

“Looking Up Zacchaeus”

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19 March 2023 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Texts: Luke 19:1-10; Psalm 107:1-16

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. (v.10)
 The last verse of our text speaks volumes about the mission of our Lord Jesus. The whole Zacchaeus story is in one sense illustrative of that redemptive purpose. Or, explanatory. It explains that a major part of the reason Jesus chose to go through Jericho was that he planned on looking up Zacchaeus. *He was intent on bringing salvation to that man as part of his redemption of the whole human race.* They had a divine appointment both there and then. And as this account informs us, Jesus is informing us that he was the one who made the appointment. The short, wealthy and much hated tax collector—viewed by the locals as a “collaborator” with the hated Romans, a traitor to them!—they did not consider that he was a lost man. He was a sinner but that he was lost was “lost to them,” so to speak. He probably knew that he was both hated and despised by his fellow Jews in Jericho. God moved him through his curiosity a certain distance—he would climb a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. This glimpse, perhaps, does not differ very much from the **if only I could touch his garment, I would be healed** approach of the ailing woman in the crowd. Her superstitious touch stimulated a full face on engagement and that engagement brought about a complete healing. **Your faith has made you whole.** Here we have a peek, an act of curiosity, a little thing that Jesus took note of—it doesn’t take much because he came **to seek and to save that which was lost.** How merciful.

Whatever social standing his wealth might have purchased him was easily offset by the contempt, the social and cultural antipathy felt and expressed towards him as tax collector. But, in Jesus’ book what mattered is that he was “lost” *and not that he was curious to get a look at Jesus.* We don’t know if he knew he was lost and that, friends, is the unfortunate case of most, if not all unbelievers! We have no doubt that he was widely regard as a public sinner—a sinner by reputation and by occupation.

Apparently, tax gatherers were reputed to be very crooked—they would extort people—demanding more of the public than they had due in taxes, in civic obligation. This conclusion is not entirely guesswork. Indeed, in the passage Zacchaeus’ pledge of fourfold reparations informs us of a couple of possibilities. For one, perhaps he had extorted, then repented, and now, after meeting with Jesus—**after salvation had come to his house!**—wanted to come clean with everyone. Or, and I consider this more likely, given his bequest of **half of his goods**, to relief of the poor represented a genuine change of heart!. This new generosity shows some degree of sympathy, or of compassion on his part—or, even more basically, love of his fellowmen that may have been stirred **by the love of God manifest in Jesus** seeking him out and blessing him with his company and saving him out of a relational wasteland, a lonely desert of rejection and hatred. Saved from the friendlessness of his life, his dire poverty.

Therefore this gesture of benevolence may have been *made out of sheer gratitude for the mercy of God* in redeeming him!

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good!
For His mercy . . .
Oh, that all would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness,
For His wonderful works . . .
For He satisfies the longing soul,
And fills the hungry soul with goodness. (Psalm 107: 1, 8-9)

From the beginning, God created us as needy, as subject to hunger and thirst, as limited in strength and endurance. In our physicality, and in our spirituality . . . in knowledge, and understanding . . . always yearning for our needs and aspirations to be met . . . in a symbiotic relationship of dependence on Him and on each other. **We have needs that only God can meet because of how we were created—framed for communion and worship and fellowship with Him..**

Zacchaeus may have been short in stature, but he proves to be big of heart. We have to wonder what people made of him after he was saved, after the bequest and benevolence. Was he embraced by others as **a son of Abraham**—as a true Jew, a blessing and not a cursed traitor! Perhaps. We simply aren't told! But this is nice piece of kingdom work regardless! It signifies that the cross was central to the **seek and to save** purposes of God in Christ.

Zacchaeus' house visit, a spiritual encounter, is one of Jesus' last stops on the gospel train to Jerusalem where Jesus would display immense love, compassion and generosity of Spirit for the rest of us. Both the stop at Zacchaeus' house and the events of Easter week ranks as appointed encounters. It could be said Easter week starts at this household in Jericho. The incident is unique to the Lukan account but the setting is found in all three gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke).

