

“WHAT CAN I GET YOU FOR CHRISTMAS? I – A LIMB”

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First Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:26-38

Matthew 1:18-25

When you were growing up, did you like to climb trees? Or, if you're still young, do you like to climb trees? I never particularly did, but oh, my brothers did – big time! Especially my two youngest brothers. When we were growing up in Thomson Estates, it was all woods behind our house then, and they and their friends spent endless hours there exploring and playing and yes, climbing trees. And that didn't always end well!

One day, one of my brothers who shall remain nameless was climbing a tree in our backyard, and he got his knee stuck in the Y of two branches – and I mean stuck! I was babysitting them at the time (no surprise there!) and some of the other kids came running in to tell me that he was stuck, so I sauntered out there to see what was going on – I mean, after all, how stuck could he be? Well, he was stuck, and I mean stuck. His knee was wedged in there as tight as could be and no amount of yanking on the branch was loosening him. I, of course, then panicked, until I remembered that one of the kid's fathers was a state policeman, so I sent Steven running down the street to get his dad. A few minutes later, he and his dad came running onto the scene, and with his brute strength, the state policeman was able to loosen the hold enough for my brother to escape!

And that wasn't the only time that particular brother had a tree adventure. Another time, while I was babysitting again (naturally), he climbed up into a different tree in our backyard onto a makeshift tree fort they had built, sat on the edge of one of the planks, and promptly fell out of the tree, with the plank falling on top of him. That one landed him briefly in the hospital! (And you wonder why I have gray hair?!!)

Climbing trees, and more particularly, climbing out on limbs tends to be something that we outgrow as we grow up. We like safety and security. We like to be in control, and not risk too much. Oh, we might climb a little – but go out on a limb, probably not! We like to call the shots, and going out on a limb, for whatever reason, is a little too risky for us.

Well, the ultimate story of going out on a limb actually shows up in two places this morning – the two Gospel lessons that we just heard read. Here were two people, just like you and me, Mary and Joseph, going on about their lives normally and naturally, when God asked them to go out on a limb for Him.

Mary, as you probably know, was just a teenage girl. She lived with her parents Joachim and Anne. Hers was probably a very normal life. She was like every other young girl her age in that day and time. She enjoyed life at home, doing chores with the rest of her siblings, growing until that day when her parents would find her a respectable man whom she would marry and with whom she would hope to have children and with whom she would spend the rest of her days.

Everything was going along just fine, thank you very much! She was so excited because her parents had found a wonderful match for her in a man by the name of Joseph, who was a carpenter. She knew she would have a wonderful life with him, for he would provide well for her and their family through his trade. Sure, he was a bit older than her, but that must have given her a sense of stability and security, and so she was walking into the future with excitement, planning a wedding and loving all the attention her betrothal was getting. At night, when she lay in bed, she was probably envisioning the home Joseph would build for her, and the great life they would have together. It was all good – predictable, safe, secure, solid.

Everything was great for Joseph too! Surely he was pleased with his engagement to Mary – she was a lovely young woman, and he could see a bright future with her. He saw the admiring looks people gave him when they heard of their betrothal, and no doubt, he too was busy making plans – plans for their home, plans for their wedding, plans for their future. He wanted to do everything right to take care of her, and protect her, and give her everything she deserved and more! For Joseph too, it was all good – predictable, safe, secure, solid.

Both of them – Mary and Joseph – nestled solidly near the trunk of the tree – and then – God called them both out on a limb! Quite suddenly, quite remarkably – He called them both to a great adventure, a great, big, risky, scary adventure!

You heard how it happened – Mary was visited by an angel in the night, telling her that God was doing a mighty thing through her – bringing his only begotten Son into the world. None of us can possibly imagine what Mary went through that night and the days ahead. First of all, she had to believe for a moment that she was dreaming – this couldn't possibly be happening! But then, after it had sunk in, so did the ramifications of what would happen should she say yes!

What on earth would her parents say? Would they believe her? Would they believe that she was still a virgin, that this child was of the Holy Spirit?

And what would the people in the village think and say? She could almost hear the rumor mill start swirling. She could see in her mind's eye the people turning away from her, or laughing in her face. Who would ever believe this incredible story?

And Joseph? How would she ever tell Joseph? How in the world would he ever believe that she had not cheated on him? And what on earth would compel him to stay with her after she told him she was pregnant? She could easily see

that, in no time at all, she could be all alone, with a little, tiny baby and nothing and no one else.

But did you hear the words that Gabriel also said to Mary? “Do not be afraid, God is with you.” Do not be afraid. Somehow, I think, it was those words, that spoke to Mary’s heart, that broke through her fear and foreboding, and caused her to step out on that limb of faith. She knew it was God calling her to this task, and it was God who would be with her all the days ahead – and if God would be with her, well, she could do it. So she said yes.

And then she told Joseph. We aren’t privy to that conversation, but we do know, from Matthew’s words, that Joseph’s world was rocked by it, and that he really, really struggled with what to do. He had all sorts of options, one of which was to break the betrothal, and move on with his life. He had every right to do that, and frankly, that’s what everyone would have expected him to do. The world would think that Mary had obviously cheated on him, and broken the betrothal by doing so, and by law, Joseph could simply break the agreement and move on.

Yet, he didn’t. Why? Well, he too was visited by an angel, and he too, heard those words of comfort and security – “Do not be afraid. God is with you.” And so, going against all odds, Joseph too, stepped out on that limb of faith, and answered God’s call on his life.

