

Coming of Salvation

October 30, 2022

Luke 19:1-10

One year, when I was growing up, my home church did a “read the Bible in a year” challenge, but it was parents reading the Bible to their children rather than to themselves. For this challenge, each parent used a Children’s Bible that is divided up into 365 different stories, one for each day of the year. So, each night for a year (or as best as they could), my parents read a story to my brothers and me from that Bible before bed. One of the stories of Jesus’ ministry that seemed a bit odd to me, titled “The Man in the Tree,” is the story of Zacchaeus. Often, we remember stories of Jesus’ ministry because Jesus said something profound or he performed a miracle. Then again, perhaps we remember some stories because they are in more than one Gospel. Sure enough, this is a story we all know and could recite by heart, but it stands to question: Why? Luke is the only Gospel to mention him, and this is the only time he appears in Luke’s gospel narrative; at no other point does he make an appearance. Additionally, he and Jesus don’t exactly have a profound or even lengthy discussion. On top that, no miracle happens. So, it stands to question: why do we remember him? Debatably, we remember him because he is one of the more relatable persons in the Bible.

Zacchaeus as a man isn’t really anyone special. He’s not married into royalty or one who holds power, so he himself does not have power. He’s not a major influencer of the crowds like the religious elite. Yes, it’s true; he is a chief tax collector, meaning that he is fabulously wealthy and probably lives a luxurious life. However, despite money being a source of power, both in their time and in ours, that wealth does not afford him any power and authority whatsoever. Truth be told, tax collectors are hated by the people, and their wealth affords them nothing but scorn. Perhaps ironically, he is just as marginalized as those people it is believed he steals from and against whom he schemes. Mind you, nowhere in the text are we *told* that Zacchaeus is in anyway thieving, conniving, greedy, or anything of the sort. We simply assume that he is from being told he is a chief tax collector and that he’s viewed as a sinner because of it. However, this isn’t the only reason he is hated by the people.

As it turns out, he is also hated, and in turn discriminated against, because of his height. Simply because he is short, people think less of him because there is, well, less of him. Due to his short stature, he is immediately deemed “short” or “lacking” in spirituality, ethics, character, and the like. Simply because there is not more of him, he is pushed to the margins and viewed as a sinner before even being spoken to. In short (no pun intended), Zacchaeus is discriminated against for who and what he is. Every aspect of who he is seemingly scrutinized and hated by the common folk. Perhaps this is the reason Jesus seeks him out and that we remember his story so vividly.

In the story, just as Zacchaeus is climbing a tree to find Jesus, so too is Jesus seeking to find him. Once Jesus sees him, he calls to him, telling him, “I must stay with you today.” Now, the word “must” here is tantamount and equivalent to the phrase “Thou shalt not” in the Ten Commandments. It is God’s order and will, and it is not to be defied. So, hated or loved, Jesus’ residing with Zacchaeus is part of God’s divine plan, and for good reason. Jesus is a physical incarnation of Salvation itself, and Zacchaeus has sought him (and therefore salvation) out.

Zacchaeus, a man who is viewed as the least-deserving of salvation, is seeking it out nonetheless, recognizing that it is not something that he can just buy. It must be sought out and freely given. So, Jesus, and therefore salvation, comes to reside in Zacchaeus's house, and in turn, he has one of the most spiritual reactions in the Bible.

Jesus comes to his home, and he doesn't say anything. Simply because Jesus is there, Zacchaeus says, "I will give away half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone out of money, I will pay them back fourfold what is rightfully theirs." Mind you, Jesus has not told him to do this, nor has Jesus revealed that Zacchaeus has been a naughty boy and needs to be punished. No accusatory dialogue has been exchanged, or at least recorded. Zacchaeus freely swears to do right towards those who are poor and in need. If nothing else, Zacchaeus proves he is in fact very spiritual, that his money and possessions do not hold any power over him, that he is not the man everyone believes him to be.

This is why Zacchaeus is so memorable, so relatable. Despite what others think of him, he is his own person. Despite what sins he may have committed, he is remorseful, willing to make amends and do what is just to set things right. Knowing full well the gravity of his sinful nature, he seeks out salvation through Jesus Christ. Much the same can be said for all of us. None of us is without our faults, and none of us are unwilling to make amends, to own up to our mistakes and set things right if given the chance. What's more, despite our sinfulness, despite what others might say or think about us, whether directly to us or to others, Jesus has sought and continues to seek us out. Jesus looks far and wide to find us, to meet us where we are at, and tell us he must stay with us today, to let us know that our sinfulness has not hindered our receiving salvation. Despite our faults, our sinfulness, salvation through Jesus Christ comes to find us and rest with us. However, it stands to question: Salvation is coming to reside with us, ready and willing to knock on our doors. When it does, will you invite him in?