

SERMON TITLE: "A Way Out"
SERMON TEXT 1 Corinthians 10:14-17 and 10:1-13 (in that order)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 7, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

If you're like me, you've been hearing a lot on the news lately about Brexit. April 12 is the currently pending deadline. But the Brits have managed to delay their exit from the European Union quite a bit longer than anyone expected, so who knows when or if they ever will find a way out.

This British exit got me thinking about the trip my husband and I took to Europe in 1997. We got off the plane at London's Heathrow Airport. After jostling through baggage claim and the long customs line, we tried to get our bearings and find the terminal doors. But nowhere did we see those neon EXIT signs like we're used to here in the United States. Instead, the signs were labeled, "Way Out."

Way out. That sounds like something the Apostle Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Those Christian converts were struggling with the temptation and sin of idol worship, and Paul was telling them that they had a way out. They didn't have to be trapped in the maze of evil enticement. They didn't have to jostle and wander in the wilderness of sin. Instead, they could flee temptation through a God-provided way out.

1—REMEMBER HISTORY'S MISTAKES

In chapter 10, Paul begins by telling the Corinthians that they should remember history's mistakes. One of the ways we can escape temptation's hold on us is to reflect on what happened to somebody before us. As our high school history teachers told us, "Those who don't remember history are doomed to repeat it."

In verses one through 11, Paul gives the example of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. As the Hebrews drifted in the desert, they had trouble keeping their faith. When they should have been trusting that God would take care of them, they were complaining instead that God had brought them

out in the desert to starve and die of thirst. While Moses was up on the mountain praying and getting the Ten Commandments, the Hebrews were at the base of the mountain worshipping a golden calf and behaving immorally. Paul then tells the Corinthians the consequence of those sins. God wasn't pleased with the Hebrew people, and thousands of them were killed and scattered in the desert. Paul suggested that this should be a word to the wise.

Today, we might not have to go all the way back to Moses and the Hebrews for a historical lesson. Who among us can't remember a story told by a mother or father? "Here's what I did, and these were the consequences. Now, you my child, please don't do the same thing." Whether drinking too much, smoking, using illegal drugs, having sex too early, making bad choices in friendships or marriage partners, mismanaging finances, working too much, playing too much, being unfaithful or dishonest, or *whatever*—our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, people in the community and the church, and even celebrities in the news can teach us a lot. "Look!" they've said to us with their words or their actions. "I messed up. Please listen to my story and learn from my experience. You really don't have to go through what I did." If we'll learn from history's mistakes, we'll have a way out.

2—DON'T THINK TOO HIGHLY OF YOURSELF

Sometimes a sense of false security can trap us in temptation and sin. In verse 12, Paul says that, "if you think you are standing, watch out that you don't fall." Another way of saying that is, "Don't think too highly of yourself." A little bit of humility and caution can provide a way out from a number of difficult and possibly disastrous situations.

A recent example of this could be the situation with Boeing's 737 Max 8 jets—two of which have crashed in recent months. Boeing was so used to having success with its variations of 737s, it seems they may have pushed production too fast, paying more attention to profits than safeguards. But, confidence or not, when 346 people die, that's a sign that something has gone badly wrong. So, now,

Boeing is being forced to take the time to figure out what happened and what they can do to prevent these kinds of fatal crashes.

We make mistakes when we think we're too good or too smart or too strong to fail. We fall into temptation when we think we're immune to evil. We commit sin when we go busting through life without sufficient caution for how our attitudes and actions affect other people. *Of course*, a certain degree of self-confidence is necessary and beneficial. But, in order not to sin—to not cause damage to ourselves and others—we must also be willing to entertain some doubts and questions about ourselves. Many times, that humility will provide us with a way out.

3—RECOGNIZE TEMPTATION IS COMMON

In verse 13, Paul gives a third piece of advice: we should recognize that temptation is common. If we think that we're the only ones who have ever suffered so much, or the only ones who have ever struggled so hard, then we'll likely end up giving in to temptation. But, if we recognize that no temptation comes our way that hasn't been around the block many times before, then we might be able to find someone who has overcome that temptation. We may just find a way out.

