

Where is your exit?
Exodus 14:10-15

We all face battles each day. We battle every day with any number of problems. Life is a series of problems. Two weeks ago we had a Hurricane Gustav in Louisiana, and last week we were hit with Hurricane Ike in Texas. The hurricanes passed away. And Hurricane Ike was not as bad as we had feared. But every time you solve one problem, another is waiting to take its place. That is life. Not all problems are big, but all are significant in God's growth process for us, if we use those problems as opportunities.

Problems are everywhere. As we read in the scripture of Luke 8:22-25, we find problems even on board the boat that carried Jesus and His disciples. They were in the middle of the Sea of Galilee when they met a severe storm. While they sailed, Jesus fell asleep. A squall came down on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke Jesus. "Master, Master! We're going to drown!" Jesus got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. Then Jesus asked his disciples, "Where is your faith?" We will meet problems ceaselessly, and continually throughout our lives. But don't be afraid!

Let's turn to 2 Corinthians 4:7-15. The life of the disciple Paul was not calm and easy, either. He was hard pressed on every side -- perplexed, persecuted, struck down. But he was not crushed, not in despair, not abandoned, and not destroyed. Problems surrounded him everywhere, but he had a way out, an exit for his life. Because he believed the Lord who raised Jesus from the dead, he could go forward through his difficulties.

Let's take a look at Moses' case in Exodus 14:10-18. Moses had a big problem, one that God told him to solve. Moses told Pharaoh to let his people out from Egypt. That problem brought about invisible battles, a series of ten spiritual power struggles between Moses and Pharaoh. In the end, Moses won his battle, and Pharaoh finally gave in. He gave the Israelites their freedom. And Moses quickly rallied them and led them out of Egypt, out of slavery.

The people of Israel were filled with joy. This was a historic moment. This was their Exodus, their deliverance, their salvation. But as they made their camp at the Red Sea, they looked back. On the horizon they saw a huge cloud of dust. Listening, they heard the unmistakable rumble of chariots. They knew what they meant! The people of Israel realized they faced a new problem. They were trapped, pinned in, cornered, and caught between the Pharaoh's army and the deep Red Sea. They cried out to the Lord. And they shouted and complained to Moses, "Did you bring us here to be killed?"

At this point, Moses had no plan, but no fear, either. He knew that life is a series of problems, and that God has a key for our problems. But the people of Israel were deeply troubled by their circumstances, because they did not have the faith that Moses had. Moses remembered what God had said to him: "Go, Moses, and tell Pharaoh to set my people free! Go, Moses, and I will go with you!" Moses believed that God doesn't send us somewhere where there is no exit.

Interestingly, as we read between the lines of this dramatic story in the Book of Exodus, we can see several different ways that people respond to trouble. Let's look at these, because they seem to be the ways people still deal with trouble today, and we just might find ourselves somewhere in the story.

If we could get into a time capsule and go back to that scene beside the Red Sea, just as the Israelites realize they are in big trouble, we might overhear these four classic responses.

First response: "Let's go back where we were!"

Let's go back to the good old days. What have you done to us, Moses? Why did you have to bring us out of Egypt? Why didn't you leave us alone and let us serve the Egyptians? Things weren't so bad back there. What we had was a lot better than being trapped out here. We never did it this way before! Let's go back! Let's surrender ourselves to the Pharaoh and go back to Egypt for a life of slavery.

Do you know what the single most powerful influence in the decision-making process is? The most powerful influence in decision making is the past. Think about that for a moment. If you are in a group trying to decide something, and you are having difficulty, what do you do? Well, you ask, what did we do last year? And nine times out of ten, you do the same thing again.

When in doubt, what do we do? We go back. We back off! We go back to the familiar, back to the good old days, totally forgetting that the good old days had their share of problems. Isn't that the way some people face trouble? Afraid to stand up to the challenge, they want to retreat, go back where they were.

