

Sermon Proper 26C 2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalms 119: 137-144

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 19: 1-10

Bill Watson

October 30, 2016

Over the past several weeks, we heard the writings of the prophet Jeremiah who lived about the same time as the prophet Habakkuk. Our lesson this morning comes from the period just before Jeremiah's prophecy. Habakkuk wrote in 597 BC before the Babylonian conquest. He wrote of the cruel treatment by the people of Israel. Yet, as cruel as the Hebrew people treated one another, the Babylonians would be even worse several decades later. Habakkuk's experience is, "The wicked surround the righteous." But Habakkuk trusted in God. He will watch and wait. Will God respond? Yes, God responds as God always does. God directed Habakkuk to, "write the vision." "The righteous live by faith." By faith, this means putting one foot in front of the other each day, walking in the way of the Lord. Open, accepting, responding, loving. Never quitting no matter how discouraging the journey may seem. Salvation is coming. That is the vision of Habakkuk. The salvation that Habakkuk was promised would take six centuries to arrive, that is the good news that Jesus brought.

We have been journeying through Luke's gospel for almost a year. We have come to the 19th chapter and finally the thesis of Luke's gospel. "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." One of the reasons so many people love Luke's gospel may be based on Luke's understanding of Jesus' mission. Luke understands that Jesus was on a rescue mission. Jesus was reaching out to one and all who were estranged or cut off.

Jesus and his entourage were going through the village of Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. Crowds were gathering to get a glimpse of the prophet who was the subject of so many stories.

Joining the crowds who had come to glimpse Jesus, was Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was said to be short of stature. But stature wasn't the only marker that Zacchaeus was short on. He was short on respect, honor, and dignity. Short on acceptance by his fellow townspeople. Short on honesty. He may not have been

able to see Jesus more because of the crowd's hostile attitude than due to his stature. Going up a tree may have protected him from being jostled by the crowd, who would view him with disgust.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector and not just any tax collector, but the chief one. We have various opinions concerning the IRS today. Most believe the IRS carries out a necessary function for society. Others despise the IRS. Others complain that the IRS is out to get them and is inefficient and then cuts their funding to punish them, thus punishing those in society who come to them seeking answers. Oh, what tangled webs we weave. So the description that Zacchaeus was a tax collector and the chief tax collector at that brings images to our mind of an agency with few advocates. But the situation in Israel was more reviled.

In the Roman Empire, local residents were subjected to a variety of taxes. From poll taxes to road and bridge taxes, to taxes on merchandise, to property taxes. Taxes were a particularly unwelcome consequence of the Roman occupation. In each locality, a chief collector appointed local collectors under them. In addition the system allowed for extra tax to be collected above and beyond what was rightfully due. This was ripe for abuse. Usually these chief collector positions were given to the wealthy and powerful who were usually not natives of the area. Their work meant that under Mosaic Law they were excluded from the synagogue. Based on literature from the period, there would be few more despised characters in Jericho than Zacchaeus. All would know that he was a sinner, perhaps the worst one.

But something attracted him to Jesus. He wanted to "see" Jesus. This, as we know, is coded language. When scripture speaks of seeing, it is more than sight; it is coming to know. Zacchaeus wanted to know Jesus.

Something about Zacchaeus was open, searching, risking to see Jesus. He went out on a limb literally and metaphorically. What drew him?

Jesus sees him and alters plans accordingly. Among everyone in the crowd, Jesus goes straight for Z. Nothing could have been more shocking. Yet, when we consider the thesis of Luke's Gospel, Z. is the reason for the visit to Jericho. This is no accidental stop on the way; this was the very reason for the journey. Z. is indicative of all whom Jesus comes to rescue, the least, the last, and the lost. Even folks like you and me. "Zacchaeus hurry and come down, I must stay at your house today."