Thus Luke describes the healing of a blind man (Luke 18:15-43) occurring at Jesus' approach to Jericho. Matthew 20:29-34 relates a similar incident of divine compassion, involving two blind men ministered to as Jesus' leaves Jericho for Jerusalem not mentioning the Zacchaeus incident at all. Mark 10:46-52 places the healing of a blind man, Bartimaeas, like Luke during Jesus' approach—and includes the unhappy record of controversy, some of the crowd warning the man, known by name, to be quiet, and Jesus halts, making a point of having this man brought to him for healing of his sight. This turmoil in Mark echoes a parallel disturbance in Matthew over the mother of James and John's request, over asking for preferred seating for her two sons in the coming kingdom. Another hindrance to Jesus' ministry? Two blind men, two blind disciples? This comparison is most likely not merely coincidental?

Probably the blindness of these blind men is figuratively apt for the spiritual blindness of James and John (and others) as to the true nature of the coming kingdom. **The opening of the eyes of the blind** (Isaiah 42:7), a messianic prerogative, probably answers scripturally for the inclusion of these diversely framed episodes. Then, the whole Zacchaeus episode follows *as a kind of exposition on blindness* which, in Matthew results in the two men following Jesus which Bartimaeas also does and as the unnamed man in Luke's account also chose to do. Surely Luke and Mark have the same man's healing in view. What we get from this "following Jesus" business us a

sense of Jesus, creating a kind of a wake, as he proceeded towards Jerusalem—a sense of a swelling crowd of disciples and followers with growing enthusiasm and excitement. This is a very intense sense of moment, and of movement towards a climax, say, in the “catastrophe of the cross.”

Blindness, and the darkness associated with blindness, are very necessary to the account of Easter. The disciples’ quibbling over places of honor in Jesus’ kingdom weren’t seeing what really mattered. The people in Jericho were also blind to the soul condition of Zacchaeus (and their own!)—they were certain they knew him for a bad person, a social pariah. They showed him no mercy and cared nothing for his lostness. And those who were physically blind need no further explanation except that when they gained their sight, they followed Jesus!

Based on trajectory and momentum, my suggestion is that Zacchaeus probably joined the swelling throng and was present at Jesus’ triumphal entry, chanting half knowingly, “**Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord.**” He possibly witnessed the crucifixion and was crushed with grief! What we are sure of is that the crowds certainly did not know what catastrophe was lying ahead for everyone!

This is the second time I have alluded purposefully to the cross as a catastrophe. The cross is a catastrophe before it is a triumph, or a conquest. Here is what I mean.

Those who are lost are living in captivity **and catastrophic means are required to get them out.** They may actually be unaware of their captivity. They are captive to forces beyond their control such as sin, or a hostile nation where they are in exile as captives. Or, and this is the most significant example, Passover. The people of God in bondage to the Egyptians are-literally enslaved. Fettered in personal liberty, not able to move about as they might wish to move—always serving their masters’ whims, desires, needs and duties and living on allowances and left-overs. Some literally chained, tied in teams of slave laborers, groaning under the strain of hard labor and the slave drivers whips. They had no autonomy and their independence had been stripped from them. They were subjugated captives.

But not all captivity is cultural and social in this blatant, external manner. Most of those complaining about slavery in our day have never experienced its cruelty, indignity, or inhumanity themselves. Alas, some do and some have. There’s captivity to poverty, to ignorance, to illness, to the welfare state . . . there’s addiction to substances, and sinful habits, too. And some slavery consists of much, to all of it taken together—some prisoners of war are abused notoriously—despite the Geneva Conventions and international disapproval. But what is stunning, astonishing even, is that some of those who are most enslaved are unaware of their condition. Others cry out, and driven to extremity they call out to God for relief, rescue and mercy. And like Jesus coming to Zacchaeus’ house, God answers. That is Easter. Easter is about the liberation of the human race from captivity to darkness and bondage to sin—we are rescued from the evil that lords it over us, to our harm and seeks to cause us to destroy ourselves and each other!

What do I mean by catastrophic means precede deliverance? I mean the ten plagues, which were inflicted upon Pharaoh because he would not heed God and let God's people go. These wonders and signs were "catastrophic" for the Egyptians! The Scripture records their horror, dismay and griefs.

Then, after fleeing Egypt, the people of God were pursued by Pharaoh and his whole army, chariots and warriors to recapture, or kill them all. The people were trapped between the Red Sea and the annihilating troops marshaled against them! They were terrified, sure that "catastrophe" had come upon them. But catastrophe was not for them, not on that day. As Pharaoh's army charged after the fleeing Hebrews, fleeing on dry land through the sea, God caused the waters, miraculously held back, to roar back and the whole army perished. Assuredly that catastrophe brought a regime change to Egypt. Only one side was cheering victoriously "that the horse and rider were thrown into the sea." That is deliverance from captivity, and ending of captivity by catastrophe.

