

Sermon: Completing the Mission Here and Now

Year C, Proper 26

[Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10](#)

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Since June we have been walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem. He's preaching and teaching, healing and walking, sometimes to great crowds, sometimes to just one or two people. But he's set his face towards Jerusalem to confront the authorities about what they are doing to hold back the kingdom of God. He's not there yet, he's in Jericho at the moment, which is just up the road from Jerusalem. But his time of preparation, his time to get ready for what was next, was coming to an end. There's a way of looking at the story of Zacchaeus as a story that summarizes this whole journey.¹

Let's look at Zacchaeus himself. He's the chief tax collector and he's rich (Luke 19:2). He's based in Jericho, which makes sense because Jericho was rich in export goods like balsam and palms.² There was a royal palace that Herod built, so there was wealth there because of that. Indeed, because of the way the Roman Empire contracted out its tax collection, kind of a pyramid scheme, Zacchaeus was near the top, and making his money by getting a cut from all the guys who collected taxes for him.

Usually it doesn't end well for rich guys in the Gospels. We've seen a few of them since June. The man who had a great harvest so thought he would build a bunch of barns to hold it all. That was his way of tell his soul to eat drink and be merry, storing up treasures for himself. That didn't end well. The rich man that send out scraps to Lazarus lying in the dirt outside his gate. He was burning up in the afterlife. Not ideal. The rich Pharisee at the Temple last week, saying how glad he was to be so wealthy and not impious? Not so good. The rich man who's steward was ripping him off? Again, not the best outcome. Through this whole journey south to Jerusalem, every time we've seen or heard about a rich man, they were really not the hero.

Still, he's a tax collector, and really he's the chief tax collector, so he's definitely on the outside of the community, serving the occupying nation, betraying his people. As we walked with Jesus towards Jerusalem, we've seen widows fighting for justice, we've seen women healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath, we've seen 10 lepers healed. Very early on, we saw a Samaritan, someone even further on the edges of society than a tax collector, put a battered man on his donkey and get him medical help. So being an outsider is a hint that perhaps not everything is going to go the way we would expect.

If we stopped the story at verse 2, [*Jesus*] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich (Luke 19:2), it could go either way. But if we've been training our ears to hear the nuances, we might realize this story has some extra sauce on it, it's going to make a more important point than usual. What's that extra detail that flags this story as important? [Pause]. Zacchaeus has a name. Mary, Martha, Lazarus, [pause] Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas. In the gospels, we always have to pay extra attention to the people who get names. And it doesn't hurt to find out what they mean. Zacchaeus means

¹William P. Loewe, "Towards an Interpretation of Lk 19:1-10." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1974): 321-331.

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975: 234.

“pure” or “righteous”³. That can be sincere or it can be ironic. Regardless, it’s a name. It’s a way that all the Gospel writers use to say, “Listen Up!”.

So we’ve been given the heads up. What do we see? We see Zacchaeus running ahead and climbing into a sycamore tree. Put yourself there for a second. We’ve been told that Zacchaeus is short in stature (19:3) and that he wanted to see Jesus but he couldn’t because of the crowds (Luke 19:3). We think of the Red Sox or the Patriots on the Duck Boats. Or of a parade we went to as a kid. I can just barely remember being on my dad’s shoulders, how powerful and tall I felt. I can definitely remember holding my nephew up there so he could see into the penguin enclosure at the Edinburgh Zoo. But think about what we know of Zacchaeus. He’s rich. His job makes him an outcast, hated by his community. And he climbs that tree. How much must he want to see Jesus, just see him, to be willing to look that ridiculous?⁴ He’d be in nice clothes, nicer than all the people who despise him. He’d have to hike them up to get into the tree, even if the branches make it easy to climb the way this kind tree does.⁵ Anyone who’s ever tried to climb a tree in a skirt can tell you that. How much must he want to see Jesus?

And when Jesus sees him, what does he say? *Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.* (Luke 19:5) He *must* stay. We see the infant Jesus born in the Gospel of Luke. Our last sight of him as a boy is when he has gotten separated from his parents on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph find him and he tells them that he *must* be about his father’s business (Luke 9:22). When Jesus learns that Herod wants to kill him, Jesus replies that Herod can just wait because Jesus *must* fulfill his mission and die in Jerusalem (Luke 13:33). At the Last Supper, he tells his disciples that he *must* fulfill the Scriptures (Luke 22:37). Going to Zacchaeus’ house is part of the divine plan to make the mission of the Son of Man concrete and real.⁶ And that mission is salvation.

Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house *today*, Jesus says. (Luke 19:5). At the beginning of Jesus’ life, an angel let the shepherds know, for born *this day* in the city of David is a savior (Luke 2:11). At the end of Jesus’ life one of the robbers is assured that *today* you will be with me in paradise (Luke 24:43). Salvation happens here and now. Not later. Not somewhere else. Salvation happens here and now.

And who is saved? The sheep that wandered away from the other 99. The coin that had to be swept out from the corner. The poor widow who demanded justice. The tax collector in the Temple. The woman healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Lazarus. All the ones outside the community. All the ones that you wouldn’t be caught dead eating with. The ones that all the Pharisees and the crowds think are not worth saving, they are the ones that are saved.

All the stories that I’m bringing up are just the ones we’ve talked about in worship these past few months. There are so many more that we skipped over. Salvation comes again and again to the

³S. MacLean Gilmour, “The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exegesis,” in vol. 8 of *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952): 320.

⁴Laura S. Sugg, “Proper 26, Pastoral Perspective, Luke 19:1-10” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 264.

⁵Richard Thomas France, "By Their Fruits: Thoughts on the Metaphor of Fruit in the Bible." *Rural Theology* 11, no. 1(2013): 55.

⁶Loewe, 325.

lost. It comes here and now. And it comes because that is what Jesus' mission as the Son of Man is. It is to save the lost, today, here.

It is so urgent that Jesus interrupts his journey to Jerusalem to go to Zacchaeus' house.⁷ Jesus turns aside because this man short of stature and hated by his community is key to the arrival of the kingdom. Here, today, the authorities in power in Jerusalem can wait until Zacchaeus the chief tax collector of Jericho is saved. (Luke 19:9)

For all the times you feel you are lost. For all the times you cry, *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?* (Habakkuk 1:2) For all the times you know deep in your bones that salvation is not coming for you here, today, know this. *There is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.* (Habakkuk 2:3) Just as persistently as we are praying to God, God is reaching for us. We can be as lost and unlikely to be saved as a rich man who has betrayed his people and God will still make a special point to stop and ask us to come down. Because God's mission will not be complete without us. God must stop today and save the sinners who want to catch a glimpse of the divine so much that they are willing to look foolish in the eyes of people whose opinions matter. God will make a special trip just to save them.

⁷F. Wellford Hobbie, "Luke 19:1-10." *Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (1977): 288.