

Ever been out on a limb? Literally out on a limb. Climbing trees as a kid. Retrieving wayward kites. Clearing deadwood. Perhaps even cutting branches to keep them away from the house or while preparing to cut down the entire tree.

How many times have you seen videos of folks out on a limb doing stupid stuff: going so far out that the limb breaks off. Or sitting on the limb as they cut it off - and sitting on the wrong side of the saw cut.

Then there all of the times we have gone out on a figurative limb. We take a position based on intuition or one that lacks concrete evidence, certainty, or wide spread support. Or when we put ourselves in a dangerous position to do something; put ourselves or our reputation at risk.

Why do we risk harming ourselves by going out on a limb? Is the kite caught in the tree worth the medical expenses and the pain of a fall? Do we compare the rewards versus the cost for supporting a novel and unproven concept in the workplace just because our intuition convinces us that it might work? Are we prepared to face the crowd gathered below the limb; the crowd that seems to be hoping to experience some perverse excitement if we fall or fail?

John went out on a limb as he announced the coming of the Messiah. Big time. It was dangerous. It did seem to lack support. There was little evidence proving his assertions. Clearly his reputation was at risk.

Others had proclaimed that the Messiah was about to arrive, or even claimed to be the Messiah. And no Messiah appeared. Yes, there was support for the coming of the Messiah yet the last prophet spoke several hundred years earlier. Others claimed to baptize people for the repentance of sins but they did not point forward to one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire for the forgiveness of sins; for actually cleansing one of their sins. There was no way to prove John's claims short of the arrival of the Messiah.

But perhaps John wasn't as far out on the limb as one might think.

Lets take a look at some of the limbs that John was on.

Limb 1: The limb of personality. Let's face it: John just wasn't a little weird. He was very weird. For those of you who have ever witnessed street preachers, especially the ones that yell and shout and wave their arms about the perils of not repenting, did you give them a second thought? The more radical an idea, the more we prefer some logical, smooth presenter who projects an aura of reasonable and logical and respectable thought.

John didn't. He was viewed as a wild man. A man who lived in the wilderness. Clothed in

material from that wilderness: hides and hair. He ate the wild honey found there. His message was no less radical than his appearance.

Yet people came to hear him. Crowds came from as far away as Jerusalem. People did not encounter John as they hurried past him on a street corner. He didn't interrupt their holiday shopping. People had to travel for a full day to hear him and another day in which to return home.

For in all of his strange personality and appearance, John also clearly appeared in the mold of Elijah. The name Elijah means "My God is Yahweh". The Lord took Elijah up into heaven by a fiery chariot. He was expected to return to announce the coming of the Messiah. When Gabriel told Zechariah that he would have a son, the angel quoted from the book of Malachi: "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

John went out on the limb of audacity John hikes up his hair shirt and scurries out onto the limb that challenged religious authority. From the vantage point of his precarious limb-tip, John taunts and jeers at an approaching crowd filled with movers and shakers from the power establishment - the Sadducees and Pharisees. To question, to mock, the most powerful religious leaders is both audacious and dangerous.

The limb of proclamation The most important limb John clings to is the way-out-there declaration that God is daring to act now in the lives of the common men and women gathering there on the banks of the Jordan. God is inaugurating a new era of divine presence and purpose. The ever hoped for Kingdom of God is about to arrive!

John didn't take up these high-altitude perches just for the thrill of it. All this "X-treme" limb-sitting served a quite definite purpose. As wild and even witless as John the Baptist's behavior might have appeared to many, it actually followed the soon-to-be established rules of "Christian limb-sitting."

There are some rules related to going out on a limb.

#1 That is where the fruit is.

John went out on a limb because he knew he could find there the fruit sought by so many of his anxious, weary, soul-starved generation. John gladly dangled from the end of a limb, for his role was to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. In order for the Messiah to come, John, as the new Elijah, had to announce this new age and incarnation to the world.

#2 Go big - that's where the support is.

If you go out on a limb, go out on a big one - there is more support. John invokes the authority of no less prophetic a figure than Isaiah. Convinced of the importance and timeliness of his message, he not only went out on a limb, he started swinging from it. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," he proclaimed. The kingdom: an audacious limb! But a limb strong enough to support all, all who will believe.

#3 If there's no fruit, don't go at all.

John's indictment of the Pharisees and Sadducees reminds us that not all trees bear fruit. Trees that can't be depended upon for good fruit God will cut down and use for other things. Whether it is making a cherry pie or making a blazing bonfire - God doesn't waste anything. Sometimes the best "fruit" a tree can offer is the light and heat it gives off when it is set ablaze. When questioned about why people came to listen to him preach and teach, John Wesley is said to have remarked, "I really don't know. All I can figure out is that the Holy Spirit sets me on fire and people come to watch me burn."

Yes, John went out on some amazing limbs. But we, as believers, are out on some of those very same limbs. We are there because we have the fruit sought by so many of our anxious, weary, soul-starved generation as we proclaim that our sins have been forgiven; that Christ will return; that there is a cure for what ails us and this world.

Since we are already out there, will you climb out on some more limbs this Christmas season? Perhaps it is the:

Limb of reconciliation. Is God calling you to crawl and inch your way out to meet someone with forgiveness and love; to repair a broken relationship?

Limb of risk-taking. Is God calling you to take a risk for God's greater glory? It could be as simple a risk as inviting someone to join you here in worship.

Limb of service. Is God calling you to Christian service in a way you've been resisting? Perhaps taking the time to accept a new role of service or leading the implementation of an essential change within this congregation. Or using your talents on a short term mission. Or even entering the ministry!

Limb of trust. Is God calling you to believe in someone? Perhaps to support a wild hope of theirs; to be the strong limb that encourages them as they climb out on their own limb of faith.

Limb of healing. Is God calling you to accept emotional and spiritual healing for some long-festering wounds? Are you willing to let go of your pain and allow yourself to be filled with God's love?

Are you willing to forgive others as God has forgiven us?

Yes, there are many limbs that we can climb out upon. But to avoid a starring role in a video of failure we need to return to John the Baptist. John pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, confident that he was accurately pointing with the support of God.. During this advent season we also point forward to the coming of the Messiah, for the Messiah to come and change us in ever new ways, to encourage us to climb out on limbs of faith and proclamation. At the same time we do point backwards in celebration of that first Advent when the words of God became incarnate in the flesh of the baby Jesus for that is where we draw our motivation and confidence to go out on limbs for the glory of God.

We need to return to the simple truths that we accept as followers of Christ. For it is in these truths of our faith that allow us to go out on a limb; confident that God is the one providing our support.

What audacious limbs are you willing to go out on in the name of Christ?