

Jesus is in Judea. He has been busy baptizing and making disciples. He has been so busy in fact, that the Pharisees are starting to notice him. And so Jesus decides it's time to move on to Galilee.

But in order to get from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, he has to go through the region called Samaria, populated by the Samaritan people, whom the Jews despise and detest. The religious differences between the Jews and the Samaritans have resulted in horrible hatred and prejudice on both sides, each calling the other half-breeds and heathens and much, much worse.

So as Jesus prepares to leave Judea, he braces himself for his trip right through the belly of the beast. Would he be attacked, assaulted, molested, robbed or kidnapped? He has no idea what fate awaits him in this lawless land of savages. Perhaps they will kill him and throw his body behind some rocks where no one will ever find him. All distinct possibilities

But here's something interesting.

Jesus doesn't really *have to* go through Samaria in order to get to Galilee in the north. He could easily take the eastern Samaritan bypass through the region of Decapolis and visited the faith city of Philadelphia (not the Pennsylvania one, obviously). Or he could have taken the western Samaritan bypass up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, which would have been my choice, stopping by cities such as Joppa and Cesarea on his

way to Galilee.

Jesus could have easily chosen either one of these bypasses around Samaria. He doesn't really *have to* go through it at all, and no one would blame him. Jesus could have avoided that dreadful, uncomfortable place if he really wanted to.

But he doesn't want to. Jesus does not choose to avoid Samaria, despite the animosity between those people and his own. He chooses to go right through it, he knows he must go right where he doesn't necessarily want to go because he knows he has work to do there, and he does encounter miraculous work there, in an encounter with a woman at a well who lives in shame and humiliation, and Jesus gives her another chance....and so in this way, Jesus *has to* go through Samaria in order to get to Galilee.

In the same way Rosa Parks *had to* sit in that seat on the bus that day, in the same way that Nelson Mandela *had to* protest apartheid even to the point of imprisonment, in the same way that Martin Luther *had to* stand his ground in court in a town called Worms when the Emperor demands that he take back everything he has said and written about the church. Any one of these people could have avoided the belly of the beast...any one of them could have gone around the issue and chosen a safer, more scenic path. But none of them did. Each one of them journeyed right into their Samarias, those places that judged them and hated them and made them shake in fear.

In the same way, each one of you have a Samaria in your life. In the same way, each one of you have had or will have a time when you are faced with the same decision

Jesus was faced with---do I go through the belly of the beast or go around it? An issue, a person, an ideology, a doctrine, a personal conviction, a creed, an ethic, a pledge or a vow...each one of us at some point stares Samaria right in the face. And we have to make a choice. Do I go there, or do I not go there?

I know I've been faced with such decisions. Sometimes I rise to the occasion and journey bravely into Samaria; sometimes I am a coward and turn and run the other way like Jonah did (and remember how his efforts of resistance turned out).

A great example from German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who gave my son Christian his middle name. Bonhoeffer accepted an invitation from the United States in the 1930's to travel throughout the US, presenting lectures about ethics and religion. Instead of settling into the religious asylum that this country was offering him, he decided he must return to Germany, asking, "How can I participate in the rebuilding of Germany after this war, if I do not share in her suffering and sorrow in this present hour?" He returned to Nazi Germany, participated in a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler and was eventually hung for it. Bonhoeffer chose to go through Samaria, instead of taking the bypass.

Jesus shows us how to do this. Jesus shows us how to journey directly into those very places in life that are ugly and messy, those places that we fear and distrust, those places that threaten us with harm and suffering. Jesus doesn't just talk about going into the uncomfortable places in life—he shows us how to do it....not only by traveling into

and through Samaria, but by continuing on to the cross...

...because of course he could have chosen not to be arrested, he could have chosen not to be tortured and crucified...of course, Jesus could have chosen an easier way for the sins of the world to be forgiven. Jesus could have chosen to avoid the cross. He didn't have to be crucified in our place. But he chooses to, he has to because he loves us, and in this way he surrenders his free will. He chooses to die a terrible death for us, instead of choosing the easy way out.

Wherever you happen to find yourself in life right now, know that Jesus is right beside you, giving you the strength you need to get through it. Jesus was with Rosa that day on the bus. He was with Mandela all those years in prison. He was with Luther standing toe to toe with the Emperor. He was with Dietrich hanging from those gallows. He is with you, no matter how afraid you are, no matter what valley of death you face, no matter how afraid you are...and he will walk with you every step of the way, right into the belly of the beast, and right through to the other side.

We might shake with fear, but he is calm and full of peace. He is not afraid, because he's been here before.