

Matthew 1:18-25  
4 Advent

[This sermon borrows heavily from the Max Lucado story *Limb Climber or Branch Sitter* in God Came Near].

The future was looking good for Joseph.  
His life was going according to schedule.

He had worked for several years as an apprentice  
and learned his trade.  
He could take a piece of wood and transform it into something  
useful or beautiful.

He might never be rich but he would put food on the table.  
He was well respected around town and an active member  
of the local synagogue.  
He recently became engaged to a fine young woman named Mary.

God willing, they would make a home, raise a family, grow old together  
in the same village with their parents, aunts, uncles,  
cousins and friends.

Life would be predicable but solid.  
Weekly Sabbath prayers and dinners.  
Yearly pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

Joseph was firmly planted on his branch of the tree;  
a tree with a wide, solid trunk and deep roots.  
Joseph was dependable, a straight arrow.

And then, one night in a dream, God told him to leave his secure branch  
and venture out onto a limb.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to go ahead with your  
marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the  
Holy Spirit. And she will have a son and you are to name him Jesus,  
for he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph sat securely on his branch and looked up at the flimsy limb  
God told him to climb.

Joseph was a reasonable man.  
God's request was anything but reasonable.

A pregnant virgin; conceived by the Holy Spirit - right.  
Who will believe me? What will our families think?

Can you imagine the disapproving stares and smirks from  
the other people in the village?

One day Joseph was a solid citizen with a solid reputation, an average Joe.  
The next day a flake, a troublemaker, a lawbreaker.  
This was not what he had signed up for when he became engaged to Mary.

But God had told him to do it and there was the rub.

Maybe some of you have had the same kind of experience.  
One foot firmly planted in your will and the other foot in God's.

You sink your fingernails into the bark of the tree to get a better grip.  
Change is in the air and you dig your heels in a little harder because  
you like it where you are.

In response to God's subtle or sometimes not so subtle call,  
we say to ourselves things like:

"I don't have the time"  
"I don't have the talent"  
"I'll get to it tomorrow"  
"Someone else is better suited"

When God calls us to let go and reach farther, climb higher  
than we think we are capable of, it's like we're leaning up  
against the wall at a dance, watching the people on the dance  
floor and God walks over to us and says, "Let's dance."

Someone gave me a copy of a brief writing called  
"Dancing With God" that talks about letting go and  
letting God take the lead in our lives:

"When I meditated on the word 'GUIDANCE',  
I kept seeing the word 'dance' at the end of the word.

I remember that I read that doing God's will is like dancing.

When two try to lead, nothing feels right.  
The movement doesn't flow with the music,  
and everything is uncomfortable and jerky.

When one person realizes that, and lets the other lead,  
both bodies begin to flow with the music.

One gives gentle cues, perhaps with a gentle nudge to the back,  
or by pressing lightly in one direction or another.  
It's as if two become one, moving beautifully together.

The dance takes surrender, willingness and attentiveness  
from one person and  
gentle guidance and skill from the other.

My eyes drew back to the word 'GUIDANCE'.  
When I saw the 'G': I thought of God, followed by 'U' and 'I'.  
"God, 'U', 'I', dance."  
God, you and I dance.

As I lowered my head, I became willing to trust that I God would  
give me guidance about my life.  
Once again, I became willing to let God lead.

My prayer for you today is that God's blessings and mercies  
be upon you on this day and everyday.  
May you abide in God as God abides in you.  
Dance together with God, through each season of your life."

Joseph chose God's guidance.  
He chose to dance with God and to let God lead.

And if you think about it, choosing God's guidance is our only option.  
Otherwise, we're just dancing in the dark.

The only thing worse than venturing into the unknown  
is the thought of turning away from God, denying our Master.

Better to grab for the flimsy limb as long as God is our safety net.

Al McGuire was a college basketball coach for many years at Marquette University in Wisconsin.

After he retired he became a color commentator during college basketball games during the yearly NCAA tournament – what has become known as “The Big Dance”.

McGuire had a saying.

If you played well enough during the year to get to “The Big Dance”, then in your tournament games, remember to “dance with the one who brung you”;

meaning, remember who or what got you to The Big Dance.

Don’t get to the dance and abandon your date, “the one who brung you” for the handsome guy across the room who looks good but you don’t really know.

Don’t try and play a different, fancier way all of a sudden because you’re on national TV, but instead remember what worked for you in the past and the players who came through for you in the past, and go for it.

Be yourself and don’t try to be someone you’re not and let the chips fall where they will.

Joseph’s fears about leaving the solid branch for a flimsy looking limb were justified.

Life was not as comfortable as it has been or as he had planned. He took cold showers for nine months so the baby could be born of a virgin.

He became a fugitive and lived on the run in Egypt for two years. There were times when it seemed like the limb wasn’t going to hold when it bounced back and forth in the wind.

But I bet Joseph never regretted it.

There is a peace that passes all understanding that comes from dancing with God; letting him lead and submitting to his guidance.

The funny thing is, the more you let go, and trust in God's guidance,  
the more you realize that trusting in God is safer and more secure  
than the branch you thought gave you security.

God is the one who has brought all of us into the world and  
he is the one who promises even better things in the next world.  
He has brought us all to "The Big Dance" –  
the life we have in this world for only a limited time.

Don't forget to "dance with the one who brung you."

When you become a limb climber instead of a branch sitter  
sometimes you just have to grit your teeth, close your eyes,  
and leap knowing that you will either reach your destination  
safely or God will be there to catch you.