

“Doors That Cannot Be Closed”

a sermon by

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Text: “Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (Revelation 3:8).

Several years ago I had the opportunity to visit the beautiful island of Patmos, which is nestled in the Aegean Sea near Turkey. It is a small island, about ten miles long and five miles wide. At the upper part of the island is a monastery named for St. John and at the lower part of the island are a number of ancient caves. Today, Patmos is a tourist attraction, and a number of celebrities have beautiful homes there that they reach in the summer by means of helicopters. In the summer the calm waters of the Aegean make it easy for cruise ships to visit the island, but in the harsh winds of winter the island is almost inaccessible by boat or plane.

There is an ancient tradition in the church that Patmos was the place where John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, wrote the Book of Revelation. Patmos was a convict island where Roman prisoners were kept. During the days the prisoners worked in the mines or in the marble quarries, and at night slept in small huts. Because it was an island, there was not a great need for a lot of guards. The prisoners never could have escaped and it was a lonely and forlorn place.

John does not tell us a lot about his imprisonment at Patmos (Revelation 1:9), but there are hints of it throughout the book of Revelation. In John’s great vision of heaven (Revelation

21: 1) he says that “the sea will be no more.” That sounds like a somewhat limiting view of heaven, but perhaps it reflects the mindset of a man who looked out all day long on the sea and viewed it as a symbol of his confinement.

There is another rather veiled allusion to his imprisonment. In his letter to the church at Philadelphia he says, “Look, I have set before you a door that cannot be shut.” To be sure, John uses these words about one of the churches to which he is writing, but they must have welled up first in his own experience. His imprisonment had shut doors all around his life. Doors of opportunity, happiness, and privilege had been closed, and there in his loneliness and seemingly hopeless situation he heard the voice of God say to him, “Behold, I have set before you an open door that cannot be shut.”

I.

I wonder how many of us find ourselves today like John. We are living behind doors that have closed in around us. Some of us are in difficult relationships that seem stifling and oppressive. We don’t know how to get out. Others find themselves trapped in situations at work where there seems to be no opportunity for fulfillment, for advancement. We are just going through the motions, but in truth we are like mice in a labyrinth. Others may find themselves in situations where they face some addiction, some habit, some destructive element in their lives, which they know, now has control over them. They long to be free. They just don’t know how to open the door.

In his little book, *Telling Secrets: A Memoir*, Frederick Buechner has a section in which he describes the Tower of London, particularly the so-called White Tower, which was built by William the Conqueror in the eleventh century. On the second floor there is a small Norman chapel called the Chapel of Saint John. It is very bare and very simple, built all of stone with twelve stone pillars and a vaulted ceiling. The chapel is almost a thousand years old and you cannot enter it without being struck with a feeling of peace and purity.

But that is not all there is in the White Tower. Directly below the chapel is the most terrible of all the tower’s dungeons. It has a heavy oak door that is only four feet square by four feet high so that a prisoner has no way either to stand upright in it or to lie down at full length. There is almost no air to breathe in it, almost no room to move. It is known as “Little Ease.”

That room is where many people live for different reasons. For Buechner he was imprisoned there because of his father’s suicide when Buechner was only a small boy. He was also there because of his daughter’s anorexia. One of Buechner’s insights about “Little Ease” is that though it is a place of torment, if you live there long enough, it eventually becomes home. You see the only thing more frightening about bad jobs, bad relationships, powerful compulsions or addictions is where do you go next. If, after all those years you get out, what are you going to do with your wellness? The freedom, Buechner points out, is staggering.

So, maybe there is a longing in all of us to hear once again these words spoken to John on the island of Patmos: “Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.”

II.

In the first place, there is within these words a reminder to all of us that there are doors in our lives that cannot be closed. Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke of God's grace not only as forgiveness, but as power as well. The gospel of Jesus Christ stands or falls on its ability to give individuals not only forgiveness from their sins, but the power to change their lives.

You see, the Roman government had the power to put John on the island of Patmos. They could isolate him by the Aegean Sea. But they could not break his spirit. They could not exterminate the visions he received, the revelations given to him, the confidence that allowed him to conclude, even in the midst of all his suffering: "Hallelujah, The Lord God omnipotent reigns" (Revelation 19:6).

That was true not only of John, but of the Apostle Paul as well. He too was a prisoner of the Roman Empire. Nero had a long arm, but there were doors in Paul's life that even the great emperor Nero could not get his fingers on. "Being rooted and grounded in love, strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge." Paul had heard that same voice too: "Behold I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut."

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, often spoke with great affection about his friend Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Fosdick observed that if anyone had seen Bill Wilson attending church on a given Sunday morning, they would have seen a man who seemed to possess everything. He was a dashing figure, a successful Wall Street banker, married to a beautiful wife and the father of a number of lovely children. What you would not have seen, notes Fosdick, is a man who was a helpless alcoholic. He was drinking a fifth of gin a day, then two, then three and he found that he could not stop. When he finally went to his doctors they confirmed what his family and friends had known all along. He was a hopeless alcoholic.

But Bill Wilson was not only an alcoholic; he was an agnostic as well. He did not believe in God, at least not in any kind of God that could help him. But in his crisis he realized that he needed something that he could not provide for himself. So, alone one day with all of this converging testimony about his alcoholism pressing in upon him, he fell on his knees in a desperate attempt to change gods--from Bacchus to God from this god he had created to the one God who had made him and who could remake him.

"Explain it as you will," said Fosdick, "but from that day forth Bill Wilson never took another drink. He said after that day he never had the need for one. As for his agnosticism, you should hear him talk about God--quietly, with a deep sense of mystery, not supposing that he knows much about theology but absolutely sure of one thing: that a power greater than himself took hold of him and changed his life."

III.

There is also a word addressed to the church in this vision given to John on the island of Patmos. The passage that I read from Revelation is part of a series of instructions that are given to the seven churches of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. In each of these sections John both commends their strengths and condemns their weaknesses. But the Book of Revelation was written to churches under persecution. John knows their hardships. He understands the temptations they face. He concludes this section with these words: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Tomorrow is Halloween, as every child here is keenly aware. There will no doubt be costumes, candy, parties and a great deal of celebration. There is, of course, nothing really wrong with that. Halloween takes its name from the medieval day "All Hallow's Eve" that precedes "All Saints Day," which occurs on November 1st. On October 31, 1517, (All Hallow's Eve) an event occurred in Wittenberg, Germany, that changed the course of Western Civilization. On that day an obscure Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed on the castle door ninety-five theses that challenged the medieval church, particularly on the practices of indulgences and the widespread corruption in the church.

Martin Luther is associated with what is generally referred to as the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. Luther did not attempt to establish a new church as much as to reform the medieval church. He did so by the recovery of Scripture (Sola Scripture) as the authoritative word of God for the church. Luther also recovered the notion of God's grace as the life-giving power of the church (Sola Gratia).

Today, the so-called mainline Protestant Churches stand in dire need of reformation. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a church that has lost its "soul." That is demonstrated by the massive loss of membership over the past forty years, the secularization of its colleges and seminaries, and the preoccupation with human sexuality, political ideologies, and a host of other matters that are at best of marginal interest to the church.

But let us not lose heart. There are doors that cannot be closed. The great power of the Presbyterian Church has always rested in its most fundamental beliefs: the centrality of Jesus Christ; the power of God's grace in human life; the confidence that our lives are not accidents of nature, but are part of the plan and will of God. These are doors that cannot be closed and when they are opened they have the power to breathe new life into the church.

So what doors in your life are shut this morning? Is it the door of fear or disappointment? The power of the gospel is that there is no door that cannot be opened

May God give us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!