

*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.*

We used to sing that song in Sunday school when I was a child. But in 21 years of ministry, I've never preached about Zacchaeus. The reading comes up every three years, but it usually gets preempted by celebration of All Saints day. But this year, I have my chance.

The story of Zacchaeus is one of those stories that seems simple on the surface, but has incredible depth and richness. It also serves as something of a summary of the nature of Jesus' ministry as told in the Gospel of Luke.

A quick word about the place of this story in the larger context of Luke. First, what comes after Zacchaeus, and then what comes before.

Jericho is in the south of Israel, about 15 miles from Jerusalem. Today, it's a quick drive on a divided, modern 4-lane highway. In Jesus' time, it was a day's travel.

In this part of Luke, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem for his Passion. In fact, after the story of Zacchaeus, there'll be one more parable. And then the very next thing is Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. So Zacchaeus is Jesus' last narrated encounter with an individual before Holy Week.

As to what comes before Zacchaeus, last week our Gospel lesson was one chapter earlier—from Luke 18.¹ We heard the parable last week of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Jesus' audience would have expected the Pharisee to be holy. And they would have expected the Tax Collector to be scum. Also, tax collectors were regarded as traitors, Jews who sold out and who worked for the occupying Roman military government. Plus, they were almost always extortionists. They basically paid a hefty franchise fee to the Romans. Then they got to keep everything they collected. This would encourage them to collect as much as they possibly could.

But in his parable, Jesus said that the Pharisee turned out to be so self-righteous that he was unable to be right with God. And the tax-collector who asked for God's mercy turned out to be the one who found forgiveness. We'll come back to this in a second.

Right after this parable, we have people bringing little children to Jesus and the disciples trying to stop them. Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." And then he adds, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."²

After that a rich young ruler comes to Jesus asking to follow him. Jesus tells him to give his money to the poor, then to come follow him. The man refuses to do so. And Jesus says,

¹ Lk 18:1-14

² Lk 18:15-17

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." And when Jesus is asked, "Then who can be saved?" he replies, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."³

Then after a brief dialog with his disciples,⁴ Jesus heads to Jericho. On the way into town, a blind man cries out for mercy. Jesus asks what he wants. The man says he wants to see. And Jesus restores his sight.⁵

The very next thing is our Gospel lesson about Zacchaeus. And Luke does a brilliant job in the way he has put these stories together. For the story of Zacchaeus has echoes and summarizes several themes that have played out in the previous chapter.

Jesus on his way into Jericho healed a man who wanted to see. And now, heading out of Jericho, we encounter Zacchaeus, another man who wants to see. He wants to see Jesus.

Like the rich young ruler in the previous chapter, Zacchaeus is also described as rich. And not only is he a tax collector like the one in the parable. He is described as an "arch" tax collector, or a chief tax collector. He's like a mob boss with a number of lieutenants, a number of assistant tax collectors under him.

But in the parable in the previous chapter, we saw that a tax collector could find forgiveness from God if he changes his ways and changes his heart. So while the people of Jericho might hate Zacchaeus, Luke has prepared us for the possibility that Zacchaeus might find redemption as well.

So this rich chief tax collector wants to see Jesus. But Luke tells us that he is short in stature. He won't be able to see Jesus over the heads of the crowd. And the crowd will be unfriendly to him because of him being a tax collector.

So Zacchaeus does two things that are completely out of character for a rich man. He runs ahead of Jesus. And he climbs a sycamore tree. Rich, dignified men in his culture would never do these things. These were childish behaviors—running and climbing trees. And yet, Jesus had just said that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Apparently, Zacchaeus is so eager to see Jesus that he engages in child like behaviors in order to do it.

And Jesus sees Zacchaeus. And he calls to him by name. And he invites himself over to Zacchaeus's house. The crowd grumbles that Jesus is going to be hanging out with sinners. But this isn't the first time Jesus has hung out with sinners. And just a week after this, Jesus will be hung on a cross between two criminals, two sinners. And yet, Luke tells us, that one of them will call out, asking Jesus to remember him. And the dying Jesus gives an assurance

³ Lk 18:18-27

⁴ Lk 18:28-34

⁵ Lk 18:35-43

to the dying, repentant criminal... in fact, he gives him the greatest invitation of all: "Today you will be with me in Paradise."⁶

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus has told how God seeks out the lost. And Jesus acts the same way.

In response, the rich Zacchaeus promises to use his wealth to do good. In the previous chapter, the rich young ruler had gone away sad because he did not want to give of his possessions. But Zacchaeus promises to do two things:

1. He promises to give half of his wealth to the poor.
2. He promises to use the other half to make restitution to anyone he has cheated.

And he promises to do so with interest. The standard penalty for paying back someone you defrauded was to restore their money along with a 20% penalty. But Zacchaeus promises to pay back 400% of anything he has taken wrongly. That's far above and beyond what would be expected.

Jesus has looked upon Zacchaeus graciously and lavishly.
And Zacchaeus is responding lavishly, trying to make things right.

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
and a wee little man was he.*

Zacchaeus has spent his life and made his money by climbing over others.

He has a low reputation as a tax collector. He makes himself even lower by engaging in childish behavior, running ahead and climbing a tree.

And yet the man who wants to see Jesus is seen by Jesus.
Jesus comes to stay with him.

And in response to such abundant love, Zacchaeus acts lovingly and abundantly. The little man turns out to have a big heart. And he goes from being a taker to a giver.

And Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Today. This day. Now. The Greek word is *sēmeron*. It's a word that's very special in Luke. Today salvation has come to Zacchaeus. That same exact word is used a number of other times in Luke.

It is used by the angel to proclaim good news at Jesus' birth:
"To you is born today in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."⁷

⁶ Lk 23:43

⁷ Lk 2:11

The word is spoken by Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry. He reads the lesson during worship from the book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."⁸ And then he adds, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."⁹

And in his ministry he fulfills that prophecy—seeking out the poor, the marginalized, the lost, the captive, the blind.

And as I said, he even does that on the cross, saying to the repentant criminal, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."¹⁰

And in Jericho, he says it twice.
"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." And then, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."

Today.

Jesus still offers his love, his forgiveness his healing. He offers it to you. He offers it today.

That's what our pattern of worship is all about. God offers these gifts Sunday after Sunday. It is about God's gifts to you, today.

The gift of hearing his word in scripture.

The gift of being able to respond in faith.

The gift of being able to come before God in prayer.

The gift of coming before God asking for forgiveness and receiving it.

And the gift of being invited to come to God's table.

And in the act of Holy Communion, Jesus is again inviting himself over. He wants to come visit you. He wants to dwell inside of you. He wants to come into your life.

Today.

Salvation comes.

Today... Today.

⁸ Lk 4:18

⁹ Lk 4:21

¹⁰ Lk 23:43