

Proper 26 Year C

Oct. 30, 2016

St. James

[Isaiah 1:10-18; Psalm 32:1-8; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10](#)

By the Rev. Rebecca Jones

If a certain song you learned as a child
is going through your head right now,
don't worry.
We won't sing it.

It IS tempting to think of the story of Zacchaeus
as just a sweet little story, particularly appropriate for
children,
who can no doubt relate to Zacchaeus being short,
and to climbing a tree to see better.
Yes, children do love this story.

But if we just think of it as a children's story,
we sell it short.
Because in truth, this encounter between Jesus and
Zacchaeus
is really the culmination of a long story arc in the gospel of
Luke.
It's the story of Jesus's final fateful journey to Jerusalem,
a journey that will end in his crucifixion, just a week after he
gets there.

The journey begins all the way back in chapter 9.
Luke tells us that when the days drew near for Jesus to be
taken up,
he set his face to go to Jerusalem.
Everything that happens from that point up to today's
reading
sets the stage for what is to come.

Now, it is no coincidence
that churches throughout the world
plan their stewardship campaigns in the fall,
because Jesus spends a lot of time on that last journey
talking about wealth and possessions,
and what a danger they can present to us.

Last week, we heard the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

The week before that we heard about the widow and the unjust judge.

In September, we heard about Lazarus and the rich man;
and the week before that we heard about the unjust steward;

and maybe hardest of all, on the first Sunday of September
we heard Jesus say that no one can become his disciple
who doesn't give up all his possessions.

People tend to squirm a lot on that Sunday.

Now today, we have a repentant Zacchaeus
giving up *half* of his possessions.

That's enough to make us squirm too.

It's important to hear that,
but that's not the only lesson we're meant to take away
from the story of Zacchaeus.

The story is so much richer than that.

To appreciate the depth and layering of this story,
it really needs to be read in tandem with the story that
immediately precedes it. Unfortunately, that story is not
ever included in our lectionary.

At least Luke's telling of the story isn't.

But we do hear Mark's version of it.

It's the story of the blind beggar,
who in Mark's gospel is named Bartimaeus.

Luke doesn't tell us his name.

Perhaps with anonymity, Luke hopes we all recognize ourselves in the beggar.

Both Zacchaeus and the blind beggar live in Jericho, a city about 15 miles outside Jerusalem. It's Jesus's last stop before he gets to Jerusalem. In just a few verses from the end of the Zacchaeus story, Jesus is going to send some disciples ahead and tell them to find him a donkey. We're getting close to the end of things now.

It is as he approaches Jericho that he meets the blind beggar sitting by the side of the road.

The beggar couldn't see Jesus, of course, but he heard the crowd getting excited and he asked what was happening. They told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, and, with inspired insight, and to the chagrin of those around him, he started shouting, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" They tried to shush him, but he wouldn't be shushed. He just shouted all the more.

"Son of David!"
How on earth did the blind beggar know to call him that, a title reserved for the Messiah. It's clear that this blind man sees far more than most of the sighted people around him.

That's when the story takes a dramatic turn. Jesus stands still, and he orders the man to be brought to him. When the beggar is in front of him, Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the beggar says, "Lord, let me see again."

Jesus says, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you."

When the crowd saw this, they praised God.

So Jesus comes on in to Jericho.

There's still a crowd around him.

And there's another man who can't see him either.

But unlike the crowd that presented a kind of opportunity to the blind man

by alerting him to Jesus's presence,

this time the crowd is the problem.

Zacchaeus is so short he can't see over the crowd to get a good glimpse of Jesus.

Now, Luke is the best story-teller of any of the gospels.

In telling us what happened next,

he picks up threads from earlier stories.

Remember the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector from last week,

and how Jesus declared that "all who humble themselves will be exalted."

So here's Zacchaeus, who in contrast to the blind beggar, is a very wealthy man.

Despised, but wealthy.

And, desperate to see Jesus,

he casts aside all regard for his own dignity,

and climbs a tree..

There he sits, silent and watchful.

Again, in contrast to the blind beggar, Zacchaeus does NOT call out.

Instead, it's Jesus who calls out to HIM!

"Zacchaeus," Jesus hollers.

"Get down here right now. Because I'm going to your house."

Now, I've already pulled this trick a time or two on some of you,

inviting myself over to your house for dinner.
And if I haven't yet, don't worry, I will.

It works.

Zacchaeus shimmies down that tree fast as he can
and joyfully welcomes Jesus.

Once again, the crowd enters the story, and not in a good
way.

Earlier, it was the blind beggar they had tried to silence.

Now, it's Jesus who they turn on.

They grumble. "Why is going to Zacchaeus's house?
Zacchaeus is a sinner!"

Here's where Luke, consummate story-teller,
picks up another thread.

Remember that story earlier about Jesus telling the rich man
to give away all his possessions,
and the man went away in sadness,
because he had many possessions.

We're ready for another dramatic turn in this story.

The story of the blind beggar turned when *Jesus* stood.

This time, it's Zacchaeus who stands.

And something beautiful happens.

Something no one saw coming, except maybe Jesus.

Zacchaeus says, "Lord, I'll give half my possessions to the
poor;

and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back
four times as much."

Talk about the old razzle-dazzle.

Talk about using your power and privilege in unexpected
ways.

There's no walking away sadly this time.

Luke points out that Zacchaeus was happy, not sad.

And the generosity of his offer would have amazed those
who witnessed it,

because it was for more than the law required.

“Today, salvation has come to this house,” Jesus says.
Just like the blind beggar, Zacchaeus finally gets to see Jesus,
and in the process is saved.
Zacchaeus is saved by God’s amazing grace.
Greed gives way to generosity.
Self-centeredness yields to self-sacrifice.
Selfishness is transformed into a deeper caring
that flows out to the community.
Because the salvation Jesus offers
can radically alter every aspect of our lives:
personal, social, economic, political.
We are made new!

This is the mission of Jesus.
He has come to seek and to save the lost,
to bring this salvation, this healing and wholeness,
this forgiveness and reconciliation,
to the whole earth.

He was sent into the world
“to seek out and save the lost.”
And this is why we are sent into the world.
To bring God’s healing and salvation to others,
to let them know that,
no matter how twisted or broken their lives have become,
there is love and salvation and healing and blessing in God.

May we always deploy our own privilege and resources
with the same wild abandon and joy as Zacchaeus.
May our eyes be opened
to see the living Christ standing right before us.
May we never, ever, crowd out others
who long to see Jesus.
Whenever we find ourselves in the grumbling crowd,
may we stop and ask ourselves

how God might be at work in this moment,
and what possible transformation might be afoot.
And may we be caught up in God's amazing grace,
and hear the sweet, sweet sound of Christ's voice,
calling us by name,
and inviting himself into our lives.

Amen.