

Welcome

When have you been the furthest outside your comfort zone? For me one of the times that sticks out the most is when I went to speak at a Pastors' Conference in Guatemala. I was there with five other USAmerican pastors. We flew into Guatemala City, and then had a six hour drive across the country to the city of Quetzaltenango. This was back when I was a youth pastor, and as soon as our host Carlos found out I was a youth pastor, he made a couple of calls and suddenly there was now a youth ministry conference *in addition* to the pastors' conference, and I was the keynote speaker.

I had 4 years of experience as a youth pastor. Mi Espanol es muy malo. And back then it was even *muy*-*er* malo than it is now. And I knew zero about Guatemalan church culture *or* teen culture. I was *wildly* underqualified to speak at a youth ministry conference, to say nothing of being the *only* speaker.

We finally reached our hotel, and Carlos told me to be ready to leave after dinner. Leave? Yes, as it turned out, the new youth ministry conference was at a church across town. So after dinner, I climbed into a van with fifteen or so Guatemalan people, including my translator, and we went across town.

It was then that it occurred to me that if something happened - if there was a car accident or if somehow I got lost and on my own, I was functionally helpless. I didn't speak the language. This was before cell phones had good international plans. And I was in the middle of a city I didn't know at all.

I wasn't scared - the people I was with were great. But I was struck for the first time in a long time how thoroughly *helpless* I was. I was wholly dependent on my hosts for everything - even basic communication.

How often are we in those kinds of situations - where we have little control, where we're at the mercy of others? I'm guessing for most of us, the answer is "Not very often." For good reason: it's really uncomfortable to be out of control. (Maybe some of you are about to head into that situation for Thanksgiving.)

It's not good to always feel out of control, but it is good *sometimes*. In fact, we're going to explore today how Jesus calls us outside our comfort zones. There are sometimes ways we need to grow, ways we need to encounter God that can only happen when we leave the comforts of home and risk.

Message

Here at Catalyst, we always take the four weeks leading up to Advent to reflect on who we are as a Church and dream about the future. Last year, we introduced four big ideas we're organizing ourselves around moving forward. So for the next four weeks, we're going to revisit those ideas and ask two questions: What does each mean for Catalyst and what does each mean for *me* as a part of Catalyst?

This year, we're going to be exploring how each big idea is found in the life and ministry of Jesus, and we're calling the series Proximity Warning because each big idea is grounded in a close relationship to Jesus. When we draw closer to God, our lives change. Fair warning.

We saw that when we explored our first big idea, Friendship. We saw how Jesus garnered a reputation as a 'friend of sinners' specifically because he got up close and personal with them. He shared his life with them. Friendship prioritizes proximity.

Next, we investigated Diversity. Far from being a buzz word or a trend we're chasing, Diversity was God's idea for the Church from the beginning. We saw in the story of the Samaritan woman that when we as Jesus' disciples don't attend to those who are different from us, we miss what God is doing in the world. Diversity is essential to God's calling, and true diversity requires us to be in proximity to others.

Last week, we explored the idea of Discipleship. We saw discipleship is transformation, that in light of God's love, we take off our old ways and put on the ways of Jesus. It's an intentional movement to be more like Jesus.

Today, we're covering our final big idea, Pilgrimage. We tend to think - especially at this time of year - about funny hats coming across the Atlantic on the Mayflower. But Pilgrimage is an ancient Christian tradition. Pilgrimage is about leaving home, setting out on a journey. Pilgrimage insists there are ways we can only know God when we leave.

For Catalyst, Pilgrimage isn't just about travelling. It's not even *mainly* about travelling. Home is where we're comfortable, where we're in control. We can be pilgrims by stepping away from that, putting ourselves in places and among people where we don't get to call the shots. Where our perspective isn't normative.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Luke 9. We're going to look at a series of exchanges Jesus has with his followers where he presses on them not to assume God is only with them, that God is aligned with their comfort zone. Again and again here, Jesus pushes his disciples to imagine a bigger faith.

One of the biggest dangers of never leaving our comfort zones is a cultivation of an Us vs Them mentality. "Us" is whoever happens to be in my comfort zone - my family, my neighbors, my race, my church, my country... whatever.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, God calls us to be diverse, to work with Jesus in tearing down walls that divide us. Pilgrimage is how we do that. Look at these first couple of examples of Jesus' disciples struggling with this:

John said to Jesus, "Master, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn't in our group."

But Jesus said, "Don't stop him! Anyone who is not against you is for you." -- Luke 9:49-50

The disciples are angry that someone else is doing Jesus' work, even working as agents of Jesus. I see so many recognizable impulses in here - the desire for control, the desire for credit. A distrust of this other guy - who is he? Is his message right? Is he representing us well? Who does he think he is?!

It's way too easy for churches to get caught up in this. So I love Jesus' word of caution: Anyone who isn't against you is for you.

This is something at Catalyst we've done well since the beginning. We've never been a church that wants all the credit. We don't run our own compassionate ministries; we support Life Message. We work with Rowlett Reindeer. We partner with our denomination to do mission work.

