INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday evening, members of our Guatemala mission trip team got together to do some planning. We won't be going until March 2014, but it's time now to begin checking our passports and getting our international vaccinations. We also talked about our need to learn some Spanish before we go. Some in our group don't know any Spanish, and others speak Spanish *un poco solamente*, so we're glad that retired Spanish professor Leon Bright has offered to give us some lessons, and we're glad that Mae Valdez is going along, as she knows lots of Spanish. Even Mae wondered, though, if the dialect in Guatemala might be different from her North American Spanish.

That's possible, I suppose. Even within the same language, words are sometimes used differently and have different meanings. In 1998, when my husband Steve and I traveled to Europe, we flew into London's Heathrow Airport. When we had gathered up our suitcases and were ready to leave the terminal, we noticed that the doors didn't have "Exit" signs like we are used to here in America. Instead, the signs over the doors were labeled, "Way Out."

"Way out" is not "far out," like the 1960s slang expression for something cool or good. "Way out," is an exit strategy or escape path, like what the Apostle Paul wrote about in his first letter to the Corinthians. Those Christian converts in the city of Corinth were struggling with temptation and sin, and Paul was telling them that they didn't have to stay there. Temptation might be inevitable, but sin wasn't. They didn't have to remain stuck in trouble by acting on their urges. They didn't have to be trapped in the maze of evil enticement. They didn't have to
wander in the wilderness of sin. Instead, they could flee temptations 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 has already happened to somebody else before us. As our high school history teachers have said, "Those who don't remember the past are doomed to repeat it."

Paul gave 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 getting the Ten Commandments, the Hebrews were down at the base of the mountain worshiping a golden calf and behaving immorally. Paul then tells the Corinthians the result of these sins: God was not pleased with the Hebrew people, and thousands of them were killed and scattered in the desert. Paul suggests that this should be a word to the wise.

Today, we might not have to go all the way back to the time of Moses for a historical lesson. Who among us can't remember a story told by our own 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 or too little, gambling, being unfaithful or dishonest or whatever--our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, people in the church and community, and even people in the news can teach us a lot. "Look!" they are saying to us. "I messed up. Please listen to my story and learn from my
experience. You really don't have to mess up like I did.” If we will learn from history's mistakes, we will see that God has provided for us a way out.

2. DON'T BE TOO SURE OF YOURSELF

Another way out of temptation provided by God is the advice Paul offers in verse 12: Don't be too sure of yourself. "If you think you are standing firm," he says, "be careful that you don't fall!" A bit of humility, a little self-doubt, can be a way out of a number of difficult situations.

Celebrity news is full of examples of people who think they can engage in all kinds of risky behaviors without consequences. They think that, because they make so much money, they're invincible. They think that, because they're so famous, they can do anything and it won't matter. But eventually, the laws of gravity, the laws of the land, and the laws of human limitations catch up with them.

We make mistakes when we think we are too good to fail. We fall into temptation when we think that we are immune to evil. We commit sin when we think too highly of ourselves and go busting through life without sufficient caution.

In our Christian tradition, we uphold Jesus as the person who would have had the most reason to be sure of himself. If anyone ever lived a life without sin, it was Jesus. But even Jesus was tempted. How did he deal with that temptation? What was his way out? He humbled himself. Over and over the gospels portray Jesus as one who would lower himself to be present with the lowly, the sick, and the outcast of his society. Jesus bowed himself down and washed his disciples' dirty feet. Philippians 2 instructs us that "Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross!"
A certain degree of self-confidence is necessary for us to do what is right and good. But we must also have a sense of humility that gives us pause. In situations of temptation, where it would be easy for us to make the wrong choice, some measure of self-questioning will often provide us with a better alternative. In this advice for us to not be too sure of ourselves, God provides us a way out.

3. **RECOGNIZE THAT TEMPTATION IS COMMON**

A third piece of advice Paul gives is that we should recognize that temptation is common. If we think that we are the only ones who have ever suffered so much, or the only ones who have struggled so hard, then we will likely end up giving in to temptation. We'll simply view it as an impossible situation, in which we have no other choice. 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 coming to church or going to 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous or to diet programs like Weight Watchers. If we think we are all alone, then we isolate ourselves even more, and the temptation becomes even more gripping. But if we can recognize that our temptations are real to lots and lots of people, then we may find help and hope. If we can get ourselves into a supportive 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.

This idea of using a support group doesn't come naturally to most of us. After all, we are Americans, and Western Americans, at that. We have grown up in a cowboy culture of independence that says we should pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We Western Americans are willing to tolerate a lot of problems, so long as we don't ask and you don't tell.
But that isn't what Paul meant. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul was using the plural word for you. When he said that God won't let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, Paul didn't mean that as an all-by-yourself you. Paul meant that as a collective you. When one of us bears temptation, we all bear temptation. And, collectively is how we can resist it. What would drag one person down has much less power over the whole group.

When we are faced with temptation and sin, we must remember that we aren't alone. There are lots of people who have been down that road before. And there are lots of people who are eager to help us avoid the wrong and do the right. Through the common nature of our temptation, God has provided us a way out.

**CONCLUSION**

As I was trying to think how to wrap this sermon up, I typed the words "way out" into my Google search engine. A bunch of odd things appeared. One of them was an astronomy website with a cow jumping over the moon. If you correctly answered the educational game questions about planets, stars, and galaxies, you could get the cow to go way out into space. Another "way out" site provided me with song lyrics that talked about smoking, chewing, loose-dog, survivalist-type guys who would shoot you with their gun if you visited their way-out-in-the-wilderness homes without an invitation.

Neither one of those ideas is quite what I'm trying to tell you today. The "way out" which God provides doesn't have to be far away or isolated from people. In fact, the beauty of God's way out is that it's right here close at hand. It's built into our people's history, it's inherent in our own humility, and it's available in supportive community. We may be weak, but God is faithful. Just because we're tempted doesn't mean we have to sin. God always provides for us a way out.