

September 6, 2020

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Exodus 3:1-15 (1)

There's an old American cliché that I'm sure most of you have heard in some form. "Go out on a limb." It dates back to at least the 19th Century, and it's pretty easy to figure out what it means just by hearing it. Like the best clichés, it evokes a physical image.

Imagine if you will, a cat stuck in a tree. I don't know if cats actually get stuck in trees as often as Hollywood and the media and the children's literature industry would have us believe, but I'm sure it does happen. Now this cat, in all of its feline wisdom, has found itself in a serious predicament. It doesn't know how to come down; it's never gotten this far before. It's going to starve, or fall. It needs help. So you climb up the tree, working your way slowly up to the limb in question. And here's where things get tricky, because tree limbs tend to get smaller as you go out farther from the trunk.

As the tree limb starts to narrow, you glance down and your stomach does a flip. It did *not* look this far up when you were standing on the ground. You grasp a small branch for support and *snap!* You lose your balance, leaves fall from your hand. Hitchcock zoom as the ground seems to move toward you and farther away at the same time. The birds, the insects, the Hollywood soundtrack all go silent as you hang there between life and an emergency room bill. You regain your balance, more slowly than you would like, and look back up at the end of the limb. There's the cat, sitting there confused and helpless. And the closer you get to it the more the bough sags. You can't help but remember "Rockabye Baby" and just how dark that particular lullaby gets at the end. You are putting yourself in a difficult position to lend a helping hand.

You are going out on a limb.

Sometimes doing the right thing *takes* going out on a limb. Sometimes it's taking a risk, putting yourself in danger or on the line because it's the only way you can see to help.

Or, sometimes doing the right thing puts you in a vulnerable position, leaving yourself out there to be judged by people who don't understand your choice.

And sometimes doing the right thing is uncomfortable. Something that rubs you the wrong way, that pushes back against the way you're used to operating or the way you think things are supposed to work, or that is completely outside your experience or expectation.

Doing good isn't always pleasant, and it isn't always easy. Not even for the best of us.

In our Scripture reading today, Moses encounters the voice of God. And the voice of God tells him something important: something life-changing, and not just for him... and something that I think says a lot about the God we worship.

God says, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

Now this request, naturally, makes Moses a little uncomfortable. He asks who *he* is that God would ask *him* to undertake such a monumental task. He hems and haws, he delays... and this is a man with a speech impediment who has *never* been one for public speaking, being called by God to *lead* his people—a people oppressed by the very royal family he grew up in, remember—to freedom on the other side of an impossible journey.

But God is persistent, and God promises to be with Moses... and Moses goes out on quite the limb of his own to stand up against his family, an empire—a *culture* literally built on oppression—and his own shortcomings, to stand *with* the oppressed, the captive, the downtrodden, and the powerless. Which is, incidentally, the same kind of thing Jesus would come to do centuries later.

And once Moses did the impossible and actually helped the Israelites *out* of Egypt, the journey still wasn't over, because they still had to cross an inhospitable wilderness and carve out a home in the hostile land beyond. Which is a struggle for the Jewish people that *still* hasn't been finished to this *day*, thousands of years after Moses answered God's call and gave his *life* to it.

We as people of God are called to do good. It's one of the basic foundations of Christianity: to be followers of Jesus. To reach out with unconditional love to those who are suffering, and those who are oppressed or marginalized because of their class or race or background or sexuality or because of some messed-up social construct. To link arms with those who suffer at the hands of unjust people *and* unjust systems, and stand strong together in the face of that injustice... and push back until all are free. It's what God was asking of Moses, and it's what God asks of us still.

One of the most Biblical things that we as a people have done in the thousands of years since Moses went out on a limb for the Israelites was the Underground Railroad. A time where black people from around the world were being abused, exploited, traumatized, and disenfranchised; a time when our culture (in the south *and* in the north) saw people of color as less than human, and either advocated for their bondage, their eradication, or even "just" that they know their place and stay out of our restaurants...

Even in a time when it was so hard to even imagine what a better world might look like, there were people who answered the same call Moses did long ago. People of all different backgrounds and skin colors who risked their freedom and their lives to both

protect and liberate those who were oppressed. And we can be proud of that legacy... but it's clear that the Underground Railroad didn't end persecution in this country, didn't end injustice in this world. Just like marching with the Israelites out of Egypt didn't end the Israelites' struggles... and just like marching onto a bridge with Martin Luther King Jr. in the '60s didn't end every last act of racism perpetrated by someone with power today.

The things God wants from us aren't easy, and Moses knew the things God asks of us can put us in uncomfortable... risky positions.

Doing good can be uncomfortable. Standing up for what's right can leave you pretty darn vulnerable to eyes that might judge you. Following the way of Jesus *is* sometimes a risk.

But what good is our comfort, if it gets in the way of the work of God?

There's a beautiful passage from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13, where Jesus tries to explain his wish to gather up the children of Jerusalem and protect them. We see Jesus compare himself to a mother: a hen that yearns to gather her young beneath her wings. Jesus came to reach his arms around the vulnerable and the powerless to protect and care for them at his own expense. Because like I said Moses wasn't the only one who went out on a limb to protect and uplift. Jesus Christ preached liberation and equality and performed life-giving miracles that stood against every power-system that existed in the world of Ancient Rome, knowing full well that those powers would see him killed for it.

I was listening to a beautiful podcast series by an Anglican bishop, who shared a bit of folk wisdom from the farmyard. "Sometimes," he said, "when there's a raging fire in a farmyard and all the animals are scattering for cover if they can, the *hen* will gather her chickens under her wings. And when the fire has finally done its worst... you may find a dead, scorched hen... with *live* chickens under her wings."

Talk about going out on a limb for someone else.

Christ does that for us... and as we have been sheltered and nurtured and lifted up, so too are we called to live *into* that.

The pastor I grew up with always said, "As we have been given much, we too must give."

We are loved, by a God that reaches out to protect us, to liberate us, and to stand beside us, sharing our strength. So too are *we* called to reach out with that same love to our fellow human beings.

And that's hard. It's scary. And sometimes the things people do to stand up against oppression can challenge our sense of what's right and what's wrong. Well, I don't want to spoil the rest of Moses' story for you, but have you ever heard of the Ten Plagues? Or what happened *after* the Red Sea was done being parted? Standing on the side of righteousness—even God's righteousness—can be complicated... and it can be

uncomfortable. The limbs we have to go out on to reach out to those held captive by Pharaoh can be... well, narrow, and precarious.

But there are chickens of all kinds in this town, in all the towns you live in, across this country and across this world that have no wings to gather under. There are cats stuck in trees. There are Israelites trapped in bondage.

There are people beaten down by systems too big and too old to fail: people God calls us to stand with, to listen to, and to join hands alongside as we stride forth to the Promised Land God wants for us all.

Whether it's racial justice, or mercy for the poor, education for our children, love for the outcast and the looked-down-upon, wholesome example for those with none, compassion for the grieving, welcome for the stranger, strength for the weak, safety for the insecure... we come to God, the one that hears our calls for liberation and reaches out to give us strength... and in turn we do the same, going out on a limb for all who are oppressed and desperately need someone to link arms with them, so that we *all* may know the liberation Moses shared with the Israelites.

May it be so.

Amen.