

Opening Doors

sermon digest

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Acts 12:1-20; Hebrews 13:1-8

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Ah, the good old days! Most of us have heard it, and some of us have said it: "Things aren't like they used to be. Time was, nobody locked a door around here." The age of trust! Having grown up in a big city where doors functioned primarily as barriers to protect the family from outside threat, of course we locked our doors when the house was empty and vulnerable or when the family was asleep. I have never lived in a community of perfect trust where all of the doors are always open, and I have secretly wondered if such a utopia ever existed. The world is changing. Populations are exploding. More people means more folks driving through our peaceful little community and city folks building houses in the middle of corn fields. Along with city people comes city problems. Folks in Utopia have learned to lock their doors. I have seen a few inner-city churches where the doors are locked not only at night but during work hours, and security guards are employed to patrol during services.

Doors control passage. Every door I have ever seen has two sides, inside and outside. Doors either keep something in or something out. Prison doors keep the bad people in, while the doors to your house or car are designed to keep bad people out. No one knows exactly who invented the door. Like shoes and houses, doors seem to be the children of necessity. In the story of beginnings, Genesis, Cain is warned about sin "lurking at the door." Were doors a part of human life from the very beginning? For Cain, the door seems to be a symbolic passage that controls the flow of evil thoughts from and to his mind?

If the door functions as a barrier to evil in the world, it can also be a figure of the passage into promise and possibility. Jesus promised that the door will be opened for those who knock. In John, Jesus identified himself as the door to the sheepfold. Paul asked the Colossians to pray that God will open a door for the Word (4:3). In Revelation, the Christ sets before the church at Philadelphia an "open door, which no one is able to shut"; and the church at Laodicea is pictured with Christ standing at the door and knocking: "if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

Frank Staggs identified the key word in Acts as *unhindered*, the final word of Acts—*akolutos*. The whole story of the church in Acts is about political doors and barriers rising before the church, and the Word continuing to move out into the world "unhindered."

Our story begins with King Herod. You remember Herod the Great, the violent King reported by Matthew to have slaughtered the innocents at the birth of Jesus. His son Herod Antipas was responsible for beheading John the Baptist. Now his grandson Herod Agrippa rises to threaten the church. Herod understood that the key to controlling a social movement is the leadership. If you want to contain the church, take off the head. James the brother of John was killed, and Peter was imprisoned awaiting death. But, Herod had to keep tabs on these Christ people. They were sneaky and slippery. The door to the tomb could not contain their Christ, and stories were circulating about other Houdini acts of miraculous escape from prisons. Had not Peter himself slipped right through the ranks of the Sanhedrin guard? Any regent who wants to close the door on Peter's preaching needs to double and triple the security. Luke notes that the arrest came at Passover, the Jewish feast of deliverance. It appears that Herod's plan was to parade Peter at the end of the festivities. He posted four squads of soldiers at the prison and had Peter bound with two chains with a guard on either side while he slept. But Herod was mistaken. Killing James and arresting Peter does not contain the power of God.

By now, the church was larger, stronger, and better organized. Herod was wise to take extra precautions. They might bribe a soldier or storm the prison. Peter has been jailed three times. Herod intends this time for Peter to stay for the grand finale. According to Luke, Herod mustered all of his military and political strength to block the forward movement of the church. So, the church did what the churches do: "The church prayed fervently to God for [Peter]." As the church prayed, the chains fell off, and the messenger (angel) of God came and led Peter out of the prison. He walked right past the guards, and the locked gate opened automatically as they passed into the city.

Suddenly Peter was alone and free as he summed up the situation: "the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod." Peter was certain that this was an act of God. Now what? Should Peter run for daylight, to get as far away from Herod as possible? No, Peter's first thought was for his friends. Praying friends deserve good news. So, Peter went directly to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark where the church was gathered and praying.

Luke loves irony. Here is the church praying for their leader Peter, but when he shows at the door, they do not know what to do with him. One would think that Peter is welcome in the church, but being welcome hardly equals the hopeless realism afflicting the congregation. Peter had more trouble getting through the locked door of the church than he did getting past the locked door of the prison. His problems were legion. The servant girl was so overjoyed at seeing Peter she was distracted from the first order of business—opening the locked gate. Then the report of his deliverance was met by disbelief by the people who were praying. It was an honest mistake. I am sure that they, like we, had prayed for people who did not make it, like James the brother of John. They did not expect ever to see Peter again. "Meanwhile," back at the gate, Peter continued to knock for entrance into the church. Finally, they opened the door, and heard the good news of God's deliverance, which they were instructed to give to James the brother of Jesus, the new leader of the Jerusalem church.

The church is an open community. One has to wonder why the door to the house was locked. Certainly the church had no reason to fear Peter, but what about the authorities who had arrested Peter or Peter's ghost? The church is not immune from the fear that causes much of the alienation, bigotry, and violence in this world. Xenophobia is the unreasonable fear of foreigners. Where do we draw the line? More important, where do we cross the line and open the doors and windows of the church to the world?

The eight people killed by the Taliban in Afghanistan on August 7 were connected to a Christian service mission that dates back to 1966, the International Assistance Mission. The IAM runs projects in medicine, engineering, languages, small business and community development. In 2008, IAM's eighteen projects in seven provinces helped 370,000 Afghans. The organization is registered in Switzerland, works only in Afghanistan, and is the longest continuously serving non-government organization in the country. One of the victims was from Knoxville, a young woman whose father is the pastor of a Christian Church. Were the victims guilty as charged with seeking the conversion of Muslims? I am sure that they provided service in the name of Christ, but the primary mission seems to have been human aid, and the people who could have been making a good living back home were making significant sacrifices to help the Afghans.

The church has always struggled with doors. We have often sent missionaries into harm's way to extend the love of Christ into the world, but churches have not been quite so open about foreign intrusions into our space. Hebrews begins with a disclaimer about Jesus. The strange message argues that Jesus is greater than angels. But the writer comes around to advising the church to be hospitable to strangers just in case one might be entertaining angels incognito. The problem with locking the doors of the church to the dangers of the world is the missed opportunity. A messenger of God may be at the door of the church.

A. Rashied Omar is an Islamic scholar in International Peace Studies at Notre Dame University. He wrote an interesting article on the admonition in Hebrews 13:2 to embrace strangers: "whenever strangers present themselves to us we are to see them as holy ground and do the distinctive and humane thing, which is to share a meal with them. The sharing of meals, which is at the heart of all our faiths, is seen as the way in which God speaks to people through and beyond any barriers they set up."

If there is one message for the church in this hour is that we need to open the door of the church to allow the beaten and battered people of the world to come in for refuge, to allow the miracle of God to meet us in the midst of our prayers, and to let the gospel out of the closed citadel of the fortress church. Luke proclaims the word from Isaiah that Christ has come to set prisoners free. At the death of Jesus, Mark and Matthew reported the ripping of the veil that separates the Holy of Holies from the world. John the visionary saw Jesus standing at the door of the church seeking entrance, like Peter, to get in. When are we going to learn? The God of the Exodus is about opening doors, parting seas, and breaking down barriers so that grace may flow freely through this world.