That's the power of 12-step organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous, diet programs like Weight Watchers, and small groups within the church. If we think we're all alone, then the temptation becomes even more gripping. But, if we can get ourselves into a supportive and accountable community of people who are likewise trying to resist evil, then we may find strength that is greater than our own. If we can gain encouragement from others' success stories, then we may discover possibilities we didn't even know existed.

Sometimes there are well-known support groups offering to help us resist temptation. Other times, we have to go seeking the help we need. In our Friday adult class, we've been reading a book written by Elaine Pagels. Even though Pagels is well known for her scholarly work with the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient texts, in her book *Why Religion?*, she writes about some very personal

experiences with tragedy and grief. At one point, after both her son and her husband had died, Elaine felt like she might be on the verge of an emotional breakdown. She was afraid not only for herself but also for her ability to care for her remaining small children. Fortunately, Elaine had the wherewithal to reach out to a friend who called another friend who was able to travel across the country and move in with Elaine to give her and her two children the support they needed. In our class on Friday, we marveled that Pagels was able to get that kind of help that allowed her and her family to keep on functioning. We've all heard horribly sad stories of contrast—when a mother with little children had no support and ended up abusing or neglecting them in her own desperation.

When we're faced with any kind of crisis, things can go bad quickly, and temptation and sin can seem like the only answers. But we must remember that we're not alone. There are lots of people who have been down every imaginable road before us. And there are lots of people who are eager to help us avoid the wrong and do the right. The common nature of our temptations provides us with a way out.

4—REMEMBER GOD WILL HELP YOU

Most importantly, we should remember that *God* will help us find a way out. In verse 13, Paul says that “God is faithful, and he won't let you be tested beyond your strength.” Contrary to how this verse is commonly misquoted and misused, this verse doesn't say that a strong faith will ward off all problems. This verse doesn't say that your body won't get sick, that your house won't get hit by a tornado, or that your finances won't go bankrupt. What this verse does say is that—when hardships, trials, and troubles inevitably do come along—God will always give us a way to escape making bad choices and doing immoral things.

Jesus is a prime example of this. As we approach Good Friday soon, we're reminded that God didn't rescue Jesus from the suffering of the cross. Jesus prayed that God would take it from him, but God didn't. Jesus clearly agonized on the cross, physically and spiritually. But instead of cursing God or giving in to despair, Jesus recalled the scriptures and the hymns of his Jewish faith that reminded him

that God was with him, that God's good purposes would survive Jesus' death, that resurrection would happen, and that life would be reborn. As Jesus' seven last words (or statements) remind us, even as he suffered that horrific torture, Jesus used his dying hours to entrust his aging mother to a beloved disciple who could care for her, he offered forgiveness to the thief on the cross next to him, and he commended his spirit to God.

We live in the real world, where natural disasters, mental illness, and all kinds of problems will come our way. Even with God's amazing help, eventually we will all succumb, at the very least, to mortality. But we have a choice about how we are going to respond. We can behave in ways that harm ourselves and others. Or we can trust in God's faithfulness that there is a better way, a way of hope, goodness, and strength. No matter what life throws at us, God is faithful and will provide for us a way out.

CONCLUSION

When Joan read the scripture for us, you probably noticed that she read it out of order. I asked her to do that because I wanted the reading to end on the idea of a way out. But, because we will soon be serving the sacrament of Holy Communion, I also wanted to include verses 14-17, which speak of the cup of blessing and the bread which is the one body of Christ. When we Christians partake of this one cup and one bread, we affirm that we are part of the historic people of God. As we contemplate the Hebrews wandering in sin and the blood of Jesus that was unjustly spilled, we can remember and learn from history's mistakes and humbly take care not to think too highly of our own abilities. As we eat the one bread, we affirm that we are not alone in this life, that whatever temptations and troubles we experience are common to other people too, and that we can benefit from bonding together in support and accountability. As we participate in this sacramental meal, we rejoice that—even in the most dire circumstances—God's cup of blessing always provides us a positive and grace-filled way out.