

Up A Tree

YEAR C

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Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 19:1-10

Today's Gospel is an old favorite. It shows again how Jesus was concerned with finding the lost lambs, in this case a tax collector, even if that upset the righteous folks. The tax collector of this story shows us how important it is to pursue Jesus passionately. However, unlike those "sons of Abraham," who struggled to see Jesus on the Jericho road, we have the advantage that Christ has been lifted up for all to see through the Holy Spirit.

Who doesn't remember Zacchaeus? The Sunday school song goes, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see." This Gospel emphasizes the special relationship that Jesus had with the tax collectors, the outcasts of his day. In fact, Jesus seems to be consciously breaking down the barriers that separated the righteous, the Pharisees, and the sinners, the tax collectors. For Jesus there is very little difference between these two groups: they are all sinners, they are all given an opportunity to repent, and they are all sons of Abraham. Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' choice to stay at his house with an extravagant act of charity and restitution: "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." Zacchaeus give much more generously than the tithing Pharisee of last week's Gospel. Has Zacchaeus won salvation because he gave more than the Pharisees who despised him?

Listen again to Jesus' statement, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." This seems a strange statement, since it seems like Zacchaeus is the one who sought out Jesus since he "ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree" to "see who Jesus was." Nevertheless, the action of Jesus was crucial: When Jesus saw that Zacchaeus was taking such an effort to seek him out; Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' home. Notice that Zacchaeus did not know who Jesus was when he climbed that tree. It was Jesus, the shepherd seeking lost sheep, who took the first step of accepting Zacchaeus the sinner. It was only after Jesus accepted Zacchaeus and the onlookers began to grumble, that Zacchaeus made his extravagant pledge. Moreover, it seems that the reason Jesus accepted Zacchaeus was that he was a "son of Abraham," just like all the rest of the Jews. Zacchaeus received his salvation as a gift from Jesus. His gifts to the poor did not earn his salvation. Instead, they were an act of thankfulness.

Grace, repentance, and thankfulness are themes in my life also. Zacchaeus and I do have something in common: we both want to see Jesus. However, unlike Zacchaeus it is not obvious that I can see Jesus by climbing a tree, no matter how tall. Zacchaeus has the opportunity to see Jesus of Nazareth the man, God in human form, walking the roads of Jericho. How many times have we Christians wished that we could just see Jesus of Nazareth "in person?" However, even though Jesus was there in the flesh he was not easy to see. Zacchaeus was willing to go to some effort, to the extent of running ahead and climbing a tree, so he could see Jesus despite the crowds.

When I opened the "Abingdon Bible Commentary" to this Gospel passage, I found a question that I at first dismissed as nonsense: "Who was the man of little stature

—Zacchaeus or Jesus?” The commentary goes on to say, “The last alternative is possible, as the text does not clearly say; if Jesus was little, it would be natural to get up into a tree to get a sight of him in the crowd. Here and there in the Fathers there are hints that Jesus was of insignificant stature, but they may only involve an inference from ‘when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him (Isaiah 53:2).’”

This sounds very strange. Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus not because Zacchaeus was a “wee little man,” but because Jesus was a “wee little man.” No way! Nevertheless, on second thought, let us reread that passage in Isaiah, it reads, “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” So much for the tall, handsome Jesus portrayed in the movies and sentimental paintings! If we did get a chance to see Jesus “in the flesh,” we might initially be very disappointed.

However, it doesn’t make much difference whether Jesus was 5’1” or 6’4”, he was a man, and his physical presence was limited to a tiny area of the globe and his active ministry of teaching and healing and feeding lasted, at most, for 3 years. Jesus in his earthly ministry touched the lives of only a handful of people. If Jesus had not been crucified and had lived to a ripe old age, he could have had direct contact with more people, but the number would still be negligible compared to the number of people who have lived since. Yet Jesus has transformed the lives of billions of people over the past 2000 years! What happened?

In Zacchaeus’ experience, Jesus was a man on the Jericho road and climbing high above him was the best way to see him. We remember other times in the Bible where it was a struggle to see Jesus and get near him, like the time in Luke, when “Some men

came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.”

There was a time when it made sense for people to climb up so that they could look down and see Jesus. That time has passed. Remember, as soon as Jesus saw Zacchaeus, what did he tell him? He told him “hurry and come down” to be with Jesus at Zacchaeus’ house. The example of Zacchaeus is inspiring, but it is misleading if we focus too much on Zacchaeus’ effort to run ahead and climb a tree. Salvation is not gained by climbing a tree or ladder of holiness. The problem with climbing a tree see God is that we are very likely to fall out of the tree and break our necks.

Instead of a few people being able to climb up and look down at Jesus, Jesus was lifted up on the cross for all to see. We might remember what Jesus told Nicodemus in the Gospel of John, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” Moreover, later in John, Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Jesus refers to an incident described in the Old Testament Book of Numbers. The people have spoken against God and Moses. “Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten

can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived."

Like Zacchaeus and the people in the desert, we are all sinners, and the wages of sin is death. However, to be saved, we do not have to climb a tree to get a better look at Jesus. Jesus was raised up on the cross so that all people at every place and every time can see him clearly. Unlike Zacchaeus, we are not looking for Jesus to find out who Jesus is. Instead, we are looking for Jesus to find out who we are.

Unlike Zacchaeus, I was not born a "son of Abraham." However, Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to help me by making me part of God's family. If I am a member of Jesus' family and an heir to his Kingdom, it is through adoption by way of the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul says in Romans, "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." Moreover, later, "The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship." St. Paul also says, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Therefore, unlike Zacchaeus whose salvation came from being a "son of Abraham," my salvation comes from being a child of God. Moreover, my salvation comes not only from being a child of God, but also from being a member of a family of God's children, the Church. The Church is my new home, where like Zacchaeus, I can welcome Jesus and ask him to stay for supper—the Lord's supper that we are having today. This reminds that we expanded that circle of God's family when we baptized dear little Kyleigh Michelle last Sunday. Remember our prayer for the baptized, "We give you

thanks, O Holy One, mother and father of all the faithful, for this your child and for the grace acknowledged here today in water and the Holy Spirit. Embrace us all as sons and daughters in the one household of your love.” Jesus has said to us today, “hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” If we will “hurry and come down,” Jesus will stay with us at our house, the Church. Let us be “happy to welcome him” Amen.

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