

## **Finding the Way Out**

At last, we have some good news. After being stranded for days in a multi-chambered cave, a young Thai soccer team and their coach were rescued. Exploring the caves with little preparation, they had become stranded by rising waters, triggered by monsoon rains. Worse, the threat of more rain meant they were at risk of drowning. They were in precarious isolation, until a rescue mission was launched. Ultimately, with little time to spare, the rescue was successful. All of the boys and their coach emerged in twos and threes, led out by skilled divers.

It was a rare, win-win situation. One rescuer died. But the rest found the young team and brought them out of the caves. It took teamwork involving an elaborate combination of skills. About eighty people were involved, including rescuers from several countries, Thai Navy seals, medical personnel, and experts in moving through caves. As details of the rescue emerged, the story became more harrowing. Time almost ran out. Of course, many dedicated people were involved; yet more than expertise was involved. This was a miracle. For which we can give profound thanks; from which there is much to learn.

Anyone who has a child the age of these young men, or anyone who has had a child that age, surely identified with this event. Even though the event took place around the world, millions were riveted, fearful, then hopeful, then relieved, and thankful. Fearing the worst has become our bad habit, along with cynicism and

criticism of those who are different from us. We are reluctant to hope and to trust lest we be disappointed, or outraged again. But now we have vivid proof of a miracle, something we dared not hope for. The young team emerged from their cave, when all seemed lost. I pray that we will remember, that we will understand how this event has touched our own lives. It may be in Thailand, but it is closer that we imagine.

A miracle occurred in those caves. Of course, the rescue of young soccer players was miraculous. But the real miracle was the teamwork that was required. It is the example of teamwork that can teach us a great deal. It can point us to where we find God, how we follow Christ, how our lives get lost, and how we can find our way out. Teamwork was required. That soccer team could not do it by themselves. People who did not know each other had to work together. People with different abilities and different viewpoints had to blend their perspectives quickly and efficiently. There was no time to determine if they liked one another; no time to assess who had the proper political views. Stranded young men and a coach had to be rescued. That was the focus. There was little time. Nothing else mattered.

If a young soccer team is stranded, the need is obvious. We can see they are lost, and, thankfully, we mobilize. But there are times when many of us are lost, profoundly so, and it is not so apparent. We may be stranded in the caves our lives have become. Alone, fearful, even angry, we also may be seeking ways out of

situations in which we might drown. An extreme example is King Herod, as Mark's Gospel describes. If Herod had been in charge today, the Thai soccer team would have been lost. As we have just heard, Herod is a haunted man. He can't understand Jesus, for Jesus is healing people, leading them toward health and purpose and hope. But Herod does not understand compassion for those in need. Herod's world is defined by power and advantage and favors intended to enhance his power. But he was trapped by his own family, who also were filled with hate.

Fearful and envious of John the Baptist, Herod's wife wants him dead, and uses their daughter to trick this weak king. Herod complies, in a particularly gruesome way, providing the head of John the Baptist as a sadistic gift. But now, having heard of Jesus, Herod fears that John the Baptist has returned, as a ghost or reincarnated. Herod wanted to be rid of John the Baptist. Instead he is haunted by him. He cannot get rid of John. So Herod is trapped, in moral and psychological and spiritual caves of his own creation. His life is a tortured disaster, despite the power he supposedly possesses. It will only get worse. Never living up to his father, Herod the Great, the younger Herod will be accused of plotting against the Roman emperor, another lost soul named Caligula. Herod loses the power game and goes into exile. His life was never found.

Herod was drowning in ambition, drowning in jealousy, drowning in dependency. Sadly, his story is as modern as it is ancient. Few of us will engage in

such power games or conspire to have a rival murdered. But we easily become lost, blind to what we are doing, digging holes we may never escape. Sooner or later all of us land in situations where there is no apparent way out. At times we feel overwhelmed and fear we are drowning. We do not understand how things got out of control, just as the young team wondered how it could have happened. How did we get so lost? We panic. What can we do? Where can we turn? We are reluctant to ask for help. If we cry out come to our aid? There is no worse feeling than isolation, and it can strike anywhere. You don't have to be in a cave.

How does it happen? How can worthwhile pursuits and hopes go so wrong, before we realize it? Like the young soccer team, setting off to explore caves, our beginnings are innocent. We cherish our freedom to go where we please, to see what interests us, to follow no one's schedule. We want to be self-reliant, and we want our children to go forth and discover. Life is good, and we are innocent.

There is a proud legacy of American individualism, of rugged resistance to being controlled, of charting our own course and daring anyone to get in our way. "Don't tread on me" is an historic American slogan. We want to pursue what we want to pursue, when we want to pursue it. "I can do whatever I please," a family member used to say proudly. And she meant it!

But is that the case? Can we do what we please, whenever it pleases us to do it? Such a world would be moral and psychological anarchy. The fact is that you

and I cannot do anything we want. There are times when we reach our limits, when we discover our inability to do what we imagine. It is a good thing that I did not want to be a math teacher. It did not take many years of school to discover my lack of skill in math. I still struggle. Thank goodness for calculators and computers!

What if I had persisted? What if I insisted that I should be a math teacher? Would that idea have taken over my life? Would I have overlooked everything else to pursue the goal that would never be realized? Like wanting to see what lies inside a cave, the pursuit begins innocently. Exploration is a good thing. We should explore and want our children to explore. But there are limits to what is possible. At some point, we encounter our limits. The results may not be pretty.

We can become lost, even losing our souls. All because we did not get what we wanted. We lose sight of realities around us; we ignore the warning signs. We become bitter and depressed, blaming someone else because we haven't found what we were seeking. Then we cannot find the way out. When a dream we have cherished does not materialize, it is a bitter pill to swallow. But it is far worse, if we lose our moral and spiritual way. It is worse than being trapped in a cave.

There is nothing inherently wrong with us. Deep inside we are good people. Yet, we all get into situations we did not anticipate and cannot control. Then we reach our limits and we feel lost. The question then is how we will respond when we do. When we can no longer skim along life's surface, when our intentions are

challenged, when we are thrown off course, how do we react? Do we become rigid and bitter and fill the air with blame, or do we adapt?

It is a matter of faith and of character. You and I need God, revealed in the life of Jesus Christ, and we need one another. “The beginning of worthwhile living is the confrontation with ourselves,” David Brooks writes in his book, The Road to Character. When we are confronted by life, we must confront ourselves. God speaks through what happens to us and around us. When we can’t find the way out, we need God and we need each other. And, when someone else is lost, we may be able to help. The key word is teamwork, and the power behind it is God.

The followers of Jesus took John the Baptist’s body and buried it, grieving and showing respect. There is our clue. God is doing more for us than we can ever desire. Especially, God invites us to be together, in joy and in sorrow, supporting one another, blending our talents, building a witness to the power of divine love. We can be found, even in the deepest entanglements. We need not be lost. There is a way out. Through faith in Christ, we can find, and we can be found.

Amen.

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