

St. James' Episcopal Church Cindy Baskin

Proper 26-C – **9:15 am Family Service** October 31, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 1:10-18; Ps 32:1-8; 2 Thess 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

Introduction – The Song, *Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man*

Some of us grew singing the song, *Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man* . It's hard for me to hear this gospel story without having this song go through my head.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he;
He climbed up in a 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.

Zacchaeus – a prototypical story of our search for God

Because of the familiarity of this story to children, it would be easy to think of it as primarily a children's story. But suggest to you that in these ten short verses, we see laid out before us the outline of our own journey to God and salvation. So consider for a moment that Zacchaeus is you and me. And his journey is our journey - a journey in **Five Steps**.

Longing

Zacchaeus obviously had heard something about Jesus who is traveling through his home town. We don't know what, but something makes him want to get a look at Jesus – there's some kind of longing at work. Maybe it's just curiosity fostered by the stories he may have heard about Jesus. Maybe he has sensed something in Jesus that touches him. Perhaps it's some vague hope or longing for something more in life – even though he can't quite identify, much less articulate, what that might be. Whatever his reasons or motivation, Zacchaeus wants to get a good look at Jesus for himself, but there are obstacles.

Obstacles

First, there are his own personal obstacles or limitations. He is short – He can't see over the crowds, which block his view and get in his way. Then there's the life choices he has made, choosing a career path as a tax collector for Rome. Tax collectors made money by inflating the tax rate actually required by Rome and keeping the difference. And Zacchaeus is not just any tax collector, he is the *chief* tax collector and therefore has become *very* rich.

Second, there are obstacles outside of himself. This crowd HATES him. Because he is a tax collector, he is despised by his fellow Jews who see him as a traitor and as a thief, getting rich at his own people's expense. These folks don't want to have anything to do with Zacchaeus, and certainly are not going to make space for him so he can get to the front of the line.

So Zacchaeus faces obstacles both from within and without.

Searching (Seeking)

But Zacchaeus will not be put off – a true seeker and he's **searching**. Such is his desire to see Jesus, that he dashes ahead the crowd, puts aside his pride, and climbs up into a tree so he can get a better look at Jesus. And now that he is up there in that tree out on limb, what does Zacchaeus expect to happen? This, of course, raises the same questions for you and me: What are we willing to do to get a closer look at Jesus? And What do we expect to happen when we seek for Jesus?

Jesus Comes

But then Jesus comes and stops at that sycamore tree and looks up. Imagine Zacchaeus' reaction. How would you have reacted had you been Zacchaeus? Would you be surprised that Jesus knew your name? And then to hear Jesus say: "*Hurry and come down quickly; for I must stay at your house today*"? Not only does Jesus tell him to come down out of the tree, he invites himself to spend the night. This is a formula for a whole mixture of emotions: fear, embarrassment, excitement, perhaps even suspicion.

In a novel by Lloyd Douglas, the author tells the story of Zacchaeus and has Jesus ask Zacchaeus "...what did you see that made you desire this peace." In other words, "Why did you come down from that tree?" Zacchaeus has to think about this because he is, after all, a despised and hated man. Is Jesus going to make an object lesson out of him? Ridicule him? Admonish him publically in front of these crowds that hate him? But as Zacchaeus looks down at Jesus from his tree perch, an incredible realization breaks over him and so, in the words of the novel, he responds, "***Master, I saw mirrored in your eyes the face of the Zacchaeus I was meant to be.***" In Jesus he sees welcome and a willingness to take him as he is. He sees what is yet possible for him. Here is One who believes in him still, even when he hardly has belief in himself. Here is one who is willing to let him start again, from here, and now! "***I saw mirrored in your eyes the face of the Zacchaeus I was meant to be.***"

Response

Zacchaeus' response is not too surprising. A miracle has happened in his life and he responds with overflowing joy and thankfulness that is manifested in concrete action. He says to Jesus: "*Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.*" This is a man transformed.

Conclusion

The stories of how each of us looks for God will be varied, but we can take a few tips from Zacchaeus. Remember, even as Zacchaeus looks for Jesus, Jesus is looking for him. Zacchaeus humbles himself by running and climbing a tree. And when he has that memorable encounter with and experience of Jesus, he responds with joyous thanksgiving through giving.

This story of Zacchaeus epitomizes the theme of our financial stewardship campaign this year: **Joyfully Thanking Our Generous God.** Zacchaeus experienced the generosity of God and responded accordingly. Can we do anything less?