

Beyond The Limits

Ephesians 3:14-21

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Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell,

my very young friend who is learning to spell:

"The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear.

"The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare.

"The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat.

"I know all the twenty-six letters like that...

...through to Z is for Zebra. I know them all well."

Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell.

"So now I know everything anyone knows

"From beginning to end. From the start to the close.

"Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes."

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor

When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!

A letter he never had dreamed of before!

And I said, "You can stop, if you want, with the Z

"Because most people stop with the Z

"But not me!

"In the places I go there are things that I see

"That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.

"I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.

"My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!

My alphabet starts with this letter called YUZZ.

It's the letter I use to spell Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz.

You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found

Once you go beyond Z and start poking around!...

...So, on beyond Z! It's high time you were shown

That you really don't know all there is to be known....

...I led him around and I tried hard to show

There are things beyond Z that most people don't know.

I took him past Zebra. As far as I could.

And I think, perhaps, maybe I did him some good.....

...NOW the letters he uses are something to see!

Most people still stop at the Z...

But not HE! [On Beyond Zebra, by Dr. Seuss, New York: Random House, 1955]

Most people stop.

Indeed, we do. We figure that we've got life sorted out.

We get into a groove and we're happy to function there.

We learn what we can trust, and what we can't.

Stuff like, "*What you see is what you get.*"

We say that, and we begin to depend on it.

But don't be so sure.

Where your own sensibility says, "*enough!*"

where your own expectations see limits,

at the projected end of your own resources,

when it seems like your energy is stretched to the max,

when your wallet runs dry, and your talents grow thin,

At that place where most people stop,
I'd like to invite you to pause.

But don't necessarily be satisfied with stopping there.
For there may be more than what you first expect.
There may be more than meets the eye; more beyond zebra.

Join me in looking beyond our first impressions;
reaching beyond what we may normally expect;
accomplishing far more than we can ever hope for or imagine.

I want to consider those ideas in the context of a prayer,
and in the context of the Christmas season.

What does a life "*beyond Zebra*" look like for believers in Jesus Christ?
And why on earth would we possibly want to go there?
Let me invite you to join Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell and step over your horizon for a few
minutes.

Beginning with a wonderful prayer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and breathed by the apostle Paul -

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

Here's a contemporary translation -

19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.
20 Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. [NLT]

The love of God, that is beyond understand.
Stretching beyond our horizons of reason and experience.
Isn't that really the Christmas season?

You hear talk of wonder, of miracle, of imagination, of possibility in this Christmas season.
Unfortunately, much of that talk has been ripped away from its root - like a branch torn from the trunk of the tree.

Wonder, miracle, events beyond imagination, possibility where we didn't think there was any, has its roots in a little shoot that the prophet Isaiah said would grow up from the trunk of Jesse's tree (read Isaiah 11 if you want to check that prophecy out).

Wonder, miracle, events beyond imagination, possibility where we didn't think there was any are found in a manger, in the birth of a baby who is far more than just a baby.

Lucy Shaw, a writer in the tradition of Madeleine L'engle and Dorothy Sayers, penned a poem about that wondrous miracle this way. It's written through the eyes of the Virgin Mary, mother of the Son of God. Ms Shaw imagined Mary beside the manger, looking down at the newborn Jesus, and thinking:

Quiet he lies, whose vigor hurled a universe.
He sleeps, whose eyelids have not closed before.

His breath once ruffled the dark deeps to sprout a world.
Charmed by doves' voices, the whisper of straw, he dreams,
hearing no music from his other spheres.
Breath, mouth, ears, eyes
he is curtailed who overflowed all skies.
All years, older than eternity, now he is new.

Now native to earth as I am,
nailed to my poor planet,
caught that I might be free,
blind in my womb
to know my darkness ended.
Brought to this birth for me to be new-born,
and for him to see me mended
I must see him torn.

The very son of God, through whom the entire world was created, has entered that creation as part of it.

It is a wonder.
It is mysterious how this can be.
Eternal God entering mortal form.
Not just "sort of like" but very really, truly, fully one of us - with us.
Which is what his Christmas name means - **IMMANUEL**.
God is with us.

It is what the Bible speaks of in 1 Timothy 3:16 -
Without question, this is the great mystery of our faith:
Christ appeared in the flesh
and was shown to be righteous by the Spirit.
He who was seen by angels has been announced to the nations.

Eternal God come to our world.
Come to our nation.
Come to our city.
Come to you.
Come to me.

God has come in unimaginably great love.
A love that is wider and longer and higher and deeper than we could ever comprehend.
A love that can bring strength.
A love that can give courage.
A love that will carry us through forever and ever. Amen!

Can you accept that?
Even if you cannot fully understand it?
Even if you cannot fully explain it?
Even if you don't always feel it?
Can you accept that,
beyond your abilities and boundaries and limits
that this, indeed, is so?

