

“Salvation Has Come to This House”

Isaiah 1:10-18; Psalm 32:1-7; Luke 19:1-10

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Today we turn our attention to a man named Zacchaeus. Some of you might know this children’s song: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he; he climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.” He was indeed a “wee little man;” Luke says he was “short in stature.” But there’s more to know about this man’s life than what the song has to say.

Let’s back up. Jesus “entered Jericho and was passing through it.” Jericho was an important city nestled in the Jordan River valley, about six miles west of the Jordan River and about fifteen miles east of Jerusalem. * It is one of the oldest cities in the world; excavations have unearthed settlements dating back to about nine thousand years before Christ. There were – and remain to this day – a number of natural springs nearby, that pump out about a thousand gallons of water every minute, making Jericho a perpetual oasis in the desert. It was called “the city of palm trees.” In the time of Jesus, Jericho was a resort town for wealthy aristocrats, featuring a royal palace, a Roman theatre, streams, aqueducts, and a large garden of trees. Today, Jericho is a Palestinian city in the West Bank, with a population of about 20,000 people, mostly Muslim, although there is a small Christian population in Jericho, and the city attracts a large number of Christian pilgrims every year.

Zacchaeus “was a chief tax collector and was rich.” He was indeed “short of stature,” but that was not his most distinguishing characteristic. This was a *wealthy* man, a man who had gotten rich because he exploited the poor. As I said last week, tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman government to collect taxes from the common people. Some of them collected far more than what was required and pocketed the difference. As a group they were hated and distrusted. But Zacchaeus wasn’t just any tax collector; he was a *chief* tax collector. He had earned a distinct reputation; the common people considered him a sinner. He basically admits to Jesus that he had been guilty of defrauding people. This was a man who was not trusted, not respected, not admired, not considered honest or virtuous in any way. He was not a man of integrity. He was not a *good* man.

If Zacchaeus was familiar with the words of the prophet Isaiah, he certainly didn’t heed them. “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan; plead for the widow.” These were things that Zacchaeus did not do. He did not seek justice; he did not rescue the oppressed; he did not defend the orphan; he did not plead for the widow. It is amazing how *plain* the Bible is about our responsibility to people who are less fortunate than we are, especially people who have been taken advantage of, or people who have been victims of oppression. But some people – people like Zacchaeus – didn’t care. They just persisted in their sin. “Your sins are like scarlet,” says God; they are “red like crimson.” God isn’t pleased when people like

that come to worship and yet persist in their sins. “Trample my courts no more!” declares God; “I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.... Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.” Such were the hands of Zacchaeus: bloodstained from his greed.

But something happened inside Zacchaeus’s heart and soul when Jesus passed through town. Who knows what he had heard about Jesus. Maybe a lot, maybe not much. But enough to pique his curiosity. “He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him.” Sycamore trees grow naturally in Palestine and in other parts of the Middle East and Africa, especially along rivers or other places with rich soil, like the spring-watered region around Jericho. They can grow up to about six stories tall, and their branches spread out widely, with the result that they are often far wider than they are tall. They produce large edible figs, year-round. Today in Jericho there are two very prominent sycamore trees that are continuously maintained in memory of Zacchaeus.

So Zacchaeus is up in that tree – and Jesus knows he is there. “When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.’” Note that it is *Jesus* who initiates the conversation. It appears that Zacchaeus simply wanted to *see* Jesus. Jesus invites him to do *more* than that. “Hurry and come down.” Come down – not just from the sycamore tree, but also from his place of power and privilege, a place that he had not fairly earned. Jesus is beckoning Zacchaeus to *repent* of his sin. Perhaps Zacchaeus was looking for that opportunity; perhaps there was something in the pit of his soul that knew that what he had been doing to other people wasn’t right. Perhaps he already knew that he needed to change, but didn’t know how. Jesus shows him a way. “Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” Jesus invites himself into this rich man’s house – not out of any desire to enjoy the fruits of Zacchaeus’s ill-gotten gain, but rather to help Zacchaeus part with his life of luxury and embark on a more faithful way of life.

In other words, Jesus *saw* something in Zacchaeus. Jesus saw *potential for great good*. Jesus didn’t see that in everybody. Some wealthy people received nothing but harsh condemnation from Jesus. Zacchaeus was, so to speak, ripe for the picking. He was ready to hear and receive the Gospel. Zacchaeus “hurried down and was happy to welcome” Jesus into his home ... and into his heart.

