A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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*Salvation Comes*

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Luke 19.1-11

Lots of us learn to love the story of Zacchaeus as children. There’s something about the image of this man up in a tree that’s delightful. And it’s hopeful, too, because if Jesus can change that man as radically as he did, then anyone can be changed. We need that kind of hope.

Zacchaeus is no saint, at least not when we first meet him. The first thing we learn about him is that he was a tax collector, a chief tax collector. He’s hardly the first. We’ve met tax collectors already in Luke’s gospel where they occupy an interesting space. Levi was a tax collector before he became one of Jesus’ disciples. Jesus ate with tax collectors which made religious leaders complain. Apparently you weren’t supposed to do that. And in just the last chapter, Jesus tells a parable about a pharisee and a tax collector who were both praying. The pharisee was thankful that he wasn’t like all those other people, especially like the tax collector. The tax collector just asked for God’s mercy and thus went home justified. As readers of Luke’s gospel, by the time we meet Zacchaeus in chapter 19, we know that tax collectors are people who can be transformed by the gospel.

But complicating matters, the second thing we learn about Zacchaeus is that he was rich. Luke emphasizes this. We might have assumed he was rich without that information. Or Luke could have told us he was a ‘rich tax collector’ and that would have told us the same, but Luke’s rhetorical flair ensures you take this information in. He was a tax collector, and he was rich. In Luke’s gospel, we’ve met rich people before. Unlike tax collectors, the rich don’t respond to Jesus so well. In the Beatitudes in Luke, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor but woe to the rich”. In just the last chapter, Jesus meets a rich ruler who couldn’t bear to part with his earthly wealth to follow Jesus and goes away sad. Jesus also laments: it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. As readers of Luke’s gospel we meet a few rich people, but not many camels going through needle’s eyes. So what kind of story will this be? Will this be a tax collectors comedy or a rich person’s tragedy?

The third thing we learn about Zacchaeus, and for most of us the thing we most remember, is that he was short. This is unexpected. In stories, notably bad guys and notably good guys are tall, big, larger than life characters. But this guy Zacchaeus though is short of stature. A short, rich, tax-collector. That’s what we know about Zacchaeus when Jesus comes to Jericho.

On that day, the crowds line the streets awaiting his arrival, and Zacchaeus wants to see as well. He was seeking to see who Jesus was. Luke’s language is a bit mysterious here, but there’s something more than he just wanted to see him. He wanted to really see him. But he couldn’t on account of the crowd. It seems that the people in the crowd willfully prevented Zacchaeus from having a view of the street. No one parted for him; no one ushered him to VIP seating. He was outside looking in because he was short, but also because he was a tax collector who was rich.

As readers of Luke’s gospel, even as readers of the last chapter, we’ve seen this before. Just as in the last chapter, disciples prevented children from coming to Jesus, now the crowd prevents Zacchaeus from coming to Jesus. Sometimes people have a funny way of honoring the prince of peace.

Undaunted, Zacchaeus ran on ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree to see him. In the last chapter Jesus said whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. Is there anything more exuberantly childlike than climbing a tree?

Here’s where we find the rich, tax collecting, tree climbing Zacchaeus, out on a limb, probably thinking to himself: how did I get here? And quite possibly wondering: and how do I get down? That problem would have to wait for a while because here comes Jesus, on cue, around the corner. And Zacchaeus finally can see him coming—just as he’d hoped.

To be able to see Jesus is not something to take for granted, not in this story. In the last chapter, just before this story was a blind man on the side of the road crying out, “Jesus have mercy on me!” The crowds tell him to shush, but Jesus stops, heals the man, who glorifies God and follows him likely right through the streets of Jericho. Surely that man was part of the entourage Zacchaeus sees coming around the corner. Seeing Jesus is no small thing. Zacchaeus had gone to great effort to see him for himself. And he accomplished his goal of seeing him. But then he got something more than he’d bargained for. He saw Jesus. And, more importantly, Jesus saw him. Jesus looked up and saw him.

As we’ve seen, the way Luke has laid the groundwork for this story throughout the gospel and especially in the last chapter suggests that nothing less than the whole good news is at stake in this look. Tax collectors, rich people, shunned people, children, people who can’t see and then are given sight have all prepared us for this moment when the parade stops, and Jesus looks up to see that man clinging to a branch in a tree. Zacchaeus is the pocket-sized picture of everyone who has already encountered the gospel.

And the picture of everyone who ever will.

It’s pretty tough to say you or someone you know is just like Zacchaeus. His station in life in relationship is definitely particular to 1st century Jewish experience in Roman occupied territory. And yet, there’s something about this story that really resonates with people. Children get it because they know what it’s like to have a to climb a tree to see something, like a parade, or a baptism. Adults get it too, because they know what it’s like to feel judged by those around you, whether or not their condemnation is fair, knowing full well it often is, at least in part. We do wrong and feel shame, but we get trapped in cycles and circles of life and go round and round again not knowing how to break out and start new again. And everyone is captivated by the drama of this grown man hanging on a limb, suddenly becoming the center of attention. He’s in a pretty vulnerable, uncomfortable position. Whatever the distance between him and us, that position seems familiar for anyone who has ever taken steps of faith.

When Jesus looks up at him, it’s as if he’s looking at us. We all feel like we’re seeing this scene, this story, this gospel moment through the leaves of the sycamore tree.

*Come on down from there. I’m coming to your house for dinner. I must come.*

Oh, the crowd, you know the crowd grumbled at this. As readers of Luke we’ve seen grumbling before. Until now it’s just been the religious leaders grumbling about things Jesus was doing. Now everyone’s grumbling. No one’s happy about this. A tax collector’s sins weren’t just between a man and his conscience. His sins took dinner off the plates of his neighbors and took sandals off the feet of their children. A crowd of Jonahs resenting the repentance of their nemesis now stood at the foot of that tree.

But forget the crowds. Jesus is undaunted by the religious leaders scorn, or the crowds disapproval. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost and he will not be deterred from this mission. Zacchaeus was trying to see Jesus, and all the while Jesus had been searching for him, too. Our salvation isn’t from how high we climb or how tall we grow. It’s when we fall whether we fall at the feet of Jesus. And we all fall.

*I must come to your house for dinner.*

No one was more surprised than Zacchaeus himself. At hearing that, Zacchaeus must have just fallen out of that tree, right? Just thud, right at the ground at Jesus feet. It’s like the scales have fallen off his heart. Listen to him; now he’s giving half of everything he owns to the poor; he’s paying back people 4 times over for what he’s done wrong.

It’s as if he’d been wanting to do the right thing, but just couldn’t figure out how to do it. Now everything that kept him from being good, from doing right is now unleashed. Everything that kept him from the path to sainthood just falls away like leaves from trees or more like apples or small men or sins falling. Thud. Landing at the feet of Jesus.

*Today salvation has come to this house.*

The saints aren’t those that always climbed higher; it’s that they never took their eyes off him no matter how high they climbed. And it’s not that they never fell, it’s that when they fell they landed at his feet. It’s not that they weren’t sinners; its that salvation came to their house and from then on the door of their house was never closed, and there was always a place at the table of grace for one more seat.

What kind of story is this? It’s a gospel story, one of the truly delightful gospel stories-of a person out of options, desperate to see Jesus, willing to do anything, only then to find himself embraced by the one who spoke the words of life.

It’s a gospel story for all time, for the Son of Man is still seeking the lost wherever he may find you.

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