

## Encounters on the Way

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.  
He climbed up in the sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.  
And as the Savior passed that way he looked up in the tree,  
And he said: "Zacchaeus, you come down,  
For I'm going to your house today. For I'm going to your house today."

If you grew up going to Sunday School, this children's chorus is an old friend. It concisely captures the essential features of an encounter Jesus had in the City of Jericho while he was on his way to Jerusalem.

The crucifixion is now less than two weeks away. Jesus is traveling with a gathering crowd, surrounded as always by the Twelve. As he passes through Jericho, a chance meeting with Zacchaeus captures his attention.

Turn with me to Luke 19:1-10. Luke is the only Gospel writer to include this story. Let's refresh our memories as we read.

Luke identifies Zacchaeus as a chief tax collector. What that means is that in the district of Jericho, Zacchaeus was a leading figure in the collection of all tolls and taxes. Other tax collectors worked under him. He took a cut from every tax transaction that took place in the city.

It was a choice position. Jericho was a point of entry into the Judean region. Every caravan, every commercial vendor that passed through on its way to Jerusalem paid taxes in Jericho.

Jericho was also known for its production of balsam, a resinous gum from which the ancients made aromatic, healing lotions. It too was a rich source of tax revenue.

All this was in addition to the income taxes, property taxes and sales taxes collected from the citizens.

Zacchaeus was not only rich, he was filthy rich.

To many, he was just filthy.

Tax collectors had a reputation that rivaled Enron and Bernie Madoff. They bid for tax collection franchises from the Roman occupiers of Israel. Tax collectors (aka toll farmers) were not only thought of as collaborators with Rome, they had a well-deserved reputation for fraud and extortion. They regularly padded tax bills with surcharges which went into their pockets.

Rank and file Jews despised them. One Rabbi said that if a tax collector entered your house, he made it unclean. Under Jewish law, houses became unclean if someone died in them, or if mold and mildew infected the home. Tax collectors were ranked with stuff like that.

As a result, they were systematically excluded from ordinary Jewish society. What friends they had came from associates and the party crowd, others like them with unsavory reputations.

Zacchaeus was in charge of tax collections in Jericho. And he was very rich.

We must think more broadly here. As Luke crafts his Gospel, he selects his material purposefully. He is doing more than compiling random incidents in the life of Jesus. Zacchaeus is not a haphazard insertion. He shows up in the context of wider purposes.

For instance, in chapter three, Luke records the ministry of John the Baptist. John was the fiery prophet who came to prepare Israel for Jesus. He warmly welcomed his audience with

words like these: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” How’s that for a pastoral welcome to your congregation? John had a way with people.

He told those who came to “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

Scattered in the crowds who came to hear John were—of all people—tax collectors. Nobody else took them seriously enough to talk to them about the possibility of their getting right with God. Tax collectors even came to be baptized. As they did, they asked John: “Teacher, what should we do?”

John told them, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to” (Luke 3:7-14). In other words, don’t cheat people. Collecting taxes is legitimate, but it demands honesty.

Like many labeled “sinners,” tax collectors had no illusions about their moral standing. They didn’t need people trying to make them feel guilty. They anaesthetized their guilt with money and pleasure. But some of them, at least, found in John someone who talked straight and offered hope. Some of them turned their lives around.

So much so that Jesus used them as examples in his rebuke to the religious elite. Matthew has Jesus telling the chief priests: “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him” (Matthew 21:31-32).

Since John ministered in and around the Jordan River near the fords close by Jericho, it’s fair to assume that Zacchaeus heard stories about John from his friends. I wonder if he ever made fun of their repentance. I wonder if he secretly admired their moral courage.

Jump forward to chapter fifteen. Luke records three parables Jesus taught. They all speak to the same theme:

- a shepherd goes out to find a lost sheep and throws a party at its recovery
- a woman turns her house upside-down searching for a lost coin and invites her friends and neighbors to share her joy at finding it.
- a distraught father loses a son to greed and immorality. When the boy comes to his senses and returns repentant, Dad kills the fatted calf. Then Dad faces the potential loss of his other son, furious at the prodigal’s welcome.

The point: when lost people get found, all of heaven celebrates, even though people might not.

