

Faith Outside the Comfort Zone

Genesis 12: 1-5 John 3: 1-17

The inability to step outside our comfort zones is dictated by fear and anxiety. The primal nature of fear and anxiety creates the strangest responses. Fear and anxiety are fully capable of overcoming obvious, objective, rational considerations, and fully capable of dismembering us from our deeply held ethics, values, and principles.

I may have already told individuals about the strange way that our dog Charley manages to kill squirrels. Although squirrels may be frolicking in the branches in the trees over his head, Charley sits beneath with alert patience, looking out across our backyard and more importantly, the neighbors' backyards.

The neighbors' backyards have no trees. The only trees are the couple of trees that Charley sits beneath in our yard. I found Charley's positioning strange. Then I saw what his strategy was.

A squirrel comes hopping nonchalantly across the neighbor's backyard. There is a fence between Charley and the squirrel. The squirrel is in a comfort zone.

Suddenly Charley springs into action, coming up to the fence barking, dancing, menacing the squirrel, who by the way is completely safe where he is.

However, the squirrel becomes instinctively anxious and fearful. When the squirrel is anxious and fearful, he knows there is only one thing to do – get up a tree.

The squirrel's problem is that there are no trees in the neighbor's yard. The nearest trees are in the corner of *my* yard. For the squirrel to go up a tree, the squirrel needs to pass through the chain link fence and get past Charley and make it about 5 yards to one of the trees.

This whole enterprise is absurd; the squirrel is perfectly safe where he is. However, fear and anxiety have now driven him to the ridiculous proposition of leaving his safety and driving him into life-threatening danger. This is how Charley hunts squirrels.

This is also how it is when we set foot outside our comfort zone. Like the squirrel, we find a threat where there is no threat, simply because we have stepped outside our comfort zone. We then respond to the fear and anxiety by retreating to a place of comfort and security. This is how and why we stay exactly where we are and have probably remained for long time.

This isn't good for a people of faith. People of faith have to – not an option - **have to** – step outside their comfort zone if they are going to live their faith in any meaningful way. The church is never any help in this. For starters, we offer a sanctuary in which to gather. It is pretty ironic that a people of faith who need to be getting outside their

comfort zones are starting out with a weekly routine that begins in a sanctuary. Inside the sanctuary, they will encounter a safely familiar routine called a ritual. Whether it is a little house church or an arena-sized megachurch, it is a sanctuary with a familiar ritual. How is anyone going to get outside their comfort zone and experience a life of faith doing that? They won't.

I may have told you about Dick, a wonderfully cherubic, friendly old gentleman who was in the church in Weirsdale. I had a hare-brained idea one week and thought I would introduce the congregation to a doxology sung in a different tune from the grindingly familiar Old Hundredth; that's what we sing. Yes, friends, the doxology can be sung in different tunes; that's shocking, I know.

Dick found it so shocking that when he came the door that Sunday his cherubic redness reflected not cheer but anger. He told in spluttering rage that if he could not sing the doxology the way it is *supposed* to be sung, then he was going to find another church. Others shared their disdain as well for my little experiment and that was the end of it. If the sanctuary and the ritual took someone out of their comfort zone, then they were going to find a place that *did* maintain their comfort zone.

When we come to the call of Abram (and Sarai) in Genesis 12, we find Abram had settled with his father in Haran. Although his father had *intended* to go to Canaan (what would later be seen as the Promised Land for another, much later generation), something caused Abram's father to stop in Haran and never move again. It would seem that Abram's father had landed in his comfort zone and decided to stay there. One could also say that when the journey stopped, so did the promise of God.

We should also note that God's own hopes for the human creation had been fraught with problems. The whole human experiment quickly demanded a new beginning which God brought about through the murderous flood of Noah's time. That wasn't the best strategy and God swore never to do that again.

Meanwhile, the human creation had emerged from the deluge as one hot mess and was getting worse. God needed to start over *again*, and God needed a new strategy.

God's vision for a new beginning lay in the one man who was most faithful to God. Upon this man, Abram, and his household, God would make a covenant promise that would finally bring the human creation into the model of God's will and desire.

Abram prospered in Haran, having added his father's legacy to his own wealth. Abram was a blessed man, except for one crucial thing. His wife Sarai was barren. Lacking any heir, Abram's prosperity was for naught. Some other family member would gain all his property and possessions. Sarai's barrenness is an apt metaphor for the **dead end** that Abraham faced. In a way, it was a life sentence, or maybe a *lifeless* sentence. They weren't young and their fate seemed sealed in hopelessness, although they were certainly in their comfort zone otherwise. Yet all that wealth and Abram still lacks the one thing that could make it all *meaningful* – an heir.

