

“HIDING FROM JESUS”

Luke 19:1-10 ¹

What do you think of when you think of a tree? One of the first things that comes to my mind is Joyce Kilmer’s famous poem:

*I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest against the earth’s sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear a nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain; who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.*

After I think of that poem, I think of how Jill loves to see the trees in winter, when the intricacies of limb and branch are in full view.

Changing subjects, what do you think of when you think of Jericho? I expect that one of your first thoughts has to do with the Vacation Bible School song, “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho”; but how about after that?

Jericho is known as “The City of Palms,” which I suppose makes it a fitting subject for Palm Sunday. The city of Jericho has been continuously inhabited for more than 10,000 years, which makes it the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world. Located about sixteen miles east of Jerusalem, Jericho is 853 feet below sea level, making it also the lowest town on earth.

Pottery was invented in Jericho a thousand years before this happened in Mesopotamia, and the famous walls of Jericho were standing 4,000 years before Egypt’s pyramids were built. In Bible times, Jericho was an important city, and all the east-west trade routes to Jerusalem went through Jericho. This commerce made Jericho a wealthy city.

Jericho was the center of a fertile agricultural region, and its pleasant weather caused Herod to build a palace there and to use it as his winter capital. Jericho’s moderate climate makes it a favorite winter resort to this day. Fresh fruit and vegetables are available all year, and Jericho dates, bananas and citrus fruits are well-known, even now.

Jericho is an important city in the Bible, being mentioned sixty-five times, but Jesus apparently visited Jericho only once. Jesus surely did many things while He was in Jericho, but only two things were recorded—two rather extraordinary encounters along the road.

As we enter the scene, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem for the last time, knowing what awaits Him there. The events we consider this morning may well have happened on that first Palm Sunday, which would have been March 29 of the year 33.

“As they approached Jericho, a blind beggar was sitting beside the road. When he heard the noise of a crowd going past, he asked what was happening. They told him that Jesus of Nazareth was going by. So he began shouting, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ The crowds ahead of Jesus tried to hush the man, but he only shouted louder, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 5, 2020. Palm Sunday. In addition to various commentaries, various snippets of this sermon come from the sermon, “What about Sudden Conversion,” by Bruce Larson, *Preaching Today* tape #72; from the sermon, “Hide and Seek,” by Scott Wenig, *Preaching Today* tape #211; and from the sermon, “FSTR,” by Dan Meyer, www.preachingtodaysermons.com.

“When Jesus heard him, he stopped and ordered that the man be brought to him. Then Jesus asked the man, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’

“‘Lord,’ he pleaded, ‘I want to see!’

“And Jesus said, ‘All right, you can see! Your faith has healed you.’² Instantly the man could see, and he followed Jesus, praising God. And all who saw it praised God, too” (Luke 18:35-43).

We know from Mark’s account that this man’s name was Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46). And I’ll return to Jesus’ profound question, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** after a bit.

Here’s what happened next: *“Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was one of the most influential Jews in the Roman tax-collecting business, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowds. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree beside the road, so he could watch from there.*

“When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. ‘Zacchaeus!’ he said. ‘Quick, come down! For I must be a guest in your home today.’

“Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the crowds were displeased. ‘He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,’ they grumbled.

“Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have overcharged people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!’

“Jesus responded, ‘Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a son of Abraham. And I, the Son of Man, have come to seek and save those like him who are lost’ (Luke 19:1-10).

I suspect that, while your first thought of Jericho might have to do with the city walls, not far after that comes the song, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he.” Forty years ago, I invited an evangelist to lead a revival, and he preached the entire week on Zacchaeus. I’m going to resist that temptation, but Zacchaeus is well worth a look.