Now, though their stories, Mary’s and Joseph’s, are so profound and singularly changed the life of the world forever, we too have stories not unlike theirs in some ways. We too, if we’ve lived any length of days, have had those moments when we’ve been called to go out on a limb, to step out in faith. And we know, how scary and uncomfortable that can be.

In a wonderful sermon on this text, Pastor George McConnel talks about that as he writes, “Can you relate to Joseph? Do you know how it feels? Aren’t you more comfortable sitting on a branch than going out on a limb? I’ll bet some of you (he continues) have been there. Some of you have been called to go out on a limb a time or two. You know the imbalance that comes from having one foot in your will and one foot in God’s will. You, too, have sunk your fingernails into the bark to get a better grip. You know too well the butterflies that swarm in the pit of your stomach when you realize change is in the air.” (George McConnel, “Going Out on a Limb in 2011,” 01/02/11)

How about it? Can you relate? I’m sure you can, because I know about some of the limbs you have been called to climb. Whether or not to take a new job . . . whether or not to start or end a relationship . . . whether or not to give more than you gave last year . . . whether or not to go to college . . . whether or not to trust someone who has hurt you, or forgive someone . . . whether or not to try something new in your life, move to a new place, retire . . . well, you get the idea. Rarely is there a life that has not experienced “going out on a limb” moments, like Mary and Joseph.

It takes a lot of courage to say “Yes” as they did. It takes a lot of courage, and more than that, it takes trust – trust in God. Trust in God to “not be afraid” and trust in God that He will always be there for you.

This morning, I want to tell you about two people who were called to go out on a limb for God. One was a man named Lord Kenneth Clark. I don’t know if you recognize his name at all, but he was internationally known at one time for his television series called “Civilization.” This is his story.

“While he lived and died without faith in Christ, he admitted an overwhelming religious experience in his autobiography. While visiting a beautiful church, he wrote, ‘My whole being was irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy far more intense than anything I had known before.’ But what he called ‘the gloom of grace’ created a problem for him. If he allowed it to influence him, he knew that he would have to change. He was sure his family would think he had lost his mind. And he was fearful that such intense joy would prove to be an illusion. His conclusion was, in his own words, ‘I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course.’” (Online, “Out on a Limb,” Sue Blader, sermoncentral.com)

That is so incredibly sad. God not only invited Clark to climb out onto the limb of faith, but He filled his heart with joy in that moment – and yet, in Clark’s words, he was “too deeply embedded in the world to change course” – he was too settled, too secure, too afraid to answer God’s call.

Contrast that to a woman named Darlene Kelley. Darlene is a pastor in New York, and in 2004, her Bishop sent her to Kingston NY to be the last pastor of a dying church, Clinton Avenue United Methodist. It had been dying for years, and Kelley’s job was to sort of do hospice for that church – walk it into a dignified death. Trouble is – God had something to say about that – He invited Darlene to go out on a limb – and here’s how it happened.

One day, after months and months of frustration at the demeanor of the very few members the church had left, and weariness over all the arguing and fighting, Darlene was coming down the street to the church, and she noticed that someone had put a big chain and padlock through the front door handle of the church. Boy, what a sign that was to the world that this church was dead.

So frustrated and heartbroken was Darlene, and also so irritated at whoever had done that, Darlene went into the church through another door, then marched herself up to the highest point in that church – which meant climbing some stairs up to the base of the steeple. And when she got there, she fell to her knees and wept in prayer to God. All of her sadness and frustration poured out and she pleaded with God to direct her.

As she did, suddenly, she says, she saw a vision of a key, and she saw clearly where it was – in a desk drawer in an office in the church. So she got up from her knees, made her way to that office, opened the drawer, and there it was! She took that key, went around to the front door, put the key in that padlock and took the

chain off of the handle. And about that time, around the corner, came the few remaining church members, including the one who had put the chain on the door in the first place! And was he ever livid!

So they all went inside, and had quite a rousing session – some screaming and yelling, some crying, and all the while Darlene hears God’s voice in her ears telling her to “love them, love them, love them.” Well, when the dust settled, some people left, never to return – but the others, began to find ways to invite people into their church, and little by little, that church has grown in strength and numbers, and is no longer planning its own funeral. (Paul Nixon, *We Refused to Lead a Dying Church!*, p. 124)

“Do not be afraid. God is with you.” If you are at a place in your life where you feel like you’re out on a limb, do not be afraid, God is with you. He will never leave you, nor forsake you – so be of good courage, and keep going.

You know what, friends? There’s an ironic twist to this story, and to any story of God calling us out on limbs in life – and it is this: once you get there, once you agree to go out on a limb and do something new, the only way you can do it, is to let go of the limb and let God catch you and carry you. Mary did that, Joseph did that, and so did Pastor Darlene.

Finally, let me point out one thing more. God called Mary and Joseph out on a limb to carry Jesus into the world, and today, He calls us to do the very same thing. This world in which we live needs Jesus more than ever, and you and I are the ones God is calling to take Him into that world. It’s is scary, and it is risky, and it does feel like we’ll be crawling out on a limb to do it.

But let it be our Advent challenge. Tell someone about Jesus and what he means for your life. Invite someone to come to church with you. Bring them to the choir cantata or children’s Christmas program. See if they want to come with you on Christmas Eve. Turn to those who are struggling and come with them to the Blue Christmas service. Call or visit someone and share with them the love of Christ.

God is calling us to bear Jesus into the world today, friends. Just as he called Mary and Joseph, he’s calling us to go out on a limb for him – with faith. So “do not be afraid,” say “Here I Am, Lord!,” step out on that limb and then let go, trusting Him to catch you and carry you all the days ahead, just like He carried Mary and Joseph. May it be so!

Amen.