

3 November 2019  
Trinity Presbyterian Church  
**Luke 19:1-10**

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "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." 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."

### What Message is Written on Us?

This is the day the church calendar designates for remembering that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, the saints of every time and place who have shown us something about God, and this year the lectionary celebrates that day with a couple of witnessing stories.

Bearing witness is a big part of what we Christians do. For me, the pinnacle of witnessing has always been the final moment of the midnight service on Christmas Eve, when the yellow light of all those glowing candles lets us see a little bit of Jesus in each other, and the image of Jesus in me sings that lullaby to the image of Jesus in you: sleep on now, in heavenly, heavenly peace. Or tries to sing it. Usually my throat squeezes

shut and nothing comes out, because alongside the little drummer boy in me, and the shepherd keeping watch in me, and the Joseph in me, and the Mary in me, is Habakkuk, and I'm afraid that if I open my mouth, he might be the one who speaks.

How long shall I keep crying out to you for help and you not listen?

That question started taking shape in me at like the age of ten, when I first put my finger in the gap between what I was told and what was really happening. How long shall I keep crying "Violence!" to a god who doesn't save?

I come from a tradition that reveres the reality-creating power of language. Words create the world we know by calling it out of unknowable chaos, and in that sense they're gifts from God. Abusing those gifts by speaking words that don't have any specific meaning, over and over, while pretending that they do mean some specific thing, is demoralizing. An insidious form of dishonesty that ultimately makes a person disrespect himself. And I think the decline of mainline American Christianity can be traced to reliance on that kind of language: words like bubbles, with nothing inside.

So I'm a little alarmed to hear God offering that kind of language to Habakkuk: There is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and it does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it. It will not delay.

Most people in America quit listening to bubble words like that — and quit expecting to hear anything else from the Christian umbrella — a long time ago.

Habakkuk pops those bubbles by putting his finger into the gap between what he's been told and what's actually happening. "I cry Violence," he says, "and instead of saving, you make me look at trouble. Destruction and violence persist before me, strife and contention arise, the wicked surround the righteous, so the law becomes slack" — that is, its words lose their core of meaning, so justice never prevails.

How long should we keep waiting for better words? How long before an entire generation, like mine, for example, gets tired of waiting and decides to look for meaning elsewhere, or gives up on meaning altogether?

Perhaps that's what Zacchaeus wants to know: how long. Traditional readings of today's gospel story focus on the reaction of the crowd: Jesus, the supposedly holy one, wants to lodge in the house of a sinner, and that scandalizes them. Actually it frightens them, because they believe the God-created world depends on keeping score. If you sin, then Jesus isn't supposed to like you. But the lectionary invites us to look at Zacchaeus in light of Habakkuk: I will stand here at my watch post on the rampart, bearing witness: I will watch to see what God will say concerning my complaint.

That's a reasonable attitude to bring before the maker of this world — in the days of Habakkuk, in the days of Zacchaeus, and so also in our day.

All right, God says to Habakkuk, write the vision on a placard — that is, give the witnessing event a physical manifestation. Write it in letters so big a runner can read them without slowing down. Or a tax-collector can read them from the top of a sycamore tree.

Unlike most people looking for Jesus in the gospels, Zacchaeus is a person of advantage. Most of those people secretly yearn for the kind of life Zacchaeus has — secretly, because Zacchaeus got his life by grafting himself to the imperial power that controls the dwelling place of Yahweh, which those wretches were supposed to protect. They hate Zacchaeus for living out the truth of their loss, and for making millions by extracting a pound of flesh for every ounce required by the Roman IRS. But mostly they hate themselves for giving him that pound instead of giving him the finger. They're glad this man they hate and envy is so small — Frederick Buechner calls him a runt, like Danny Devito. They're glad to look down on his balding head and know their betterness before they watch him climb that tree.

Why does he do that, this Zacchaeus? What's he looking for?

Maybe he has finally seen the disadvantage of advantage. Maybe luxury has finally lost its power to distract him from the fundamental human yearning. Maybe speaking words that don't have meaning, over and over, while pretending that they actually mean something, has demoralized him. Maybe, like us, he's been reading Habakkuk, hoping the words of the prophet might call forth some meaning from the chaos of wanting, and having, and wanting again.

What if he gets to the point where God says, "there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and it does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will not delay," and those words break like empty bubbles when he pokes them with his finger?

I need words that mean specific things, Zacchaeus must have said, not empty bubbles. If that's the message written on the placard, I'm making my bed with the Romans. Let's keep dancing, and bring on the booze.

Write the vision on a placard, or a person, in letters so big that they can be read from the top of a sycamore tree, 150 feet above the paving stones, by someone who has climbed up high enough to make some final difference, one way or the other: See, and know at last, or just let go.

I've climbed that tree a thousand times, and I would bet that some of you have, too. Up and down, and up and down, and up and down; and over the years I have seen some messages worth printing as a seal upon my heart — rich, revitalizing words — but when I climb down from the tree and hold those words against reality, they don't ring true.