Psalm 107 appears to allude to the wilderness experience of God's people and it bears some striking comparisons to the wilderness struggles of the first settlers in America, particularly those who were religious refugees and not incipient slave holders. It is indisputable that the institution of slavery had been practiced on this continent long before the Europeans landed! Slavery is a human aberration and not simply a white obsession, or a racist trait! History should stand against revisionism, but it won't stand if the original history are effaced, or ignored for political expedience. The wilderness experience of Israel was framed by God great and persistent goodness to his people. They had more to be glad over, thanksgiving should prevail over the cries and groans which preceded it in Egypt. Some of the distress was the birth pangs of the birth of a nation. **God is good.** All that God created as an expression of his nature and being was good. The entire cosmos is shot through with the goodness of God. That belief lies behind the words of Jesus declaring, **Only One, God is good.** God is all good, superlatively good, sovereignly and supremely good! Being formed out of that goodness, and benefitting from that goodness, we should, ought to magnify God for it! Even God's response to sin is merciful . . . of course. Conviction, confession, repentance, repentance, sanctification and restoration are, despite their momentary and slight affliction, ultimately kind provisions from God's hand—they are good things.

Who delivers us from our enemies? God does. Who accomplishes what no one else can do? God does. Who overthrows fierce oppressions, sometimes through superior force? God does. The wickedness and cruelty of our persecutors is turned, in his time, to his praise . . . and those who suffer are rewarded. Who gathers his people from every quarter, and even from the sea? God does. Not even one is lost! We believe that an even greater and everlasting in-gathering is transpiring in our day. Who populates his kingdom? God does. On earth this movement is manifested by the church (**one Lord, one faith, one baptism**) and this is to be consummated in heaven; when we enter together in one common bliss: the one people of the One great, good God! There is one blessed Shepherd, and one blood-bought flock drawn through countless dangers and perils to one great, green, good pasture! There's ample space in this blessed place! And who's there? All who wandered and were recovered, all who taken away, all his sheep **enslaved, or free**, all by God's great, good grace

retrieved—gathered home, collected in. Oh, let the reprieved and the retrieved, the redeemed of the Lord say so with one voice declared the Name of Him who is good!

Centuries later, first Israel and later Judah, both segments of the divided monarchy, the legacy of David's sin—and following there disloyalty of God's people. They turned their back on God, held his ways in contempt and worshipped other gods, idols and participated in other religions (despite being warned no to do so repeatedly), the armies of Babylon came and destroyed Jerusalem carrying off its leaders, princes, kings and nobles and made them captives in foreign lands—even others were dispersed and the nation of Israel came to a humiliating end, a total collapse, a catastrophe!. This condition persisted for seventy years, when God, moved by the sufferings of his people chose to act. God ended their exile and brought the captives back. They were lost and God restored them. The temple was rebuilt and God hoped that the lessons learned through national chastisement would bring better results. It did not. And when Jesus appeared the throne of David had departed from the line of David entirely and foreigners were enthroned, and Israel was a client state of the Roman Empire. . . in captivity again, following various catastrophes!

I am not suggesting that all of these disasters for Israel were equivalent and David authorships argues against the idea that this psalm actually includes the experiences of *the post-exilic Jews*. These catastrophes are not the same! The Captivity in Egypt suffices and remains the supreme example of divine mercy—and that is the deliverance commemorated in the Jewish religion as Passover. And that religious backdrop is the one against which the event of Jesus' global rescue mission are to be understood. Jesus came to die for the sins of the world, transcending the historical limits of the Jewish religion and both time and national boundaries. If you want to learn more please attend and experience our Seder Supper April 6th at 5:30 p.m."

Therefore Jesus' coming to this man's house is symbolic of Jesus' approach to each believer's heart and encompasses the salvation of the world! *For if God does not seek us out, we remain unsought, unreached, unloved—in a word "lost."* It doesn't matter where you are, or what condition you are in (bruised, beaten and broken), our Shepherd stands at the door—He is the door—and he is wide open to letting sinners in.

Amen.