

Proper 26, Year C
October 31, 2010
St. Michael and All Angels, Portland
The Rev. Deacon Gabriel Lamazares

Isaiah 1:10-18 • 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12 • Luke 19:1-10

“The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Who are the most famous vertically challenged guys in history? Napoleon Bonaparte and Zacchaeus the chief tax collector, perched on a tree branch to see Jesus. Considering how often we've heard this story, it's hard to believe that it only appears in Luke's Gospel, but perhaps it's beloved to us precisely because Luke chose his stories to appeal to Gentiles like us.

Zacchaeus is certainly a compelling character, and I think most of us would agree that he's the protagonist of the story: the tale is about him and his memorable encounter with Jesus. Luke wants us to get to know him, to wonder what he's up to, what his motives are, and to see how Jesus responds to him as a type of how Jesus might respond to us, perhaps.

But it's funny. I can never be sure what will happen when I step into one of the stories in our Scriptures. This time, I found myself drawn to place my hand upon the rough bark of the character that may at first seem like a prop: the sycamore tree.

Perhaps I'm still resounding with Bishop Tom Breidenthal's image of Jesus as Jacob's ladder. Do you remember? He said that we ascend and descend, like the angels, on Jesus' own self. That for some of us it was easy to clamber up and be lifted into the jet stream of God's juicy, refreshing grace. But for some of us--and here's the bit that pierced me to the core--it was more like climbing a great tree, slowly, with difficulty, making our way, branch by branch, up into the heights, seeking the fresh breeze of God's magnificent freedom, the wind of God's Spirit brooding over the world, lifting us from the heat and dust of the surface. As the Psalmist says: “You are a hiding place for me, You preserve me from trouble.”

Oh! With the tree grown and transfigured, the story of Zacchaeus becomes my own story. Have you ever felt like you're in a crowd of people taller than you, that everyone sees something you can't seem to glimpse, that the parade of life is passing you by and you can't even see it, that an opportunity to look upon the Divine is coming but unless you do something pretty drastic you'll miss it?

In that sense, perhaps many of us are vertically challenged. I know I am. Sometimes in my spiritual life, I feel mired, grounded, blind. But like Zacchaeus perhaps I am also hopeful and crafty.

Behold! A tree, the Tree of Life, rooted in the depths of earth and flesh and bone, reaching, growing UP, many-branched, its broad canopy holding up the heavens, dappling the earth with sunlight, swaying in the wind, making sustenance out of air, water, and pure light. Yes! That's got to be the way to get some fresh air, to catch a glimpse of salvation, of the One who comes near to us. If I can just see him, just touch the hem of his garment, just get his attention, just hear his voice, perhaps I will see that my life is bigger than I might ever have imagined. Perhaps I will ascend and see my world with God's eyes.

But I'm not a kid anymore! Climbing the tree is harder than I thought. It's embarrassing and disorienting and terrifying. My robe is getting in my way and everyone can see under it. My arms and legs are quivering with the effort of scaling from branch to branch as the distance to the ground gets more and more dizzying and dangerous. And, yes, there is air and sky, but the higher I get the more I concentrate on keeping hold of the tree, on not falling back to earth, on gaining height to extend my vision.

Once I get to a stable perch, I cast my eyes towards the crowds below, hoping for a glimpse of Jesus at the still center of the swirling cacophony of seekers and cynics, celebrity-sighters and those looking to be entertained or amazed. As I look down, my heart stops as I find that the Beloved, God's own face in Jesus, the still center of the turning world is **looking up at me**. How can this be? While I climbed and huffed and puffed and sweat and scrambled to look for him, **he was looking for me all along**. It turns out he's not particularly interested in my skills in tree-climbing. Not even remotely!

The Beloved speaks my name and tells me that it is necessary, it is God's plan, it is fated that he should eat with me and I with him. Where I had sought only to get a glimpse from far away, he longs for us to become companions, sharing food and friendship in my own house, my own life, my own heart. But first, I have to come down. Was this entire climb futile? It's hard to say, see, because it seems that this ascent and descent was always to be part of the story of God salvaging human beings from our mire and mess.

So from the heights, I come back down to earth, to the press of the crowd, to grumbling and disdain, to walk the walk of a child of Abraham, a child of Moses, a child of Isaiah. On the ground, I can plead for the widow, give the gift of fearlessness

to the oppressed, defend the orphan, seek justice, make amends, give to the poor. On the ground, I can be reconciled to my neighbor, do right by my community, live simply so that I can convert what money and talent and time I have left over into seeds of the Reign of God.

Who is it again that comes to seek and save the lost? As I tune my strings to God's pitches, I am inspired to imitate God's own compassion, to look for lost sheep and lost coins, to salvage what is damaged and broken, to see as God sees, to love as God loves, to bear the burdens that God bears.

And perhaps when I die, my body made of earth and dust will be buried under the roots of this Tree, this ladder between earth and heaven. Let my body become part of its sturdy lift, its whispering leaves, the wind sweeping through the crown of my resurrected body that belongs not just to me. My body will bloom and share in the union of heaven and earth, which will never be thought of as opposites again.

So where are you? Are you in the crowd, trying to get a glimpse? Are you getting up the gumption to start climbing? Are you clambering up the tree? Are you sitting in the branches, swaddled in blue and green, gazing upon the Beloved? Are you ready to come down to meet him among the dust and the crowds? Are you ready to stand on your own two feet, no matter how tall or short you are, and make justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?

Wherever you are, come and sit in the shade of the Tree for a while and look up into its leaves. The Beloved wants to eat with the least and the lost, the vertically challenged, the tax collectors and sinners, the outcasts and imperfect and unrighteous. His food is his own self, strength for the journey, manna from heaven and liquid praise.

As Rumi said, "Come. Come. Whoever you are. Worshipper, wanderer, lover of leaving. This is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come."