

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 30, 2016  
Proper 26, Year C, Track 1

E. Bevan Stanley

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4  
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12  
Luke 19:1-10

"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." In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's reading from the Gospel recounts the second of two encounters Jesus had while passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. The first occurs as he is entering Jericho, when a blind man accosts him, calling him by his Messianic title, Son of David." He heals the blind man saying, "Receive your sight. Your faith has made you well." Now we have another man who wishes to see. Zacchaeus has his natural sight, but the next says, "he was trying to see who Jesus was." Or perhaps, what Jesus was.

This Zacchaeus is described as a chief tax collector and very rich. As such he was despised by his fellow Jews for two reasons. First, he got rich by extorting more taxes than people really owed and pocketed the difference. He headed up a gang that went around and threatened to break people's knees if they didn't cough up what was demanded. Second, he was also despised as a collaborator with the hated occupying forces of the Roman Empire.

This man had heard about Jesus and wanted to get a look at this famous phenomenon, who was passing through town. Some said that when he got to Jerusalem he would somehow call down divine power and kick out the Romans. This would be bad news for Zacchaeus, who would lose his power. Others said that when this hick preacher from the boondocks got to the big city,

the authorities would simply lock him or kill him, and that would be the end of him. Either way this was news, and Zacchaeus was curious.

It happened that Zacchaeus was a short man, and he couldn't get a good look because he couldn't see over the heads of the crowd. So, he runs ahead and climbs into a tree. Luke records that it was a sycamore tree, which is an odd detail to include, and I have no idea if there is any significance to it.

When Jesus comes to the tree, he calls out to Zacchaeus, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." This raises a couple of questions. First, how did Jesus know Zacchaeus' name? Had they already met before? That seems unlikely, because then curiosity would not have been Zacchaeus' motive for wanting to see Jesus. Had his reputation come to Jesus' ears? Had one of his disciples whispered in his ear that had heard all about the short guy in the thousand dollar suit? Or did Jesus simply have some divine knowledge? Hard to tell.

Second, what does Jesus mean when he says, "I must stay at your house today?" Is God the Father giving him a command? Is it necessary so that Jesus can fulfill some prophecy? Is it necessary for Zacchaeus that Jesus stay at his house? It seem that this last is the most likely.

Zacchaeus' response astounds everyone, with possible exception of Jesus. He falls out of the tree and is happy to welcome Jesus. "By all means, come and spend the night at my house." And then the text says, "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" All of a sudden Jesus is the bad guy, because he has chosen to stay with such a terrible man. This is very similar to the host who grumbled when the woman who was a notorious sinner slipped into the dinner party and washed Jesus' feet with her tears. Indeed,

people are often complaining that Jesus seems to have fairly low standards for choosing with whom he is going to associate.

And now Zacchaeus astounds everyone by saying, “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.” In fact the text says that Zacchaeus stood there and said this. Or one could translate it, Zacchaeus took his stand and said this. Zacchaeus may have been short, but he was not small. You don’t run a successful protection racket by being weak or timid. He is a man of some presence.

Then Jesus said to him, “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.” The reason Jesus gives for Zacchaeus’ salvation is that he is a son of Abraham. He is part of the God’s people, and as such he participates in God’s covenant of love and mercy. Whether Zacchaeus’ repentance and amendment of life were the result of free choice or an emotional response to Jesus’ attention or the work of the Holy Spirit changing him from the inside out, God is faithful to his promise to be this people’s God forever. And we are reminded once again of Jesus’ mission: to seek out and save the lost.

This is an excellent passage to use for a *lectio divina*, or divine reading. We can picture the scene: the road, the crowd, the yelling and shoving, the sycamore tree, Jesus stopping and looking up. The man coming down and joyfully telling everyone that his life has just been turned around. And having the scene in our mind’s eye, we can ask the question, “Who am I in this scene?” Am I one of the disciples looking with admiration at how my master is dealing with this notorious crook? Am I one of the crowd that is just curious about this healer and preacher and hoping to get to see a miracle? Am I one of the grumblers who finds it distasteful and abhorrent that a man of God would sully himself by allowing any kind of relationship with so repugnant a

character as Zacchaeus? Am I Zacchaeus, a person who has found himself as a result of a long series of choices to be a person that I despise. Am I Zacchaeus, a person who has been surprised and overwhelmed by the generosity and mercy showed to him by God? Am I Jesus, who sees in the most depraved and unlovely the image of God and an opportunity for God's power and love to make a new creation? Am I an outside observer seeing the whole scene and wondering once more at what Frederick Buechner calls "the best and oldest joke in the world." If you are anything like me, there have been times at which we have been any of these and more that I can't think of right now. But most of all this story reminds us that it is necessary that Jesus come and stay at our house today. And when we receive Jesus into where we live, there is joy and new life.

Buechner summarizes this story of Zacchaeus in these words: "The unflagging lunacy of God. The unending seaminess of human beings. The meeting between them that is always a matter of life or death and usually both."