

Sermon by Rev Wendy Sellers, 22 December 2019

Readings: Isaiah 7.10-16 & Matthew 1.18-end

So, I have a few questions to start. If the answer is 'yes', please stick your hand in the air.

Have you ever been up a really tall building, such the Shard, or the Eiffel Tower or the Empire State Building?

Have you ever been climbing or abseiled?

Have you ever zip-wired or bungee jumped?

Have you ever jumped out of an aeroplane to sky dive or parachute?

Now, in medieval paintings Hell is often depicted as a place full of fire and sulphur. To me, Hell is having to do any of the activities I've just mentioned. Because I have a fear of heights.

When I met my husband, Dale, I told him this, and he said that he actually didn't like heights either much.

We got married and, on our honeymoon in Paris, the first day we went up the Eiffel Tower, all the way to the top in the lift. While Dale wondered about snapping the view with our camera, I stayed in the middle with my back firmly pressed to the lift shaft. The next day, we went to Notre Dame. 'Let's climb the Towers', suggests my new husband.

So, we climbed up the stairs inside the left-hand tower. To get down, you have to cross an exposed stone walkway and go down the right-hand tower. When we come out into the walkway, Dale whips out the camera to take my picture, and turns to find me frozen to the

spot clutching a gargoyle. At that moment, he realised he really wasn't frightened of heights, but I was.

In spite of this I have since endured climbing up endless tall buildings. I've been on theme park rides, flown in a very small plane and suppressed my panic as my loved ones have pranced around near cliff edges. I have had to learn to subdue my fears for the sake of those I love.

Today we are going to think about a man called Joseph who had to face his fears for the sake of love.

I want you to imagine that Joseph lived in a tree called Nazareth. It was a big tree and Joseph's home was a nice sturdy branch at the bottom of the tree. It was so near the ground, that Joseph could rest his feet on the soil. The branch was safe and secure and seldom rocked in the winds that sometimes whipped the thinner branches higher up. And Joseph had no intention of ever leaving his branch. Joseph had worked hard to earn his place on that bough. He was a respected member of his community, known as a righteous man, and he was a highly skilled craftsman.

His family could be traced back to the greatest king Israel had ever known - King David, and Joseph was very proud of that.

After years of toil as a carpenter, Joseph was at last in a position to marry and he was betrothed to Mary. He couldn't wait for her to come and live with him permanently in his tree. He looked forward eagerly to the children that would hopefully follow. They would sit on the branch beside him. Sons he could teach his craft to. Daughters just like his beloved Mary. Children he could teach about God, sharing the stories of the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt. Children to sing the hymns of David to. Joseph knew his scripture and hugged the words of Deuteronomy tightly to his heart: 'Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.'

Joseph longed to do just that with his family.

Then, one day, Mary came to visit.

Normally, she would hop up and sit alongside him on the branch. But today she stood in front of him, head bowed. And she told him something and Joseph's heart broke. Mary was with child. She pleaded that an angel had visited and told her the child was the Son of God, but, really, how gullible did she think he was?

After she had left, tears running down her face, Joseph sat and faced his deepest fears. His fear that Mary loved someone else. Or that Mary had been exploited in her innocence. However, this had happened, the child was not his. Not his to teach his craft or his faith to. Not an ancestor of David. If he exposed Mary, she would be put to death.

In spite of her news, Joseph loved her still. So, he decided to send her away. And Joseph's heart broke a little bit more at the thought of never seeing her again.

That night, Joseph had a dream. In the dream an angel came to him, just as Mary had said happened to her.

Joseph had no doubt at all of the reality of this dream. It came not from his imagination, but from God. When God sends an angel with a message, the only thing to do is to listen.

The angel reassured Joseph of the truth of Mary's story. But to play

his part, Joseph has to make a decision. He has to leave his secure, safe, sturdy branch and go out on a limb.

He has to trust in God as he climbs those thin branches overhead, with Mary at his side. It is such a long way to fall if a branch breaks. Joseph remembers what Mary had said in response to the angel's request.

Mary said, 'Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me, according to thy word!'

In his dream, Joseph looked the angel in the eyes and took his leap of faith. 'Behold the handyman of the Lord,' said Joseph. 'Let it be to me, according to thy word!'

And so it was that Joseph became God's handyman. He got Mary safely to Bethlehem and found her somewhere to give birth to the precious baby. As the angel had instructed, they called the baby Jesus.

Joseph welcomed the shepherds who visited that night. He found seats and refreshments for the wise men when they turned up unexpectedly. He smuggled his wife and the child away from the threat of Herod and his henchmen, and then earned his keep as a carpenter in far off Egypt until it was safe to return to Nazareth.

Then Joseph, the man who had gone out on a limb for God, returned to that much-loved bough and lived there with Mary and Jesus and the children who came after. There they loved and laughed. They celebrated Passover and sang the hymns of David.

But it was Jesus who told the stories of the faith, because he did that so much better than anyone else. It was almost as if he had known them from birth.

And Joseph thanked God daily for the gift of this child, a true ancestor of David. The child who was to go out on a limb to show the world the depth of God's love. The child who was to die on a tree.

So that is the story of Joseph. The righteous man, who went out on a limb because God asked him to. Who took a risky leap of faith into the unknown with his pregnant, teenage bride. An ordinary man who helped raise the most extraordinary son.

Behold Joseph, the handyman of the Lord.