We don’t know a lot about Zacchaeus. Only Luke recorded this encounter, and it is a brief account. Zacchaeus’ name means “Righteous One,” but it appears that he wasn’t living up to that name.³

We’re told that Zacchaeus was a “chief tax collector,”⁴ which meant that he worked for the Roman Empire, a job that his neighbors considered traitorous. It also means that he was pretty high up in the pyramid of corruption that surrounded the Roman tax system. This information tells us that Zacchaeus was not one of the Good Guys. He had ripped a whole lot of people off for a long time, and, while he was wealthy as a result, he was also despised and hated.

Nobody in Jericho would give Zacchaeus the time of day unless they absolutely had to; but somewhere along the way he heard about this rabbi named Jesus, who, on occasion, was known to hang with morally ragged people and even went to parties where there were prostitutes and tax collectors (Luke 7:34). So he was curious about Jesus.

² Having faith means having had sufficient *personal experience* with the *Living God* that we are persuaded that God is trust-worthy, and being therefore willing to trust God and to obey God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend.

³ Zacchaeus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, “Zaccai” (Ezra 2:9; Nehemiah 7:14).

⁴ The term, *architelōnēs*, is found nowhere else in contemporary literature.

When word came that Jesus was in town, Zacchaeus really wanted to get a glimpse of Him, as we might try to get a spot viewing a Presidential or celebrity motorcade, but Zacchaeus had two problems: he was rather short, so he couldn't see over the shoulders and head of normally-sized people; and nobody—I mean *nobody*—was going to move over for *him*.

So, being a resourceful fellow, Zacchaeus scurried ahead along the route he knew Jesus would take and climbed up in a Sycamore tree so as to be able to see. Why a Sycamore, you wonder? Well, the branches of a Sycamore fig tree are strong and wide and horizontal, and they are frequently close to the ground, so this was doable for a fellow like Zacchaeus.

Beyond this, the leaves of a Sycamore are fairly large, and it wouldn't be too difficult to hide in the tree. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but he didn't want Jesus—or the crowd—to see him. *Zacchaeus was hiding.*

Jesus and His entourage were not the only people headed to Jerusalem that day. It was time for Passover, so pilgrims from all over thronged the roads, headed to the Temple. Jesus was rather a celebrity, so the crowd was large and noisy as it passed through Jericho's business district.

But, for all Zacchaeus' efforts at hiding, *“when Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. ‘Zacchaeus!’ he said. ‘Quick, come down! For I must be a guest in your home today.’*

There are several things to note here. First, sin causes us to hide from God, as it always has, ever since the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). Second, Jesus finds us when we hide; and third, Jesus knows our names. Jesus had never before met Zacchaeus, but as very God of very God, He had known Zacchaeus since before the creation of the world . . . and He knows your name, too.

Another key thing to note is that Jesus told Zacchaeus that He “must” be a guest in his home that day, right NOW. Zacchaeus suddenly discovered that he had a divine appointment that he never saw coming. Zacchaeus had hoped just to glimpse Jesus as He passed by; but now Jesus is inviting Himself to Zacchaeus' house for lunch! Can you imagine his surprise and joy? And because Zacchaeus was notorious and hated, the crowds grumbled.

No self-respecting citizen of Jericho would have anything to do with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was “unclean” within and without. No Jew would have even entered Zacchaeus' home, much less sat down at table with him. But Jesus did.

We're not told anything about their luncheon until much has obviously already taken place. What do you think they talked about? Bruce Larson, when wondering about this, wrote:

What do you think happened? Luke tells us a condensed story. They go home and they sit and eat a luncheon banquet, I'm sure. If you were a novelist, how would you describe the conversation? Who does most of the talking? Do you think Jesus is a boring know-it-all who tells Zacchaeus all about God and conversion and prayer and where to worship and all that?

