

## **Outside Our Comfort Zones**

Exodus 17:1-7      Crossroads Christian Church

John 4:5-42      March 23, 2014    Lent 3A

You've probably heard the phrase "comfort zone." It means a place or a situation where you feel relaxed, competent, comfortable. Likewise, being out of your comfort zone means a situation that makes you nervous, edgy, tense, or downright scared. Comfort zones are different for each of us. For some of you, talking in front of a crowd would be out of your comfort zone, but it's in mine. For some of you, being out on the dance floor is in your comfort zone, but it's definitely out of mine. For some of us, going to a family reunion is a comfort zone, and we're happy as a clam gabbing with cousins, aunts and uncles, and eating comfort food from our childhood, chicken and noodles, macaroni and cheese, and Jello salad. For others of us, going to a family reunion is not in our comfort zone, but something we endure.

As much as we might like to, we can't stay in our comfort zones forever. Sometimes life's circumstances force us into a situation that's awkward or difficult, and we have to face a challenge that we would rather not face. And that can be good, for growth can happen then. We find ourselves stretched, like after a workout at the gym. We find ourselves widening our comfort zone to include new places. If we didn't step out of our comfort zones long enough to ask someone for a date, or to become our life partner, or to take a challenging job, or to learn a new skill, we would find ourselves in a shrinking, shriveling world. Our comfort zone would become a cage.

Both of our scripture readings today were about people in situations that were definitely out of their comfort zones. First we heard a story from the Exodus. Slavery in a foreign land, Egypt, had been difficult and demeaning, but there they had homes to live in and food to eat. Now they were an ill-prepared people trying to make their way across a dry desert

wilderness. And, of course, they were frightened. Would they die here? Did Moses really know what he was talking about? Sure, there had been miracles and plagues and crossing the Red Sea, but what had he done for us lately? They were frightened, insecure, uncomfortable out in this place where the only wildlife seemed to be snakes and scorpions, lizards and locusts. And because they were frightened, they became angry. They grumbled, they complained, they questioned, they whined. And let's be honest. Wouldn't you?

At the point of the story, they weren't even that far into the desert. The Sinai was an overwhelming and hostile environment, and a very, very, dry one. They challenged Moses' authority, maybe because the only sensible thing seemed to be to turn back and apologize to Pharaoh, rather than to perish in the wilderness. So they complained, and Moses saw them testing the heft of some good throwing rocks. "They're ready to stone me!" Moses said to God. God instructed him to go ahead of the people, with some elders, leaders of the tribes, with him, to a point where he would perceive God's presence. Then, with the staff he had used to part the sea, he was to strike the rock. He did that, water came gushing out, and the people were able to drink.

Our Gospel lesson is a fascinating one, but a long one. You may have felt like it was going to go on forever. Indeed, it's the longest recorded conversation that Jesus had with anybody. Jesus and the disciples were traveling through Samaria. Most Jews took the long way around because they considered Samaritans unclean, and wouldn't eat with them or even speak to them. This was a tension that went back centuries. So the disciples probably were way out of their comfort zones even being there. Then Jesus sent them out to do some tasks and struck up a conversation with a Samaritan woman. Normally, a Jewish man wouldn't talk to a strange woman in public. Another discomfort zone. And the woman was drawing water at noon, rather than in the morning or

evening, which probably meant she was an outcast, unwelcome to draw water with the other women of the village. So when Jesus asked her for a drink, she basically asked, "Oh, yeah?" She challenged Jesus. "Why are you, a Jew, even asking me for a drink. You know who I am." Jesus said, "If you really knew who I was, you would ask me for a drink of living water." And the conversation goes on, filled with irony, with Jesus speaking of spiritual things and the woman thinking in physical terms. Finally, she asks for the living water, and Jesus invites her to go get her husband. Now she's in an extreme discomfort zone, since she's living with someone without benefit of marriage and has a really bad track record when it comes to men. So naturally, she changes the subject, to where people should worship—there or in Jerusalem. And Jesus answers that the physical place doesn't matter. We should worship in spirit and in truth. About then the disciples come back on the scene and are totally baffled why their rabbi should be even talking to such a woman in such a place, let alone having a great theological discussion.

The woman goes on to tell her neighbors, "come see this prophet, who knows all about my past. Could he be the Messiah?" The Orthodox church has a name for her—Saint Photini. Some have called her the first apostle to the Gentiles. This woman who was uncomfortable with her neighbors because of her past was now carrying the Gospel to them.

We assume that we find God most in our comfort zones. We're comfortable here among friends in our beautiful sanctuary. We feel inspired and close to God in the beauty of nature, or we feel thankful to God for times with people that we love. That's all well and good. But often it's in our discomfort zones where God meets us. The desert, or the well in hostile territory, were not comfortable places. But God

used people's discomfort to open them up to new possibilities.

What does this mean for us? We're comfortable with who we are as a church, but maybe God wants to meet us, to lead us, outside our comfort zones. This can mean stretching our financial comfort zone to increase our mission giving. It can also mean working hard at being an open, welcome, hospitable church to new people, who may see things differently than you do, who may have a different way of life than you do. That means being much more intentional about evangelism. It may lead some of you to go on a mission trip or a Habitat project, or to accept a teaching role or a committee assignment. It may mean some cherished assumptions—racial, economic, lifestyle—will be challenged and you'll be expected to change and grow.

Our Dare to Lead team worked with five other SEGA congregations and Hope Partnership over the last year, they dreamed some dreams about what Crossroads could become, and they shared those dreams with the congregation last October in an out-of-this world way. They looked at how we could become a more missional church, reaching out to the community in different ways; how we could connect more with the community and with the Disciples; how we could revitalize the ways that we do things and attract more people to Christ and the church. Since it offered change, it took some of us outside our comfort zone, since change hasn't been kind to us in recent years. Yet we need to work toward positive change rather than just let negative change happen.

In any case, remember that God didn't let the Hebrews stay in the relative comfort of slavery, but led them out. Jesus didn't take his disciples on the safe road, but took them into their discomfort zone. If you don't take some chances, chances are that you aren't going where God wants. Follow God. It may be a bumpy ride, but it's well worth it. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon