**Rev. Melissa J. Claxton
Luke 19:1-10
March 19, 2023**

We are getting closer and closer to the cross as we journey through Lent and through the gospel of Luke. Luke tells the story of a Jesus who reached out to the outside, the outcast, and the outlaw as he lifted up the lowly and reached out to the marginalized. Today, we continue that journey through Luke by looking at how Jesus invites those who are broken and sinful back into a relationship with God.

I do hope that you are taking time this Lent to read through Luke’s gospel. We really can’t be disciples of Jesus if we aren’t learning and growing, and the gospels are the story of Jesus written by those who walked with him. Let us pray.

**Sermon:** When I was a little girl, we learned a lot of the Bible stories through music. When we gathered together for Sunday School, we would sing fun songs like ***Only a Boy Named David*** that told the story of David and Goliath. *Only a boy named David, only a little sling. Only a boy named David, but he could pray and sing. Only a boy named David, only a rippling brook. Only a boy named David, but five little stones he took.* Anyone else learn that?

Through music, we learned stories like David and Goliath; Noah and the ark; Joshua and the battle of Jericho; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace...the only reason I can say those three names is because I learned them through music. I also learned about a little man named Zacchaeus. *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 to stay.”*

When my children were little, I taught Sunday school, and in teaching Sunday school, I was tasked with teaching these same stories. I wanted to make sure that I was doing that faithfully, and so I would prepare before-hand. I would read the story. Every lesson came with a little background information that went deeper. I would read that. And what I began to discover was that there was more to these stories than I realized. David was the most unlikely choice for king...the youngest and least significant of Jessie’s children in a world where there is this hierarchy. There was a reason he was in the fields with the sheep. Yet, he was the one God chose to be the king of Israel. I learned that Jonah wasn’t afraid to go to Nineveh. He didn’t go because he didn’t want God to save those people...and he knew God would if they were given a chance to repent, to change direction. I learned that the Good Samaritan stopped and cared for his enemy. I didn’t learn that as a child...that they were enemies, and that’s what was significant.

Zacchaeus was another one of those stories. I grew up with that fun song that talked about how Zacchaeus was a wee little man. He was short. I get short. I call it vertically challenged thank you. I was at Meijer’s several years back trying to get something off the top shelf when this gentlemen came walking by and grabbed it for me, and as he handed it to me, he asked when I was going to grow up? Us vertically challenged people...we learn how to climb shelves. We learn to be creative in how we reach things, how we adjust to our challenge. I had my husband make me this stand so I could see over it. I get short.

When I was preparing to teach about Zacchaeus, I discovered that we focus on the wrong thing. The song has us focusing on his height. He’s short. Of course, he climbed up in a tree. It was the only way he could see over the crowd. It’s the only way you can see over the 6’ 2” in front of you. But there’s more to Zacchaeus than his height. ***There’s his career.***

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and not only any tax collector; Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector. Last week, we talked about tax collectors. They were notorious for their corruption, cheating people to fatten their own pockets. In that system, the kingdom was divided up into regions. The regions were divided into districts. The tax collector of the district was responsible for collecting a certain amount of tax and passing it up the chain of government. Whatever they collected over the amount required was theirs to keep. The chief tax collector was in that chain. He would employ other tax collectors under him to collect taxes in various parts of the district in which he would keep a portion. As chief tax collector, he would have also been responsible for collecting tolls on good come into Judea. This is who Zacchaeus was...a wealthy, corrupt, cheating man hated by his community. ***We didn’t learn that as children. We just learned that he was short.***

I want you to think about that kind of life. Wouldn’t it be lonely living in a community where everyone pretty much despised you. You wouldn’t have been welcome in the synagogue or the Temple. You wouldn’t have been invited to banquets or celebrations. It was part of the cultural law that you didn’t eat with sinners and tax collectors were considered sinners. Zacchaeus must have been lonely. He must have been hurting deeply inside. He was on the outskirts. Yes, he was wealthy, but the nice house, the servants, the things...do they really bring happiness when you’re pushed to the outside of community?

Because of his occupation, Zacchaeus probably didn’t have a lot of friends. Who would want to hang out with the guy that was getting rich by cheating you? His circle of friends would have been limited to mainly other tax collectors. So, I think Zacchaeus, this wee little man, was miserable and lonely. He was lost, and he may not have known what he was missing, but he knew he was missing something.