To discover meaning and new life in this situation, Abram is forced to make a drastic change and leave his comfort zone. Life's true promise from God for Abram and Sarai lies elsewhere. He can stay and remain prosperous, but also confined and defined by his comfort. However, the promise of God is not in Haran.

Today's brief passage has God speaking to Abram, telling him to leave Haran and sojourn on a route that God would reveal. God promised, *I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.* God may simply be planting a seed in Abram, but God has a really big vision for how all of this will work out.

So at age 75, ever faithful Abram left Haran with his substantial possessions. Just like that apparently, picking up and moving because the promise of God had been revealed to him. It required him to move in faith outside his comfort zone into an unknown, subduing any fears and anxieties he may have had about this venture, resting wholly on his faith in his God. He faithfully accepted God's vision for new life, a vision for starting over in another place, wherever God should lead them.

That vision for starting over always sounds enticing. I caution my prison students that having a vision written down in statement form is nothing but words on a page. It can be exhilarating to see that vision statement, but some will think that they have it now and they are tremendously self-congratulatory. I make sure to burst that bubble with a strong dose of reality. Hearing and reading a vision for something new is wholly different from actually making it into the action path for one's new life. That has a sobering effect on them. Real work, real effort, real discipline, and really thinking hard about how to get from point A to point B remain to be accomplished. And yes, failure is an invaluable part of the passage to achievement. All of it will only take place when they sojourn outside their comfort zone, working through their fear, discomfort, and anxiety faithfully.

In John's gospel, Nicodemus has come *at night* to see Jesus. We don't know the reason for his nocturnal visit and have to speculate. It's exceptional because Nicodemus is a high-ranking Pharisee, and you probably know that Pharisees haven't exactly been Jesus' best buddies. Knowing the motivation for his visit would be helpful, but we might imagine that that Nicodemus simply wants to learn more about this popular new teacher and healer who has arrived on the scene.

The author or editor of John's gospel loves the symbolic interplay of light and dark as we can see quickly in his early verses in chapter 1. Like I said, Nicodemus visits Jesus at night – *in the dark* – a symbolic reflection of Nicodemus' state of spiritual awareness. Nicodemus is in the dark about Jesus, and likely in the dark about the promise of God that could be coming from Jesus. Perhaps Nicodemus is open to a vision for starting over. Maybe he's seeking a new way for himself, a new way that would redefine his life of faith an open God's promise to him anew. But then there is that comfort zone. This new direction Jesus offers may be intriguing, but coming out of that comfort zone may not be what Nicodemus was bargaining for.

The dialogue is quite uneven, another stylistic trait of John's gospel. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher from God due to miraculous signs. Yet Jesus' reply **ignores** what Nicodemus has said. Nicodemus' remark missed the point. Nicodemus didn't recognize the miracles as the witness of Jesus to the Kingdom of God.

So Jesus answers the question that Nicodemus *should* have asked which would have been: 'How can I behold the kingdom of God?' To that **unspoken** question, Jesus says: *No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless he seeks a new life with God in Jesus, in the baptism of water and Spirit, he'll never know the gracious healing, salvation, and new life that God is offering. But this metaphor of new life is not a vision that Nicodemus can fathom. It is not presented in terms familiar to him.

Nicodemus carries on ridiculously about literal rebirthing from the womb; 'how can that happen?' Jesus continues to explain about the Spirit of God, that the Spirit moves as it pleases, leading the faithful like Abram into the promise of God. But Nicodemus is immersed in his darkness, confined by his pre-conceived notions of how everything is supposed to be, and fully immobilized by his comfort zone.

Jesus gets exasperated: *You're Israel's teacher and you don't understand!* Jesus draws on the story from Numbers about the staff with the snake that Moses raised up for the people. Jesus is like the snake on the staff. He's **both** a reminder of our sinfulness before God (Garden of Eden) as well as a sign of gracious healing for salvation to eternal life. (Since the snake sheds its skin, the snake is also seen as a metaphor for new life, a new being.)

God's grace is evident in God's deep and abiding love for his people, so great and profound that his only Son Jesus has come to bring God's people the promise of new life.

As we witness in Nicodemus, the vision of the Kingdom invites us to step outside our customary, familiar ways, outside our comfort zone. But as Nicodemus reveals, we can be trapped in that familiar space, bound by our reluctance to explore a new direction faithfully, defined by fear and anxiety rather than faith.

It's pure faith journey, trusting the voice of God, letting that voice re-order your plans, re-define your path, and provide the promise of unexpected blessing. This is the servant spirit, listening for God's promise, a promise only grasped and embraced by faith.

May our Lenten attentions awaken the power of our faith to empower our faithful vision to behold the blessing of God's rich promise for those faithful to the Lord.