

Come on Down

Leviticus 25:35-4; Psalm 9:1-2; Luke 19:1-10

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*Zacchaeus was a wee little man; and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree; the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Savior passed that way, He looked up in the tree,
and said, "Zacchaeus, you come down. I'm going to your house today.
I'm going to your house today."*

Remember that song that we learned in Sunday School?

Jesus was passing through the new city of Jericho which Herod the Great had rebuilt and beautified and used as his winter capital. It had been built two miles south of the old city of Jericho that Joshua and the Hebrews had marched around until the walls fell.

Jericho was the gateway for Judea's trade center and the center of a remarkably fertile agricultural area. Jericho was especially famous for its palm trees and balsam groves. From the balsam groves came the famous healing resin called Balm of Gilead, an ointment that was used to treat superficial skin conditions. There were also the costly imports from Damascus and Arabia that were transported along the trade routes of the area, moving along the toll roads.

All of this trade moving through the area would have provided a great opportunity for a commissioner of taxes to enrich himself. A Commissioner would work for the Roman government and supervise others to collect the taxes from the residents and from the caravans. It was necessary for the Commissioner to pay an amount certain up front to the government, so he depended upon those who worked for him to collect over and above in order to earn a living. It had worked very well for Zacchaeus and he had become a wealthy man.

Zacchaeus belonged to that despised class of people who oversaw those collections of taxes. To his fellow Jews he was ranked with the cutthroats and robbers, the adulterers and brothel keepers. He was considered a traitor both to his nation and to its ancient faith in the one true God.

Zacchaeus was a man whose Hebrew name, ironically, meant "pure" or "righteous" so one can only imagine the dreams that his parents must have had for him when they came to his naming ceremony at the Temple.

Somehow Zacchaeus had decided to make his own way in life,

- the making of money and
- the getting of possessions
- was a driving force for what he did.

Yet, it seems that something about his lifestyle,

- the making of money,

- the getting of things that the money made possible,
- did not bring the fulfillment that they once had.

It is in this setting that our story unfolds.

Zacchaeus had heard about this man named Jesus, a Jew from Nazareth, who did not separate himself from folks like him. After all, he had heard that one of Jesus' disciples, a man named Matthew, had also been a tax collector. In fact, it had been rumored that Jesus would go to their homes and actually eat with them.

Jesus has begun making his way toward Jerusalem and his final days on earth. This will be the last time that Jesus enters the house of “sinners” to dine with them before his death.

On this day Jesus was in the town of Jericho and Zacchaeus was determined to get a look at him. The crowd was large (there was always the crowd wherever Jesus went) and Zacchaeus was short of stature and so he was jostled aside as Jesus approached. Zacchaeus did not get where he was in life by being timid or giving up easily, so he goes to Plan B and hustles himself up one of the sycamore trees along the road where Jesus will walk. He just wanted to see this man that everyone was talking about. Adults customarily did not run, and they certainly did not climb trees, so one can only imagine the ridicule that was coming his way from the crowd that hated him for who he was. Never would he have imagined that Jesus would have chosen to stop and speak to him, much less want to stay the day at his house.

By entering the home of Zacchaeus, Jesus was violating the purity code of the Temple. A tax collector would have been regularly rendered “unclean” because of his handling and inspecting all kinds of goods. At the same time, Jesus was giving dignity to a man. Jesus would have given honor to anyone whose house He entered to receive their hospitality. We shouldn't be surprised that the Pharisees and the scribes (the religious lawyers) were grumbling about what Jesus was doing. They seemed to always be present to gather information about Jesus that they might be able to use to discredit Him. It is interesting to note that it is not Zacchaeus who invites Jesus to his home for the day. Rather, it is Jesus who invites himself. It is Jesus who is seeking out Zacchaeus.

Imagine having Jesus spend an entire day at your home.

- Would you allow Him to come to your home if He asked?
- What would you talk about?
- What questions would you ask about Him and about yourself?
- How would physically spending a full day in the presence of Jesus transform your life?

It was at that moment, on that day, when Jesus called him to come down from that tree, that the life of Zacchaeus was forever changed. For at that moment, on that day,

- his past was redeemed,
- his present was transformed.
- his future was redirected.

Zacchaeus knew who he was, he knew what he had become, but at that moment when Jesus called his name, called him down out of that tree, his life was changed forever.

At that moment his past was redeemed.

An interesting thing happens when we stand in the presence of Jesus and openly look upon Him and then look at ourselves.

- In the presence of the holiness of Jesus we see ourselves with new awareness.
- In the presence of Jesus, the excuses we have given
 - for our unholy thoughts,
 - our wrongful attitudes,
 - our actions and words that have hurt others, are no longer valid.
- In the presence of Jesus, we find ourselves asking for forgiveness for the sin in our lives, for our willful attitudes that refuse to allow Jesus to be Lord.

Zacchaeus demonstrated his repentance, his turning around of his attitude and his actions, by making a commitment to more than restore what he had taken illegally from others. Jesus responded to Zacchaeus in the way that He always did, and continues to do. He forgives, He restores, He redeems.

Not only was his past redeemed, Zacchaeus' present was transformed.

Through the forgiveness of Jesus, and the practical actions of Zacchaeus, he not only had his past redeemed, he was restored as a son of Abraham. He was restored to his heritage as one of God's family. Over and over again, in the Gospels Jesus talks about his purpose in coming to earth: He had come so that those who received Him might have abundant life. This was now a possibility for Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus' past was redeemed.

His present was transformed.

His future was redirected.

The story of Zacchaeus ends with Jesus saying, "I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed." (NRSV) This fulfills the words of the prophet Ezekiel, saying, "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick..." (Ezekiel 34:16a)

On that day Zacchaeus came to know Jesus of Nazareth as Savior *and* Lord.

When he became a follower of Jesus it changed the direction of his life. A new relationship was established. His life became wholly committed to God.

The second verse of that Sunday School song says,

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a happy man was he, for he had seen the Lord that day, and a happy man was he."

Official church records (The Apostolic Constitution 7:46) identify Zacchaeus as the first Bishop of Caesarea Palestine. Not many people become Bishops, but I do believe that sometimes we can be amazed at what we can become and what we can do when we allow Jesus to be the Lord of our lives and we step out in faith to follow his leading.

Think about it.

Amen.