

## Beyond the Comfort Zone

Rev. Ann Eichhorn

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*Editor's note: Ann stepped into the pulpit at the last minute on this Sunday to replace her husband Bill, who was home with the flu. She resurrected this sermon from many years back, as she felt it had relevance in today's world. Her listeners agreed.*

*Sandra Weil*

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We were well into the normal return flight over the Atlantic Ocean, having left Paris about three hours before. Stewardesses were busying themselves getting ready to serve lunch. Bill was dozing beside me and I was finishing a good book, when all of a sudden the plane took a dive and began to shake. Several overhead compartments shook loose, spilling contents on the floor and causing passengers in the aisles an even greater struggle as they made their way back to their seats. *Fasten your seatbelt* signs flashed as flight attendants moved quickly to get people seated and get themselves buckled into seats. Everyone was awake, and many had reached for the comforting hand of another to hang onto as the flight now resembled the experience of being on a bucking bronco, with its lurches and drops. Around us we heard air sick bags quickly being grabbed from the seat pouches and put into use. Eyes were wide as all of us struggled to control our rising panic as we waited for the plane to get through the turbulence we had obviously just encountered. It wasn't long before the reassuring voice of the pilot came over the loud speaker informing us that while we had just hit an unexpected weather front, he was searching both above and below it for a comfort zone that he hoped he could locate soon.

"Well, now that we have been assured of the reasons for this scary situation [not made any easier by the fact that we had been detained on this plane in Paris for nearly an hour and a half while they repaired one engine that was not working properly], we will just try to be patient for a few more minutes until it passes," Bill and I said out loud, trying to comfort each other. But the lurching, shaking and more than just occasional drops continued on and on and on. Instead of lasting just a few minutes, the situation went on for nearly an hour, with none of us doing anything but hang on to each other's hands, and some of us reaching to go beyond the physical distress, seeking spiritual comfort through our prayers. Locating the passenger comfort zone was not a sudden quieting the pilot was able to bring about. Rather, we worked our way through the turbulence, becoming aware that as time went on the severity of the drops and shakes began to lessen and slowly disappeared. This experience made us more aware that we all get attached to comfort zone expectations, hoping we can go through life avoiding the bumps and being able to remain on a smooth path.

Another way of understanding comfort zones came to us while being on a bus together for seventeen days with twenty-eight other people traveling throughout Israel. Not being the tour leaders for a change afforded us the opportunity to observe group dynamics from another perspective. We found it most interesting to watch the power games being played and to see how they got resolved and by whom. For example, in the group was a newly retired church district superintendent who insisted on riding in the bus with his window shade down at all times, making it difficult for people around him to see the sights. When it became warm enough in the bus for the driver to turn on the air conditioner, it would run for about ten minutes, and this man would bellow to turn it off, as it made him too uncomfortable. He did not like to have his window open, nor to have the breeze from someone else's window blowing on him. It did not matter that we were on the desert and that it was hot! He simply wanted his way, was used to getting it, and had no apparent regard for the comfort of anyone but himself. In the first days, various members of the group tried occasionally to talk him into positions of compromise, but he would not budge. So before long, rather than allow him to ruin the trip for everyone, or to continually be frustrated with his inability to change his attitude, people worked out little strategies for how to get seats in the front of the bus and to isolate him in a corner of his own in the back. The man's behavior continued to indicate that he had no interest in working toward the comfort of others; he was caught up in his own need to be comfortable.

Travel itself brings to the forefront the notion of comfort as one encounters different realities in different places. And just the fact of visiting the Holy Land carries with it the potential for having Bible passages, learned long ago, and the events of the moment turned into new understandings, as one views the terrain, is exposed to various religious traditions, confronts the conflicts of contemporary times, and observes the wide diversity of people and their cultures that continue to inhabit the land. Bible passages about comfort began to surface, carrying new meanings and bringing new challenges.

When you stand at the top of Mt. Sinai in Egypt and look out as far as you can see in any direction, and find not a sign of trees, grass, weeds, birds or water *anywhere*, but just rocky, barren, hot, dusty mountains, you are struck with how excruciatingly difficult the Exodus experience of the Hebrew people must have been as they left Egypt and wandered about in the wilderness for forty years, just trying to survive in this extremely hostile environment. The Hebrews were a Biblical people needing comfort.

To see the scattered little Bedouin settlements today, where "home" is dried grass stacked against a chicken wire fence or piled in a circle with animal hides or old pieces of plastic or fabric stretched over the top, and to see people living as their ancestors did, tending small herds of goats and sheep as nomads of the land, it is not hard to see that comfort as most of us know it is a concept beyond their understanding. For them, living in a comfort zone means being able to stay out of the way of stray bullets, unjust raids, and retaliatory violence between those fighting for control of the land, and this conception of a comfort zone is foreign to what most of us have known or can even imagine. These people, like the early Hebrews, are a people struggling to exist in a hostile environment, and they are in need of comfort.

It is clear being in the Holy Land, nearly two thousand years after Jesus, that some human dynamics and environmental realities have not changed much since his days on earth. The daily conditions which Jesus encountered called out for comfort. Comfort, Jesus would have understood, was an action plan to address the needs of others. *Comfort* would have been a verb as it is defined in the dictionary today. To comfort means to soothe, console, or cheer those who are in pain or distress, or who are grieving or depressed. It means to bring relief to those afflicted, to offer aid and assistance to those who need it most. Jesus taught that comfort as action becomes a way to interact with all dimensions of life – personal, communal, political, spiritual, physical. Comfort is an invitation offered to us by God, as a way to love one another. Comfort is something we can give freely and which can make a difference in whatever is being experienced by someone else.

Comfort is something given, not possessed. Sometimes (like the superintendent in the story above) we get so attached to our own comfort zones, or take them for granted (taking long showers, having clean clothes daily, going to certain jobs, living in particular neighborhoods, attending special schools), that we begin to think others owe us comfort, or that we have a right to collect more comfort than others. This kind of thinking switches the focus of comfort from something we give or seek for others in need to that of something we who already have more than our share demand or expect to receive. Such a switch in focus also causes confusion between the action word *comfort* and the word which usually describes non-action: *comfortable*. To seek an existence in which one is always comfortable is self-serving and leads to isolation, alienation and loneliness. To seek only the comfortable life is idol worship, and the idol is ourselves. To be focused on what is comfortable for us is to miss God at work elsewhere, bringing comfort.

It is almost ironic that when God breaks into our lives – usually when something happens to disturb our “comfortability,” our plans – we don’t like it. But it is sometimes in the very midst of those experiences where we are so very uncomfortable and unhappy that we discover the powerful presence and the tremendous love of God offering comfort to us in fresh new ways. Comfort is not illusive nor complicated. Comfort is a way God’s love is made visible in our world. Let us intentionally work at seeking out those whose pain and needs are usually invisible to the world; they are God’s children, and they are genuinely in need of comfort. Let us all through God’s grace bring an angel’s touch to another’s wounds today, this week, this month, this life.

Amen.