Do you think Jesus becomes the great inexhaustible fountain of wisdom, which He was? Or do you think that when you're in the presence of God, He sits and asks you, *“How are you doing? Tell me about your life. How did you get so rich? Do you have any friends? How do you and your wife get along? Do your kids love you? Talk to me.”*

I don't know what happened, and you don't know what happened, but I have a feeling that when you sit in the presence of unconditional, ultimate love, which Jesus is, He makes you the agenda: *“Tell me about you.”*

Isn't that beautiful? What do you think you'd do if Jesus came to *your* house?⁵

Some conversation such as this must have taken place between verses 7-8 of our text, because now Zacchaeus stood and said, "*I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have overcharged people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!*"

This was quite remarkable. Remember that Zacchaeus was wealthy because he was a thief, and he was now volunteering to pay back four-fold what he had stolen, which was what the Mosaic Law required, but it was also a LOT.⁶

There is no evidence that Jesus had asked Zacchaeus to make such repayment. But, having long been a man who sought earthly treasures, Zacchaeus was now choosing to invest in heavenly treasure and was becoming free from the thrall in which he had been captive, by God's grace.⁷

And Jesus then said, "*Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a son of Abraham. And I, the Son of Man, have come to seek and save those like him who are lost*" (Luke 19:1-10).⁸

Mission Accomplished. Divine Appointment concluded. The Lost have been Found. Redemption has come.

Reflecting on this dramatic encounter, Bruce Larson continued, "Why do you think, out of the entire city of Jericho, Jesus picked Zacchaeus? I used to think it was because Jesus said, 'I'll pick the meanest, rottenest, worst man here in town to show the power of God.'

"I don't think that anymore. I think Jesus went through that town, and said, 'Where is the person who is the hungriest, the most ready, the most open? Why it's this man up here!' who just happens to be the least pious, the least religious, but the most open to what God has for him. So Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, you come on down." So Zacchaeus came down and received Jesus gladly."

Zacchaeus was willing to let Jesus change his *mind*. Zacchaeus was willing to let Jesus change his *heart*. Zacchaeus was willing to let Jesus change his *behavior*. Zacchaeus was willing to let Jesus change his *destiny*.

So here's the deal. Zacchaeus was a biological son of Abraham, but he wasn't a spiritual son of Abraham; and Spirit, not biology is the point (Luke 3:8). Nobody gets into God's Kingdom on someone else's "coattails." Zacchaeus couldn't, and we can't, either.

Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name, even though they had never met; and Jesus knows your name, too.

Jesus loved Zacchaeus even though he was a cheat and a traitor; and Jesus loves you, no matter where you've been, no matter what you've done, and no matter what has been done to you.

⁵ One of my favorite books as a child was Joan Thomas's *If Jesus Came to My House*. www.alibris.com/search/books/isbn/9781626542020?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=NMPi Smart Shopping&utm_term=NMPi Smart Shopping&ds_rl=1264488&ds_rl=1264488&gclid=Cj0KCOjwmdzzBRC7ARiS ANdqRRltjI-OJBaVsUCqNX9GMYkjG3lydYBf4sFKqkYjo3QAvbvc_q3KUewaAmAsEALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds

⁶ Exodus 22:1, 3-4; 2 Samuel 12:6; cp. Leviticus 6:5; Numbers 5:7.

⁷ See Matthew 6:19-24.

⁸ On "lost," see also Matthew 10:6, 15:24; Luke 15:6, 9, 24, 19:10; John 17:12, 18:9; 1 Corinthians 15:18.

Jesus found Zacchaeus even though he was hiding; and Jesus can find you, too, if you'll let yourself be found. Remember that Jesus has come to seek and to save those who are lost, those who are broken, those who are hiding, those who are willing and ready to let Him change their minds, hearts, behavior, and destiny.

Friends, I say this to myself and I say it to you: The only person in the entire universe who can set us free from the power of Sin is Jesus. He's come to find us. He's come to forgive us, but He wants us to invite Him over for lunch, invite Him into our lives and say, "Lord, I am struggling with this area. Will you please by your grace set me free from its power?"

The Good News of Holy Week is that it's never too late to change. We don't have to be locked into what we have always been and done. You are not a prisoner of your track record. *You can change.* That's what the Gospel is all about.

So how are things at your house? Need some company? Jesus is at the door. Are you going to try to hide, or are you going to invite Him in?