In chapter eighteen, Luke includes two parables and three encounters in which the powerless and the ungodly win Jesus’ approval, and the rich and religious go away empty:

- A widow’s persistence earns her an answer to her petition.
- A Pharisee’s arrogance is exposed and God hears a tax collector’s humble plea for forgiveness.
- Parents bring their children to see Jesus, and over his disciples’ objections, Jesus blesses the kids.
- A rich young ruler asks Jesus what he must do to be assured of eternal life. He keeps the commandments of the law carefully, but is unwilling to give up his counterfeit god—his great wealth. Jesus says it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God’s kingdom.
- And then, on the outskirts of Jericho, a blind beggar cries out for mercy, and Jesus heals him.

In two of these cases, those who have an in with Jesus try to keep others away from him. His own disciples tried to turn away the children. Those leading the crowd tried to silence the blind man. It’s almost as if they didn’t want anyone else to share their insider status.

Then we come to Zacchaeus. It's impossible for him to see over the crowd, and he can't force his way through it. Crowds have their own ways of keeping people out.

So Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus passing by.

I've always puzzled about the tree. The sycamore trees I know around here in Michigan are giants. The first branches are usually way over our heads.

Zacchaeus would have climbed a shorter variety with sprawling branches. It would have been easy for him to find a perch.

Easy, but not dignified. And their's was a culture that valued dignity. People of importance, for instance, never ran, and they certainly never climbed trees. Zacchaeus did both just to get a glimpse of Jesus. What others thought didn't matter. He wanted to see Jesus.

Look at verses 5-6.

And once again, the crowd chimed in: "All the people saw this and began to mutter [grumble], 'He has gone to be the guest of a *sinner*.'"

Crowds are such fickle things. They were probably scandalized by Jesus going into a tax collector's house. After all, if one tax collector could defile your home, what would a houseful of them do to Jesus?

But—I think—jealousy worked in the crowd as well. Jesus walked away from them to spend the night at Zacchaeus' place. The shepherd left the flock to find the lost lamb. No wonder the flock groused about Jesus' choice of friends.

But inside, something wonderful was going on. Remember John the Baptist's insistence that those who repent act like they've repented. Look at v. 8.

Scholar Darrell Bock writes: "In Judaism, it was considered generous to give away twenty percent of one's possessions. More than this was not considered prudent." Zacchaeus blew away the norms. He reduced his holdings by half.

And, the Mosaic law required a twenty percent penalty as restitution for extortion. Zacchaeus offered to restore what was taken four times over.

This is a man with a transformed heart. His repentance reached all the way down through his heart and into his wallet.

Notice how Jesus responds: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

We have to be careful here. Zacchaeus didn't receive salvation by being generous. His restitution and giving to the poor was not a good deed he did to earn his way into heaven. They were outward expressions of his encounter with the love of God in the face of Christ. He tasted God's love and wanted to share it.

Salvation, being put right with God, is always God's work, God's initiative. Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus' home and into Zacchaeus' heart. As Zacchaeus opens himself to the invitation, Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus back into the fold of Israel as a true son of Abraham.

Early on, when Jesus first launched his public ministry, people were already complaining about Jesus' poor taste in friends. "But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'"

Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'" (Luke 5:30-32).

Now, as Jesus approaches the cross, his purpose stands firm. Look at v. 10: "For the Son

of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Jesus turns the rules of religion upside down. In popular thought, good people go to heaven. Jesus says he came to find lost people—the not-good people—and to rescue them. Acceptance with Jesus begins by figuring out that you really are lost, hopelessly alienated from God.

Which is amazingly good news. When we are brutally honest with ourselves, most of us have lots to hide. We have attitudes, fantasies, snippets of misconduct and wholesale episodes of evil that we’re ashamed of, that we know are wrong. We put on our best front and measure ourselves against really bad people who do open, large-scale, horrific acts of evil. Compared to them, we come off not so bad.

God compares us to Jesus. The Bible says: “Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13). God sees deeply into the secret recesses of our hearts and holds us accountable for everything he sees there.

Only people like Zacchaeus, who know they are lost, who open their souls to God, acknowledge their real guilt and confess their sins—only such as these are candidates for grace and entrance into God’s Kingdom. Only those who know they’re disqualified, qualify.

Zacchaeus went looking for Jesus, only to discover that Jesus was looking for him. Jesus swept aside the opinions of the crowd to find this one lost man and restore him to the Father. A materially rich but spiritually impoverished man entered the kingdom; a camel passed through the needle’s eye.

Jesus came to seek *lost* people and reconcile the likes of us to God.