situation we can't go back and re-create the past.

Others will say, "Let's run away and hide." The most common way people hide from trouble, at least in my experience, is to pretend it doesn't exist. I don't know how many times I have been talking with people who are in a situation where it seems like there is an army coming from one direction and a sea at their back and they pretend that nothing is amiss. It is as if they believe that if I don't admit to there being a problem

it isn't real. It never works, ultimately, and leaves the person unprepared and those around them frustrated.

Others just want to feel sorry for themselves. When life's troubles come crashing down they puddle into inaction, crying, "woe is me." They give into self-pity believing they are in a worse situation than anyone else who has ever lived. They become incapable of making decisions and so things just get worse.

And let's not forget the blamers. These are the ones who feel that it is always someone else's fault. Moses, the darling who rescued them from Egypt, is now the goat leading them into the wilderness to die. There is no personal responsibility, just blame.

Beyond these negative ways of dealing with life situations there is one more. It is the call to move forward. For the Israelites, that meant they were to go into the sea and ultimately they left Pharaoh and their problems behind them. Today I want us to talk about ways we can move forward when the "World Takes the Wind Out of Our Sails."

First of all, don't give up. Just because something we tried doesn't work doesn't mean that we are through. When faced with difficulties I have heard often, well I tried... and since it didn't get the problem resolved they had quit. The way forward is to, with prayer, keep trying. Perseverance can be a healthy habit when things are going wrong. There is a quote from Thomas Edison that I like. He had been trying to develop a working light bulb but everything he tried for the filament either didn't work, wasn't very bright, or burned out in just a short time. When someone asked him how he was dealing with this failure Edison said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Often, physical therapists, when they first begin talking with a person after surgery or stroke, say, "The amount of recovery you will experience is up to you. Do the least bit we ask or not even that and you will likely not progress very far. Push yourself, don't become discouraged when you don't see any progress, and you will go a long way." That is advice for all of us. When we are standing at the shore, with an army behind us we have to be persistent in trying to find a way forward.

This leads me to my second idea. There is more than one way forward. The Israelites thought they had two options: run into the desert and hope they were not

among those who were caught and hope they don't die of thirst in the desert, or give up and go back into slavery. None of them even considered the idea of going forward. The sea was a barrier, not a way out. But God showed them a way. This, for me, is a reminder that there are usually more options for moving forward than we believe are possible. In today's parlance it is called thinking outside of the box.

I am one who is always ready to think outside of the box. I resist the idea that there is just one or maybe two ways to handle something. Because of this my mind is always thinking of other possibilities. Now I am the first to admit that most of those out-of-the-box ideas are not workable or practical for a variety of reasons. But sometimes those out-of-box ideas do open up a new way of approaching the problem. It is like the sea parts and what had been nothing but obstacles now becomes a path forward.

One of my favorite stories of this was when I was in Moscow, ID. I became good friends with Sister Margaret who ran the Catholic school for ages pre-school through eighth grade. They were trying to get funds for a gym for the school because it is a little difficult to have physical education classes outside during the winter. They had raised about \$400,000 towards an almost 2 million dollar goal. The diocese would not let them proceed until they had a million in hand with a plan for paying for the rest. We were having lunch one day just after a school board meeting where she barely kept them from scrapping the entire project and thinking of other uses for the reserves. She said, "I guess it isn't going to happen." I asked her how many families were in the parish and she said about 400 that relate to the school. I said, "Do you think you could convince 80% of them to give \$10 a week to the school for three years?" She said, "Probably but what good would that do." I said, "300 families giving \$40 a month is \$12,000. Which is \$144,000 a year which over three years is \$432,000 which is most of your goal. Get a few donors to give more and in three years you have \$600,000." She almost jumped out of her chair with excitement and I was invited to a specially called meeting of the school board the next night. From despair to hope happened in that meeting and when I was back a couple of years ago she showed me proudly the new gym. They had an answer staring them in the face but it took someone to show them a new way forward.

This leads to the next idea which is: “rely on each other.” Independence is not necessarily a virtue. I see too many examples of people being stuck between a rock and a hard place, to use another metaphor, because they are trying to do it all themselves. We, as a church, are a family. There are great resources when we band together. What we cannot do alone we can accomplish together. Often, when we come to God with our concerns because we are in that difficult place, the word we hear from God, if we are willing to listen, is: “Ask for help.” This isn’t a sign of weakness as we are sometimes led to believe in our society. It is instead an affirmation of community.

Finally, and this is the hardest: We have to trust God and take the first step. Think of those Israelites. Moses parts the sea, a new way forward out of danger is presented but still they had to go forward. They had to do something they had never done before, trusting in God that it would be all right. It took great courage to take that first step. But with each step into the unknown it got easier. You know why? Because with each step they were also seeing the way forward and they were seeing an end to the problem. But they had to risk and trust and take that step.

We know the end of the story. They do go forward and, when Pharaoh tries to follow, the waters roll back over his soldiers. The Israelites on the other side sing their praises to God for their salvation. You would think that from here on out those who had walked through the Red Sea would trust Moses and trust God no matter what. But no. We have forty years of whining and doubt and calls to go back to Egypt. This is a reminder that the work of faith that asks us to move forward needs to be relearned every day and in every situation.

You will find that the “World Takes the Wind Out of Your Sails.” When it does, seek for a way forward, and when you are open and trusting and willing to rely on the help of others there is always a path.