We're not the kind of church that feels threatened by others doing good work. Quite the contrary: we get excited by the possibility of partnership with those outside our family.

But what about those who *aren't* 'on the same team' as us, so to speak? In the very next passage, Jesus and disciples encounter some Samaritans. You might remember from a couple of weeks ago that Jews and Samaritans didn't get along very well. And not every interaction Jesus had with them went as well as the one with the woman at the well. Look at what happened next in Luke 9:

As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. But the people of the village did not welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. When James and John saw this, they said to Jesus, "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. So they went on to another village. -- Luke 9:51-56

The people of that particular village wanted nothing to do with Jesus - not as a respected rabbi or as God's promised Messiah. And I love how the disciples respond - Lord, should we call down fire?

As if they could call down fire.

They're saying, Lord, are you gonna smite em?

And Jesus *rebukes* them. That's not what we're doing here. And they just go somewhere else.

Wow. That is *not* the response Christians today have to people who are hostile to us. We want to fight, wage a culture war. Defend ourselves in the name of defending God (as if God needs our help).

This is especially important when we take the risk and leave our comfort zones, head to Samaria, as it were. It's not always going to go well. We're going to sometimes be rejected, and we have to take care not to get offended.

Over the summer, my wife Amanda and I went to the Texas Theater to see a documentary called Hail Satan?. It was a fascinating, thought-provoking exploration of the movement called The Satanic Temple. These people call themselves Satanists, but they're also non-theists, which means they don't believe in God or Satan.

Weird. And pretty far outside my comfort zone.

After the screening, we saw some people from the Dallas chapter of the TST hanging out, so I went up to introduce myself to one guy. I said, "Hi, I thought the documentary was really thought-provoking. Thank you for making time to come out."

He got really excited and said, "Thanks! Are you interested in the Satanic Temple?"

I stammered. "Uh... sort of, but not like you think. I'm a Christian pastor, and I'm really interested in building some bridges for interfaith dialog."

He got a funny look on his face and said, "Oh... I have to go," and then walked off.

I started to get offended - after all, I'm the one out of my comfort zone here. I took time to sit through the documentary *and* introduce myself. How dare he not acknowledge my gracious courage! Call down that fire, Lord!

I took a deep breath and stopped myself. I remembered that I don't know that guy. Maybe he's just a jerk. But it's very possible he's had some deep, painful experiences with Christians, with pastors specifically. I have no idea. And frankly, he doesn't *owe* me anything. I left my comfort zone, and that's why I'm called to do.

Sometimes leaving our comfort zones makes for great new relationships - our relationship with the Sachse mosque began because they were receptive to our overtures of friendship.

But we can't predict how the people who live in our Samarias are going to react. We're not called to worry about that. We're called to be faithful to *go*, to leave our comfort zones.

This uncertainty can be scary for us, but it's what Jesus modelled for us. We don't like it because it leaves us out of control, and we'd much rather engage new and unfamiliar people and ideas on our own terms.

But Jesus' model is incarnation - leaving the comforts of home to become one of us. Or, as he said in the very next passage:

As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go."

But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.” -- Luke 9:57-58

My friend Bryne Lewis wrote on this passage, and she points out that what Jesus does here is put himself at the mercy of our hospitality. By insisting he's homeless, Jesus is refusing the comforts of a comfort zone. He's making himself wholly dependent on us, on humanity.

This is a step past what most of us think of as hospitality. When we extend hospitality, we're still in control. It's our house, our place. Hospitality is welcoming Them into the space that belongs to Us. It's still on our terms.

And hospitality is *good*. It's one of the most important Christian virtues. But notice what God does to rescue us: God leaves heaven and becomes one of us. God, in a way, becomes a pilgrim.

It's important that the first movement in our relationship with the Sachse Mosque was that a dozen of us went to their mosque and shared a meal with them. We went out of our comfort zone.

That act - of putting ourselves at the mercy of our neighbors' hospitality - has opened up the possibility of building stronger relationships in the future. We are earning the opportunity to speak openly about Jesus even as we live out who Jesus is with our new friends.

So as we look to 2020, we want to continue to find new ways to learn what God is doing in the world around us. From partnering with our city for events like Trunk or Treat to working with community organizations like Life Message to building relationships with other faiths like our friends at the Sachse Mosque, we're going to continue to stretch ourselves.

Of course we'll continue to gather here, in our comfort zone, to worship, to celebrate our common faith and the God who makes us one family.

But we'll also continue to ask how God is calling us outside, to meet God in the world around us. We'll be courageous, putting ourselves out there, knowing that while we can't control how we'll be received, we can trust the God who has gone before us to prepare the good work.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to the Cross with him.

1. What does my comfort zone look like?
2. Where am I hesitant to leave my comfort zone?
3. How might God be calling me out of my comfort zone?

Assignment + Blessing

Put yourself somewhere uncomfortable.