The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want. (deny) He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. (deny) He leadeth me beside the still waters. (deny) He restoreth my soul.

My guess is that Zacchaeus expects to hear either beautiful specific words like those, which don't stack up against reality, or just another line of empty bubbles. Those are the possibilities afforded by the world in which he lives. There surely won't be any recommissioned David in the outfit of a jaunty ensign. The bread and wine and chocolate of today — the border walls, and the impeachment hearings, and the things they let you do when you're a star — don't leave room for any David to defeat Goliath, unless he wears a baseball uniform.

But the message Zacchaeus gets from this Jesus beggars the possibilities he has come to expect: Zacchaeus, Jesus says, come down from that tree and invite me over to your house for dinner.

And I'm like, wait: what? Jerusalem is held by people who are trying to take the meaning out of words. Rome is selling fighter jets to the very king who cut Jamal Khashoggi into pieces with a bone saw. The seraphim who's supposed to press the coal against Isaiah's lips is watching porn and eating chicken in the frat house even now, and you want me to come down from my witnessing post and invite you to my house for dinner?

Yes. Make that good falafel, with a lot of parsley, and some rich tzatziki.

You want tzatziki?

Yes. And after eating maybe we can have a game of Scrabble.

You want to play Scrabble?

Or watch Netflix — I don't care. Just make a place at your table for me. Clear off all that junk mail. Make a place in your house for me. Make a place in your person for me.

How can that be enough?

Part of what makes it hard to believe that's enough is my perception that so much is wrong, that justice doesn't prevail because the law has become slack — and that I should act against that problem. I want more to be asked of me, in specific terms, so I can step forward and do more, and know that my doing is right. I want to be able to step into my own rightness.

So when I'm told that the action I should take is come down and invite me over for dinner, I think, well, how can that be enough?

A couple of weeks ago I was at a seminary retreat where experienced ministers were trying to help beginners like me see the way forward, and at each of the worship services during that retreat, we sang a song based on Psalm 23, the words of which are the epitome of wishful thinking. The chorus is "Hallelujah, I am not alone! Your spirit lives inside me, so I will walk in your peace." Wishful thinking words I've read and said a thousand thousand times, and yearned to place as a seal on my heart.

Maybe your spirit dwell inside me when I'm up in the tree, but on the ground I feel the urge to tackle Danny Devito and take his money.

Wishful thinking. Christianity is mostly wishful thinking, Frederick Buechner says. And sometimes wishing is the horse on which the truth rides in. Sometimes the truth itself is the very thing sets us wishing for the truth.

So I'm at that retreat, singing that song, like four times in three days, surrounded by that crowd of witnesses, feeling a little stickier inside with every chorus, because too much wishful thinking does that, and then suddenly somehow on the last day, during the last celebration of worship, those wishful thinking words become the truth: God's spirit dwells inside of me.

How does that happen?

Hurry down from there: I'm staying at your house today.

That message puts an end to Zacchaeus as he used to know himself. He says If I've defrauded anybody in my tax-collecting life, I'll repay them fourfold. In other words, I'll stop being what I was and become a new thing.

How can that be enough — I'm coming to your house for dinner?

For me, the junk mail image is accurate: all this stuff just comes to me. It piles up and piles up until my inner space is full of all this stuff, which isn't even really mine: it just came in the mail. Make a space for me means put aside some of that stuff so there's room for me to sit with you. How does that change anything? I don't know, and maybe that's the point: I don't know. Whatever change takes place is not the work of what I think or what I am, but rather the work of God's presence in my home, in my self, to which I have assented. That's what makes the words ring true.

When I first began to practice centering prayer, which is a technique for clearing away your inner debris, I chose the centering word Maranatha, which Paul uses at the end of his first letter to the church at Corinth. It's a transliteration of two Aramaic words into one Greek term which means both "Come, Lord" — marana tha — and "Lord is come" — maran atha. For Paul, it seems, there's no difference between asking God to come and declaring that God is already here. He follows that term, maranatha, with a sentence that's usually translated "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you," but there's no verb in the original Greek: all he says is "the grace of the Lord Jesus with you," as if to describe what he already sees.

I make space inside myself for God, and I discover that God is inside me.

The world does need to be changed, and people like us have to walk in that direction. We also have to make dinner for Jesus. In fact, that's how we have to begin: clear out some of our debris so we can see that God's been sitting at the table all along. Then those words we yearn to set as a seal on our sleeve and on our forehead will begin to ring true.

The human placard Zacchaeus saw in Jericho is on a different body now: this body. We are the body of Christ in Jericho Virginia today, and thousands of our neighbors are up there in that tree, looking in to see what message God has written on us. As the contemporary body of Christ, our commission is to make the church's words ring true, to be the horse on which the truth rides in. We do that by making space for Jesus at the table, which is something all of you have done here extraordinarily well, not only in this space, but in your very homes, with Marks Groups, and house churches, and now with the Myrtle project.

And in your very selves. I look through that window and I see a cloud of witnesses, the saints of this time and place, who know what happens when they make space inside themselves for God.

I'm coming down.

I'm coming in.

Amen.