The crowd's response was horror and disbelief. No one was more despised in the community. What could Jesus have been thinking in addressing Z.? This would have horrified the faithful. Who is comparable in our culture today? I am not sure that there is anyone in the Lynchburg community who was viewed with such contempt. The head of a Ponzi scheme perhaps? Doubtful since they only attract the rich. Or a mass murderer? Possibly, yet they would get the strongest response from the families affected. Or perhaps the CEO of one of the many check cashing operations or payday loan operators that prey on the poor. But I doubt that, they are a plague on the most invisible in our culture. I am not sure who in our day would have generated as much disbelief as Z. Appalling, that must have been the initial reaction. Out of all those adoring crowds, Jesus chose the most despised.

Were Jesus to call on us, we might worry about how the house looked or what food we had in the frig but Zacchaeus saw his heart as the soil of preparation. He was open and welcoming. The impact of Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus produced **an incredible change of heart**. Something in the invitation was transformative. Life changes begin with invitations.

The evidence of his change of heart was apparent in his confession to Jesus. He would give half his possessions to the poor. And to those from whom he had defrauded, he would pay back four times any defrauded amount. This was an incredible repayment, indicative of an astonishing change of heart. What was required of those who had defrauded others vs. what Z. actually did was unimaginable. Voluntary restitution was the original amount plus 20%. Mandatory restitution called for repaying twice the original amount. Z. offered half his possessions to the poor and to those he had defrauded, four fold repayment. He went way above and beyond the requirements of the law. He showed what we call the fruits of repentance. He was a completely transformed person. (From *Interpretation: Luke* by Fred Craddock, p. 219), Zacchaeus' "generous offer of restitution can be seen as evidence of the radical nature of grace and the power of Jesus' good news to him." Zacchaeus' name can be translated to mean pure or innocent. In the end, he lived up to his name.

Jesus proclaimed, "Today salvation has come to this house,..." In the encounter, Zacchaeus was saved. Today, we hear many speak of being saved as a personal experience. An experience affecting one's life in the world to come. That is far from Luke's understanding.

(From Long in Interpretation:) For Luke, “conversion was not in a private sense.” “Not only is his household involved but also the poor who will be beneficiaries of Zacchaeus’ conversion as well as all those people whom he may have defrauded. His salvation, therefore, has personal, domestic, social, and economic dimensions.”

But the word we translate as “save” has even broader connections to health and well-being. Saved also means to be “made well,” “healed,” or “made whole.”

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem but the stop in Jericho with Zacchaeus was not a delay, it was and is the reason for the journey.

There is a vision for the appointed time. Salvation is for all. (Connect to Hab.) That is the good news that Jesus revealed to the world. And this salvation is not for some future date, it is here and now. You are saved. I am saved. We are saved. God’s love and mercy reaches into our lives and changes everything.

So many times I suspect we can be our own worst critic. We fail to live up to the hopes we have for ourselves. We find ourselves feeling unworthy of God’s love and concern. Certainly God’s love wouldn’t be extended to someone with your faults or my faults. But Jesus approaching Zacchaeus reveals that Jesus is precisely concerned with those who feel unworthy, isolated, and distant. That is what salvation means. Salvation means that we too are brought within the saving healing embrace of Jesus. God’s love surrounds us, accepts us, saves us.

As we come to realize this, it has the power to change how we live. This can change how we relate to one another. There has perhaps not been a time when we need to hear this as clearly as we do now.

Jesus’ invitation changed Zacchaeus. Jesus’ invitation has changed people ever since, from St. Francis of Assisi to St. Theresa of Calcutta in our day and unnamed saints galore. Even ordinary people with everyday concerns like you and me. Suddenly, this opens us to new possibilities. Jesus has a claim on our lives and when we experience this, we respond accordingly. We can loosen our grip on possessions. We needn’t hold on quite so tightly. We look at others not so much with judgment as with acceptance and grace and welcome. We realize that they are struggling for balance in their lives, just as we struggle at times in our own. And so we invite others to come and hear the good news.

“The Son of man came to seek out and save the lost.” And that changed everything.