**Then, word came. Jesus was coming into town**. Word of Jesus had spread all throughout the land. Stories have a way of spreading from town to town, don’t they? Especially when you live in a hub like Zacchaeus did. New people are coming into town all the time with their good. They are sharing what’s going on in the rest of the world. Have you heard about this rabbi named Jesus? Have you heard how he’s healed sick people...even on the Sabbath? He’s not even afraid of lepers. He healed them too. Have you heard how he took a few fish and two loaves of bread and fed 5000 people with that? He’s unlike any rabbi we’ve ever seen before. He surrounds himself with women and he eats with tax collectors. In fact, one of his disciples is a tax collector. Have you heard about this man named Jesus? Guess what? He’s coming to town. He's on his way here.

Think about it for a moment. Zacchaeus, a tax collector, working in that port of entry collecting taxes, must have heard stories about Jesus. And maybe he heard the story we find in Luke 5:29-32, *“Then Levi (*also known as Matthew) *held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”*

*Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”* I remind you that repentance means to change direction.

I can’t help but think that there was something in Zacchaeus that said, “I’ve got to see him...maybe not meet him, because who would want to meet me, the chief tax collector, but if I could just see him....” There was something about the story of Jesus that drew Zacchaeus in, and he wanted to see him.

The word “wanted” or “sought” in ancient Greek means *“to devote serious effort to realize one’s desire or objective, to strive for, or try to obtain.”* We see that in this passage. Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and found a large sycamore tree that he could climb. Up there, he would have been high enough to see Jesus as he passed by, but out of the way enough as to not draw any unwanted attention. A sycamore-fig tree like the one Zacchaeus climbed is an evergreen tree that grows to be about 40 feet high with branches that spread out in every direction. It’s relatively easy to climb, and easy to hide in. Zacchaeus was ready to get a good look at this Jesus everyone was talking about.

I get that there are times in our lives where we just want to be invisible. My whole high school career was devoted to the art of invisibility. I was good at it. Yet, in this passage, we learn that God sees us even when we don’t want to be seen. When we’re trying to hide from God...God still sees us. God saw Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector hiding up in that tree. God saw a this person who was hurting inside, who was hiding, hoping to get a glimpse of this rabbi who everyone was saying was the Messiah God had sent into the world. **God saw him and being seen changed Zacchaeus’ life.**

Our passage tells is that *“When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said, ‘Zacchaeus come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”* I not only see you...I’m going to dwell in your house today. For Zacchaeus that was a game changer. On the spot, he gave half of his possessions to the poor and vowed to pay back anyone he ever cheated fourfold.

In response to this, Jesus said, *“Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* Here is a man the world had given up on. Here is a man whom the world had turned their backs on...wanted nothing to do with. Yet, Jesus reached out to him and told him that salvation had come to his house that day...in that moment.

Salvation is one of those churchy words that I believe has lost its original meaning. We use that word all the time, and we usually use it to talk about the next life. “Are you saved?” “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Savior?” “Are you going to heaven?” In the Christian faith, it has come to mean *“the saving of human beings from sin and its consequences, which include death and separation from God” by Christ’ death and resurrection.* I believe that, but I don’t believe that Jesus was talking about eternity in some fiery pit somewhere. I believe Jesus was talking about this life. *“Today, Salvation has come to this house.”* That’s what he told Zacchaeus. Today...salvation has come. It was something for the here and now...in this life.

Jesus only used the word salvation twice outside of citing scripture...with the woman at the well and with Zacchaeus. But if you were to go on-line to a site like Biblegateway and type in the world Salvation, you will find that it appears 114 times in the NIV translation. It first appears in Exodus 15:2... *“The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.”* He has become my salvation...here and now.

Then there’s 2 Samuel 22 in King David’s song of praise...David writes, *“My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior—from violent people you save me.”*

One hundred fourteen times scripture talks about salvation...and it came to Zacchaeus’ house that day. And what I love about that story is that Jesus never told Zacchaeus, *“If you get your act together, I’ll stop by.” “If you change occupations...if you repent and fix all the damage you’ve done...then you’ll experience salvation.”* No, Jesus saw a man, up in a tree, trying to get a glimpse of him. In that point in Zacchaeus’ life, I’m not even sure he even knew what he was looking for...but here was this Jesus who saw people like him...who was willing to sit and eat with people like him. He didn’t know what he was missing. He didn’t know what he was lacking...but maybe in Jesus...just maybe...he would find it, and he did. He found salvation.

**We forget...**We forget that Jesus never demanded that we get our act together first. Jesus never demanded that we look a certain way or act a certain way first. Jesus never even talked about what we need to believe. We spend a lot of time on trying to make sure that everyone believes the right things. Jesus never talked about that. In his famous Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew’s gospel...there is not one thing about what you need to believe. He talks about how are hearts need to be changed...and he knew it wasn’t going to happen overnight. It was a journey that would most likely take a lifetime...and when we’re on that journey, we open ourselves up to experience God’s salvation right here, right now.

That’s the message today. Everyone is welcome. The love of God is for everyone, even those we view as the most broken.