What compels us to worship, to wonder, to sing and to leave these gatherings with hope in this Christmas season is something that has nothing to do with snow, mistle toe, reindeer....

...or even a new version of *Guitar Hero* under the tree.

It is that the Creative Power of Eternal God holds and sculpts and cares for and rescues and eternally directs our mortal world, and my limited life.

Which is **SO** far beyond us!

We think that we've got so much by the tail.

storing gigabytes of info on tiny little cards.

sending reams of information around the globe in the blink of an eye.

firing rockets to the moon and beyond.

repairing hearts of babies still in the womb.

altering the genetic map of plants and animals.

It's all within our scope.

We see it.

Know it.

Control it.

From A to Z.

And then we come to Christmas.

And the wonder that

the God of Eternity

is the baby in the manger

is the mysterious Spirit-being

who takes up residence within my inner being.

And if that is true

if that is a fact - even though one beyond my reach or comprehension

if that is real

then it changes absolutely everything!

It means that the human form, which God himself took on, is sacred.

Human life matters - eternally.

It must be handled with extreme dignity from beginning to end.

It may not be terminated in wanton ways.

And it must be given adequate housing, proper shelter, nourishing food, and peace.

It means that when life **does** finally end, we can face that end with faith in Christ and confident hope in glory that will last forever and ever, amen.

And in between those moments of birth and death - we can live with a confidence and expectation and action that goes beyond what we might suggest to be proper, given what we can see and measure.

Trusting that the promise of God, and the love of God, and the power of God will never fail, will be new every morning, with be great in faithfulness.

It is that kind of trust, a trust and confidence born in Christmas, that caused a young man to change his life near the end of the 12th century. He loved to ride his fine steed up and down the road. And loved a good party with excess in every way. If he lived today, he'd be a regular pub crawler.

As he cruised the streets of his day he'd often pass beggars. And occasionally flip them a coin - mostly to show off that he had what the beggar did not.

One day, for some reason, he "saw beyond Zebra." He saw what before he had missed. He saw, it would seem, from heaven's point of view rather than our oh so limited human perspective.

He stopped, dismounted, went to the beggar he had just passed and embraced him.

And everything changed. He began to care for the poor around him. He started to devote his life to them. His rich father said, "Son, I don't understand why you associate with these low-class beggars. I want you in our family's cloth business. Not there. If you keep this up, I will disown you."

The young man stripped off all his clothes, except for some underclothing and said, "Well, then I guess I'm no longer your son. I must follow the ways of my Lord."

And the one we know today as Francis of Assisi continued his life of caring for the least of God's children.

It is said that he brought life and love back to what had become a cold, institutional church in his day. He trusted God beyond what he could see or even imagine.

A Canadian naval officer did the unexpected thing upon leaving the service. He bought a home north of Paris, and invited Raphael and Philippe, two men with mental disabilities, to live with him. Someone asked, "Why are you doing that?" And the officer replied, "I think it is what Jesus wants me to do." Together they found that as a community they could live together.

They found a new way of treating people with disabilities. It became an association known today as L'Arche - named after Noah's ark. Today over 120 communities exist in thirty countries, including one right over here on Rossland Ave, all because this believer went beyond what was normal, beyond what was expected by those around him, and listened to the inner call and reached for the higher standard of the Son of God.

The officer's name was Jean Vanier, son of former Canadian Governor General, Georges Vanier. [both accounts taken from *The Gospel According To Dr. Seuss*, p.88]

Francis and Jean were just two ordinary believers - who would fit right in here at Calvin Church. Not extraordinarily strong or smart or equipped.

But taking the mystery and wonder of Christmas seriously.

Living their faith fully.

And depending on the power of God - who can work within us to accomplish abundantly **far more** than all we can ask or imagine.

Doing it not for personal fame or glory or even a personal sense of satisfaction. But so that God would be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages.

It's what drives some believers to say, "I'm not retired. I've been reassigned by Jesus to focus my energies in other areas of His service" and head to a food distribution warehouse or to strap on a tool belt rather than to a Florida beach.

It's what encouraged a woman to volunteer evenings at a Pregnancy Centre, giving hope to young women at the end of their rope.

It's what helps a person I know, struggling with depression, to get out of bed in the morning, thinking, "I may not feel that strong, and I don't see myself as very important, but if Jesus is willing to live with me, then I, too, will try living with me for another day. He hasn't given up on me, so I won't either."

Living the mystery.

Living beyond what would be normal and expected.

Reaching deeper.

Serving further.

Loving longer.

And being able to do it in the power of the One whose reach and service and love went longer and wider and higher and deeper than any of us will ever be able to comprehend; the power that *IS* at work in all who believe.

In you too.

And me.

Can you trust that?
Do you dare to?
Will others see it?