

SLIDE 1 – trees with yellow leaves

Jesus is striding through Jericho on his last leg of the journey to Jerusalem, the journey to the cross and the redemption of the world. Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem and he has just told his disciples what will happen to him: he will be handed over, mocked, insulted and spat upon; he will be flogged, killed, and on the third day rise again. But his disciples did not understand this, in fact, the fullness of salvation was hidden from them. A crowd accompanied Jesus as he walked. Jesus inspires awe along the way. In Jericho was a head of state, a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus. He wanted to see Jesus. For the gospel of Luke, seeing Jesus is seeing God's salvation. This is what Zacchaeus wants to see, the saving grace of God. For the gospel of Luke, seeing Jesus is seeing God's salvation!

Jesus is salvation walking, and as Jesus enters Jericho, Zacchaeus climbs his sycamore tree in order to see. This is no idle curiosity or celebrity stargazing. Zacchaeus does not want an autograph or a selfie with Jesus. Zacchaeus longs to see something that is not easily spoken. The word "salvation" points to it, but the longing is deep and aching. The language of "trying to see" is phrased in terms of seeking, searching, and yearning. We may wonder at times what Jesus looked like, but Zacchaeus wants to see more than a face. He wants to see more than he can say, but he knows at least this much; it has to do with Jesus entering Jerusalem, and going toward his human opponents. He senses salvation is near!

SLIDE 2 – Green pines and red maple leaves

Zacchaeus was not born into wealth, he was born a peasant, Having an aptitude for figures, he worked his way up in the field of finances until he became chief tax collector and wealthy. He was a man who belongs to an oppressed people by birth but joins the ranks of the foreigners/oppressors by trade. He gains personally but his work shifts his position in society from formerly oppressed to being an oppressor. It is no wonder that the people of his birth would despise him and look down upon him. Yet the pull of the search for something beyond words places Zacchaeus in a tree.

Zacchaeus wishes to see Jesus but what happens is that Zacchaeus is seen by Jesus. When Jesus came to the sycamore tree, he **looked up** and called Zacchaeus by name, and asked him to **come down** and he encouraged the tax collector to

stand. Jesus announced his further intention to go to Zacchaeus' home. Jesus, known in the gospel of Luke as a glutton and drunk that eats and drinks often with sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors is at it again. When Zacchaeus comes down he is greeted by the grumbling of his own people. He cannot escape the envy and resentment of his neighbors. But he hurries down and is overjoyed to welcome Jesus!

Zacchaeus tells his story, plain and simple. "Look," he says, "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." He is reciting the regular practices of an observant Jew. He is reciting the generosity expected of a person of faith. To be seen by Jesus is to be affirmed as one who belongs to the gathering of disciples. The grumbling of the crowds is not the correct assessment. Jesus is the one who sees the truth and who encourages faith. Being seen by Jesus results in Zacchaeus experiencing overwhelming joy!

SLIDE 3 – pathway/trail

There are other things which create happiness and joy. Zacchaeus was practicing a form of what is known today as "prosocial spending." A study from 2014 by Elizabeth Dunn and associates proved that people gain much happiness from giving to others rather than spending on themselves. Even toddlers experienced joy and eagerly shared with others first when tested. We are predisposed to experiencing joy when we create relationship with others and give for their benefit. Helping others is most emotionally rewarding when it provides the opportunity to connect with other people. That is what has happened in the ministry of St. John's Apartments.

Zacchaeus noted extravagant giving when he was making reparations towards those he had defrauded. He promised to pay back four times as much. I imagine what ended up happening was not a sole financial transaction but the possibility of friendship.

We can get a sense of what that life with Christ is like when we read Luke 19. Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus with overwhelming joy! Joy in Christ plays a major role in the gospel of Luke: the angel Gabriel whispers to Zechariah "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." 1.14

On Christmas night another angel brings “good news of great joy for all the people” 2.10

In the womb John the Baptist “leaped for joy” (1.44) as Jesus approaches in utero Zacchaeus, in text today, fairly leaps for joy to welcome Jesus! Joy is the only adequate response to what God is doing in Jesus. The crowds in Jericho may grumble, but Zacchaeus gets it right! He rejoices when Jesus is walking through his town even though he does not quite understand the gravity of Jesus’ visit.

In the gospel of Luke salvation is surprisingly visible for us who read the story. When Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus to the temple, they encounter Simeon, a righteous and devout man, who cradles Jesus in his arms and praises God because, he says, “my eyes have seen your salvation.” 2.30

The story in Luke never gets around to telling us if Zacchaeus was successful in seeing what he was looking for. Instead, Luke tells us Jesus “looked up” and saw Zacchaeus.

People familiar with this story have mistakenly thought it to be about the hospitality of Zacchaeus, or the generosity of Zacchaeus, or the repentance of Zacchaeus, or about anything this tax collector might do or not do. But a close study of the story do not reveal these things. Instead the story in scripture is primarily about Jesus.

SLIDE – Hosanna, image of Laura James, Jesus bringing salvation

Jesus was “passing through Jericho.”

Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus.

Jesus spoke to Z., “Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

- It must be done because it is divine will.
- This is no random encounter, it flows from divine will, Jesus’ visit is integral to Jesus’ kingdom mission. This is the last leg of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.
- As Jesus travels he has a gift for seeing and affirming what others do not.

“I am coming to your house today!”

- This is the arrival of glad tidings, just as on Christmas Eve:
- “to you is born today...a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord”
- Jesus’ first reading in the synagogue in Luke says this, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled

Today is when God is doing something astonishing. Today is the time of God's salvation. Zacchaeus responds to Jesus by hurrying down out of the tree with joy filling his heart.

Jesus declares, "Today salvation has come to this house."

By seeing him, calling him, staying with him and blessing him, Jesus declares for all to hear that this one, even this chief tax collector, is a child of Abraham, a child of God. Zacchaeus was lost to his faith community, as they grumbled about him, but Jesus sought him out, allowed him to testify, and restored him within the community.

One of the chief characteristics of all disciples is a desire to see Jesus along with a corresponding response of joy in the presence of Jesus. Zacchaeus cannot see Jesus because he is too short, and the crowd impedes his sight. Yet this rich official is so desperate to see that he will not be deterred and humiliates himself by climbing a tree like a child in order to get a glimpse of Jesus. He embodies the promise that anyone who desires to see Jesus will. And anyone who desires to see Jesus will, in turn, be seen by Jesus and in this way have their joy made complete, for Jesus is salvation walking.

Who among us, both in this congregation and outside of it, are those who have been left on the margin, who have been ruled out of bounds? The ministry to those in need of low-income housing is testimony to the vision of the congregation in past years of reaching out to those on the margins. The ministry and need continue today. Today we are challenged not only to see how we can give of ourselves, but of entering into relationship with those on the margins, and be ready to be surprised by their generosity and faith, by how they can enrich life, and share in the community of those to whom Jesus brings salvation.