Not everyone was happy about this. People were grumbling. “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner!” Yes indeed. This is one reason why Jesus kept getting into trouble. He ate with tax collectors and sinners! He dined with people who, some people thought, didn’t *deserve* his attention. People can be so judgmental, so quick to condemn, so slow to understand how God actually *works* in this world, how the Holy Spirit *moves* in people’s hearts. Zacchaeus, a sinful man, went *running* to Jesus. That should be cause for celebration! But all some people could do was complain.

Zacchaeus knows what Jesus wants before Jesus even asks. “Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’” Those aren’t just words. This is sincere *repentance*. He’s willing to take *half* of everything he owns – including what was certainly a very large house – and just *give it away*. Not *sell* it for profit. Not give it to his friends and family members, nor use it to buy people’s favor. No – just give it away, to the people in the city who could use it the most. The ones with little to wear, little to eat, little protection at night. The people that Zacchaeus had been too blind to see as real *people* before now. People with urgent and desperate needs, people with no opportunity to accumulate wealth, people who were just barely managing to scrape by from one day to the next. Today, there are enough resources and wealth in this world to keep *anybody* from going hungry. There’s no good reason why 34 million Americans should be suffering from food insecurity.

There's more than enough to go around. What's lacking is *will*. Zacchaeus found the *will*. "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor." He sees a great need. He wants to *do something about it*.

But Zacchaeus wants to do more than just that: "and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Did you catch that? "I will pay back *four times as much*." Jewish law did not require that; Zacchaeus is willing to go far above and beyond what is necessary. Let's say Zacchaeus has collected in taxes a thousand dollars more than was necessary from an individual household. He's willing to give that household *four thousand dollars* in return. If there's a household from which he has collected *five thousand dollars* more than was necessary, Zacchaeus is willing to give that household *twenty thousand dollars* in return. That is *far more* than those households would have brought in if they had been able to keep the money and invest it. Zacchaeus is repaying them back, with interest, *and a whole lot more*. He's trying to make up for the *wrongs* he did, for the *unjust way* he went about his work. He's trying to make amends. He's trying to restore *justice*.

When great wrongs have been done, when people have been defrauded of what was rightfully theirs, exploited by an unfair and unjust system, it's not enough to just *recognize* the wrongs. Not enough to just *admit* that what happened was bad. There needs to be some sort of *restitution* – some kind of concerted, faithful, generous *effort* to right the wrongs, make amends, and restore real *justice*.

This is what Zacchaeus was willing to offer. The Bible records it very clearly. The Bible also records Jesus' response: "Today salvation has come to this house." *Salvation* has come for Zacchaeus. He receives the healing, loving, forgiving, amazing *grace* of God, as a result of his heartfelt and generous repentance. God is ready and willing to forgive *any* of us for our sins. But it's up to *us* to do the confessing, the repenting, the *changing*, the *giving*. Jesus goes on: "he, too, is a son of Abraham." Zacchaeus was a Jew; he was a biological descendant of Abraham, as all ethnic Jews are. But Zacchaeus became something else that day: he became a *spiritual* descendant of Abraham, counted as *righteous* in God's eyes because of his great *faith*, a faith that merits God's recognition and praise.

"Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven," writes the Psalmist, "and whose sin is put away!" Zacchaeus could have written those words: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin." Zacchaeus confessed. And God forgave. "For," says Jesus, "the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost." Zacchaeus had been lost. Now, he's been found. Now, he's been *saved*.

What happened to Zacchaeus after this? He does not appear again in Luke's gospel, nor anywhere else in the New Testament. I do not think he immediately followed Jesus up to Jerusalem. He had to make good on his promises. It would have taken some time and effort to do what he had promised to do, giving away half his possessions, repaying those whom he had defrauded *four times* over. So he fades from the Gospel story. But there are some legends about him, legends saying that later on he accompanied the apostle Peter on some of his travels, legends saying that he eventually become a bishop in the church. Those are just legends; there might not be any historical truth in them ... but they do point to the *truth* of Zacchaeus's sincere repentance and commitment to Jesus.

When the story is told of *your* life, of *your* commitment to Jesus, what will be said? That you went *running* to Jesus? That you responded *quickly and eagerly* to Jesus' invitation? That you were ready and willing to repent from your sin? That you freely and generously responded to Christ's call? Are you so devoted to him that stories will be told of your faithfulness for generations to come?

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