**Search and Rescue . . . Saving Zacchaeus**

Isaiah 1:10-18; 2 Thess. 1:1-12; Luke 19:1-10; Psalm 130 11.3.19

Summary: What made Zacchaeus become a tax collector? Why did Jesus appeal to him so that he would embarrass himself by climbing a tree to see Him?

A man went for physical checkup and the nurse asked him how much he weighed. He held his stomach in and replied, "160 lbs." She got him on the scales, weighed him and said: "No, your weight is 170 lbs.

The nurse then asked him how tall he was. Standing very straight he answered, "5 feet 10 inches." The nurse measured him and said, no - he was only 5’9".

Then the nurse asked him what his normal blood pressure was. After looking at her for a moment he said, "How can you expect my blood pressure to be normal??? I came in here a tall, slender man and you have already made me short and fat."

Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he.

He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.

And as the Master passed that way,He looked up in the tree.

And He said "Zacchaeus, you come down. For I’m going to your house today."

How many of you have sung that song as a child? It’s a cute song. And the impression you get from it is that Zacchaeus is a sweet little old man who had only one basic problem: he was too short to see Jesus.

That would be true except for one basic fact - Zacchaeus was not a sweet little old man. In fact….

**I. He was probably one of the most hated men in the region of Jericho!**

Why was he hated? Was it because he was so short?

Well, no. Although I don’t suppose that helped. I suspect his height was a problem. It made it easy for others to make fun of him, push him aside, bully him, or even ignore him.

If you’ll pardon the pun, as far as others were concerned, Zacchaeus just didn’t measure up.

His shortness was at the root of his problems - but that was not why he was disliked. I believe the reason Zacchaeus was disliked was that he had an attitude problem. I think Zacchaeus had become an angry and bitter man because of the way people treated him.

WHY ELSE would a man take a job with such a NEGATIVE effect on his life. This man was a tax collector. Public sentiment towards tax collectors in Jesus’ day was that they were scum of the earth. In the Gospels, we’re told (no less than 8 times) that people complained about Jesus eating with the "tax collectors and sinners." It’s as if there were sinners... and then there was a special class of sinners called tax collectors.

Twice in the Gospels, people complained of Jesus eating with "tax collectors and harlots." Harlots were women who sold their virtue for money. Apparently tax collectors were viewed as having the same vice.

This is not like he worked for the IRS. Very few people in our day "like" IRS agents, but usually we don’t "hate" them. They collect taxes that are necessary for the building of roads and other national concerns.

But by contrast, tax collectors in the day of Jesus were viewed as traitors. Men like Zacchaeus were individuals who’d betrayed people. Zacchaeus did not work for the nation of Israel. He worked for the Romans. And the Romans were a hated people - occupiers of Israel - an arrogant and cruel people.

And, not only were tax collectors regarded as traitors, they were also seen as thieves. The Romans exacted a tax from the Jews, which was bad enough, but they didn’t pay their tax collectors. Tax collectors made their living by adding an additional percentage on top of the Roman tax - and they usually added whatever they thought the person could pay. A savvy tax collector could make very good money without having to worry about being fair.

Publicans or tax collectors were hated men.

On top of this, Zacchaeus’ job required him to have constant contact with Gentiles. This would make him ceremonially unclean. That meant that he couldn’t go to the Temple and offer sacrifices. He was robbed of his ability to worship God. This effectively separated him from his God.

So, Zacchaeus was cut off from his people and alienated from his God.

Why would Zacchaeus take a job like this?

Well, nobody cared for him anyway. People mistreated and rejected him all of his life because of his height. AND God obviously didn’t care either. WHY ELSE would God create him a short man - an object of ridicule?

**II. Zacchaeus took comfort in his job.**

He really liked his job. He wasn’t just a tax collector... he was a CHIEF tax collector. He was now a BIG man. People feared him. They may have loathed him and hated him, but they feared him. He was a man of power and influence. AND, he was a rich man. He was a rich man - in part - because he was much like other tax collectors of his day.

AND I suspect he made it a practice to specially gouge people that had mistreated him in the past. He was getting back for all the pain he’d received.

Zacchaeus had everything a man could possibly want: power, riches, control of his life and control of others. He’d built WALLS around himself designed to INSULATE himself from the insults and indignities of his past.

BUT, he was still a short man that nobody liked.

As I prepared this sermon a song from years back came to mind:

"I’ve built WALLS - a fortress deep and mighty, that none may penetrate

I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain

It’s laughter and loving I disdain; I am a rock, I am an island.

Don’t talk of love - I’ve heard the word before;

It’s sleeping in my memory; I won’t disturb the slumber

of feelings that have died, If I never loved I never would have cried

I am a rock, I am an island.

I have my books and my poetry to protect me

I am shielded in my armor; Hiding in my room, safe within my womb,

I touch no one and no one touches me.

I am a rock, I am… an island

("I Am A Rock" by Simon & Garfunkel)

That’s how I picture Zacchaeus - a LONELY, ISOLATED man who has everything... except what he really wants.

**III. And then Jesus comes to town.**

Jesus had been preaching and teaching throughout Galilee, Samaria and Judea for the better part of 3 years. This was His first visit to Jericho.