Until a hundred years ago, Korea was a closed society. The Korean people were closed-minded about other cultures, and didn't accept western ideas. But after Christianity came into Korea, the Korean attitude gradually changed. About one hundred years ago, American missionaries brought western culture, along with the gospel, into Korea. They started a Christian mission school in Korea, and from that point on the education system was transformed. Until then, Koreans thought: Mine is better than anyone else's! Keep the old system! Keep our religion! Keep our Confucian culture! They were afraid to accept new values, and therefore they didn't have a chance to change or evolve. That attitude was stubborn and unwise. But since Christianity was introduced, Korea has become open to change, and the country and the culture has evolved rapidly in the last few decades.

Do not be afraid to stand up to the challenge. And don't look back, but go forward. "Open hearts, open minds, and open doors" is the motto of United Methodist Church.

Second response: "Let's run away and hide!"

This ploy is as old as the Garden of Eden. As soon as Adam and Eve had a problem, what did they do? They tried to run away and hide. People are still trying to do that, aren't they? People are still trying to run away from their problems, hide behind their "escapism crutches." But you can't really hide from trouble.

"Escape from Freedom" is a fascinating book written by Erich Fromm. In this book, Fromm points out, "In attempting to avoid the pain of responsibility, millions and even billions daily attempt to escape from freedom."

One of key problems of the public education system in United States is a lack of accountability. Lack of accountability of students, of parents, of teachers, and of the government has resulted in poor public education in our country. Do you know that American high school students, compared to other countries, rank just 24th in math and 21st in science? In contrast, Korea which had a very primitive education system one hundred years ago, is now ranked 5th in the world in both math and science.

"Let's run away and hide" is the mindset of a lack of accountability. Escape from the pain of responsibility is not the real freedom. That is escapism.

Next, the third response: "Let's feel sorry for ourselves!"

This is the way many people choose to deal with their problems. They just quit on life. They give in to self-pity. They have nothing left to deal with their problems creatively, because they are expending all their energy crying, "Woe is me!" feeling sorry for themselves. That is the fatalism. They are trapped themselves in fatalism. Fatalistic mind is "I was born to be slavery. There is no way for me to get out."

A young mother had a two-year-old son. One day, she was trying to give her son some liquid medicine. The child would not cooperate. He would shut his mouth tightly, shake his head from side to side, and hit at the spoon with both hands. The young mother coaxed, she pleaded, she threatened, she bribed, but all without success. He would not take his medicine! Finally, worn down, the young mother gave in to self-pity. She threw down the spoon, fled into her room, and fell across the bed, sobbing.

In a few minutes, she heard loud laughter coming from the kitchen. Curious, she went to investigate and found that Grandma had solved the problem. She mixed the medicine with orange juice, put it in a water gun, and was squirting the mixture into the wide-open mouth of the delighted little boy!

We have only so much energy. If we use it all up in self-pity, we won't have any left for creative solutions.

And finally, the fourth response: "Let's find someone to blame!"

Isn't it interesting? When something goes wrong, one of the first things we want to do is find someone to blame it on! Look at the Israelites at the Red Sea. They see that cloud of

dust on the horizon being kicked up by Pharaoh's army, and immediately they turn on Moses. Moments ago he was their champion, their leader, their hero; but now when trouble appears he is to blame. "It's your fault, Moses! A fine mess you've gotten us into. Why did we ever listen to you? You're the one to blame for this."

None of these four responses offer a real solution. The only productive response is to say: "Let's go forward, trusting God!" This is the true exit we are looking for. Though caught between Pharaoh's army and the deep Red Sea, Moses did not give up, he did not quit, and he did not throw in the towel. No, he trusted God. And he went forward.

When trouble suddenly erupts, remember Moses at the Red Sea. He didn't have all the answers, but he did stay in communication with God. And he did go forward, and he did do his best, and he did trust God to bring it out right.

When Moses and the children of Israel were caught at the Red Sea, God didn't lead them over it, or around it, or under it. God led them through it. Now, in the same way, when we are in trouble, God will not lead us over it or around it or under it. No, the Lord will lead us through it. That is the affirmation of our trust in God.