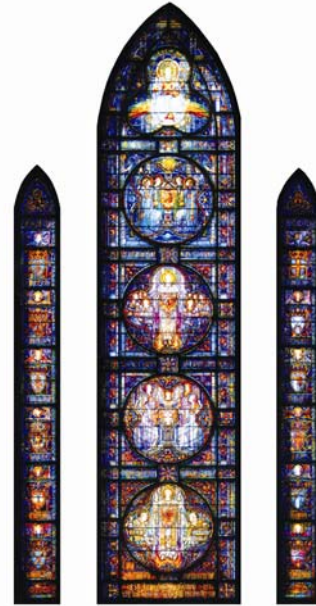


January 2, 2011

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Going Out on a Limb in 2011

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 1:18-25

Now, Joseph was perched firmly on his branch in the tree. It was thick, reliable, and perfect for sitting. It was so strong that he didn't tremble when the storms came, nor did he shake when the winds blew. No, this branch was predictable and solid and Joseph had no intention of leaving it.

That is, until he was told to go out on a limb.

As he sat securely on his branch, he looked up at the limb God wanted him to climb. He'd never seen one so thin! "There's no place to sit. There's no protection from the weather. And, how could you sleep dangling from that quivering twig?" He inched back a bit, leaned against the trunk, and pondered the situation.

Common sense told him not to go out on the limb. "Conceived by the Holy Spirit?"

Come on!"

Self-defense told him not to do it. "Who will believe me? What will our families think?"

Convenience told him not to do it. "Just when I was hoping to settle down and raise a family."

Pride told him not to do it. "If she expects me to buy a tale like that..."

Fear told him not to do it. "What will happen if someone discovers I have not lived up to the letter of the law?"

But God had told him "to do it." And that's what bothered him.

It bothered him because he was happy where he was. Life next to the trunk was good. His branch was big enough to allow him to sit in comfort. He was near scores of other branch-sitters and had made some valid contributions to the tree community. After all, didn't he make regular visits to the sick at the North Branch Medical Center? And wasn't he the best tenor in the Treedom Singers Chorale? And, what about the class he taught on religious heritage, appropriately entitled "Our Family Tree"? Surely God wouldn't want him to leave. He had, well, you could say that—he had roots here.

Besides, Joseph knew the kind of person who goes out on a limb: liberal, extremist, radical - head in the clouds - risk-takers, all - always stirring the leaves, not leaving well enough alone - always taking a flyer - folks with their heads full of strange ideas. The stable, conservative, well-established folks are the ones who know how to stick close to the trunk; to stay close to home; to bet on the sure thing.

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 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.

Perhaps change is in the air right now. Maybe you're in the midst of a decision. It's disrupting, isn't it? You like your branch. You've grown accustomed to it and it to you. And, like Joseph, you've been a pretty good branch-sitter. And then you hear the call: "I need you to go out on the limb and..."

...forgive. It doesn't matter who hurt whom first. What matters is that I want you to go and build a bridge of reconciliation."

or...

...take a stand. Your office is cutting ethical corners. I'm calling you to go to your boss and stand up for what is just and fair."

or...

...sacrifice. The church has needs that aren't funded - dreams which aren't financed. Remember the bonus you received last week?"

or...

...evangelize. That new family down the block, they don't know anyone in town. Go meet them and invite them to Westminster."

or...

...relate. You've been meaning to take God and your neighbor more seriously. What about joining that Small Group opportunity?"

Regardless of the nature of the call, the consequences are the same: civil war. Though your heart may say "yes," your feet say "no." Excuses blow as numerous as golden leaves in an autumn wind. "That's not my talent." "It's time for someone else to take charge." "Not now, I'll get to it tomorrow."

But, eventually you're left staring at a bare tree and a hard choice: God's will or yours?

Joseph chose God's will. Joseph knew that the only thing worse than a venture into the unknown was the thought of denying God. So, resolute, he grasped the smaller limb. With clenched teeth and a determined glint in his eye, he placed one hand in front of the other until he dangled in the air with only his faith in God as a safety net.

As things turned out, Joseph's fears were justified. Life wasn't as comfortable as it had been. The limb he grasped was, indeed, a slender one: the Messiah was to be born to Mary and to be raised in his home. He risked the smirks of friends and family when Mary began to show. When they got to Bethlehem, he had to push away the sheep and clear out the barn so his wife would have a place to give birth. After the birth he became a fugitive of the law. And then he spent two years trying to understand Egyptian.

At times that limb must have bounced furiously in the wind. Still Joseph just shut his eyes and held on.

But, you can be sure of one thing. He never regretted it. Sweet was the reward for his courage and faithfulness. One look in the face of that heavenly toddler and he knew he would do it again in a heartbeat.

What about you? Have you been called to go out on a limb for God in 2011? Is God calling you to a deeper discipleship in the New Year? You can bet it won't be easy. Limb climbing has never been easy. Ask Joseph.

Or, better yet, ask Jesus. He knows more than anyone the cost of hanging on a tree.