Jesus is a famous person. Everybody wants to see Him. Rumors have floated thru town that this is a man who does miracles. He raises the dead, feeds thousands, heals the lame, the deaf and the demon possessed.

And NOT ONLY THAT - when this man speaks it is like the voice of God Himself.

Word has reached Zacchaeus about Jesus, and he’s more than just a little interested. There’s something about Jesus that touches his soul. It’s been rumored that Jesus doesn’t care who you are, or what you look like or what you’ve done.

This Jesus has eaten with tax collectors. And they said that one of His disciples had been one at one time - Matthew or Levi, or something like that.

They even said (and this was a good one) that Jesus had told the chief priests that tax collectors would make it into heaven before they did (Mt. 21:31).

Maybe, just maybe - this Jesus could give him the ACCEPTANCE that he’s craved. And this visit of Jesus to Jericho may be Zacchaeus’ one and only chance to find out. Jesus might not come around again for a long time. So Zacchaeus rushes to the street - but he can’t get through. Nobody likes him, nobody wants him there. You can see him jumping up and down trying to see if Jesus has come by yet. Then… he sees that tree - a sycamore tree. Sycamore trees of that region were fig trees with wide branches which sprouted out from the trunk - close to the ground. They were easy, even for children, to climb.

There is nobody in the tree - so he climbs up and waits.

Then along comes Jesus. The people are crowding around Him, trying to get His attention, touching His clothes, calling His name. And gentle and kindly man that He is, Jesus slowly makes His way through the crowd, speaking to people as He passes.

Then Jesus comes and stops at the base of the tree. He looks up - right at Zacchaeus. And then He says: "Zacchaeus" just like He was his friend.

"Zacchaeus come down from that tree, I want to go and eat at your home."

Jesus spoke to him. Jesus wanted to go to his house. Jesus had...... ACCEPTED him.

Zacchaeus climbs down out of the tree and rushes to his house. He orders servants to prepare the meal and oversees every detail of the preparations. And then he turns - and there is Jesus at his door.

This is probably the first time, for a long time, anyone has wanted to eat at his house. And suddenly he’s struck by the poverty of his soul… by the shabbiness of his life of selfishness and pettiness.

Here’s this holy man of God - eating at the home of a sinful and self centered man. And it’s like he’s wearing filthy garments in the presence of this God Himself. Zacchaeus feels like his soul needs to be washed clean of the wickedness he’s permitted to be there for so long.

And so he says: *"Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."* Luke 19:8

According to the Law, a thief was required to not only return the stolen goods but to repay an additional 20% of the value of that which was stolen. BUT here Zacchaeus was not only willing to pay back what he’d taken, BUT he was willing to add an additional 300%. Impressed by his repentance, Jesus told him: *"Today salvation has come to this house."* (Luke 19:9)

**IV. What does the story of Zacchaeus tell us?**

It tells us there are people in this world that are hurting. And they are often men and women that behave in ways that aren’t particularly endearing. They’re often not cute puppy dog types with big soft eyes that say -"won’t you take me home?"

They are rough people. Hard edged and rude. And they’ll take you in a business deal or rip you off when you’re not looking. Inside, they are little people who’ve built WALLS around themselves. Walls laced with barbed wire.

They’re often NOT nice people. AND they know that being like this isn’t right… but that’s the best they can do… If they let down the walls, if they are nice to someone for even a moment - they’ll get hurt and lose the protection that has for so long comforted them. Their WALLS are up and they know of nothing better for their lives…

That is, until Jesus comes.

**V. One last thing - Jesus came looking for Zacchaeus.**

He knew where he lived. He knew the turmoil in Zacchaeus’ heart.

Jesus had never been to Jericho before, but when he got there, he walked right up to the tree that held Zacchaeus. AND, he called Zacchaeus by name. As far we can tell, this is the ONLY thing Jesus did in Jericho. Jesus came to Jericho for one person - Zacchaeus.

He came to make a difference in the life a man who was small, petty and bitter. If Jesus would go to all that trouble for a man like Zacchaeus, wouldn’t he do the same for your life?

CLOSE: Bob was a drug dealer who had sold his soul to a white supremacist cult that had made the Thor, Nordic God of war, their object of worship. He had finished doing time in a federal prison and was finishing out the time he still owed to the Douglas County, Nebraska, jail in Omaha. Like Zacchaeus, he had begun to realize that he had made seriously bad choices and desired to do better before he was released and so he had requested to be moved to the God Mod, a module of about 55 guys that were under the direction of the Good News Jail and Prison Ministry chaplain with the help of outside volunteers from area churches.

One Friday night a Lutheran pastor and two lay volunteers did their usual prison ministry visit. The pastor had a prepared topic using approved prison ministry materials to teach from, but as they entered the mod, he felt the Holy Spirit telling him to teach on something different. It was exactly what Bob needed to hear. That evening Bob heard Jesus’ words speak to his heart and for the first time in his life he realized that there was a GOD WHO CARED ABOUT HIM and that JESUS WAS THERE to FORGIVE HIS SINS and GIVE HIM A NEW LIFE! The WALLS in Bob’s life came down, and Jesus came in!

Friends, Jesus is still saving souls today, and H e is using you and I to do his work.

**Prayer:** Lord God, I know that there are Zacchaeus types all around us who need to meet Jesus. Help us to be Jesus to them that they might be made new. Amen.