

Climbing High, Running By

Luke 19: 1-10, Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-4

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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.”

Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire, secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.

This image that Charles Dickens offered of Ebenezer Scrooge is clearly one of a man who hoarded for himself, who saw no need to have a world beyond his cold, hard counting room, who was unloved and truly unlovable. And it is also I would imagine a fairly accurate description of Zacchaeus. A small wee man, not just in physical stature but in vision, in character, in relationships, in humility.

Zacchaeus had accumulated great wealth as a traitor to his own people. He was a pawn of the Roman government, oppressing his own Jewish community by collecting exorbitant taxes while lining his own cloak pockets. And he was a man who saw no problem, no ethical concerns, no sense of corruption, by his lifestyle. When he heard that Jesus would be traveling by, he was not one of the many who would seek out Jesus for healing, for food, for need, for hope, or for prayer. Oh no, this is a first century celebrity sighting for Zacchaeus. He had heard the stories,

the amazing, miraculous stories, of this itinerant preacher and his band of followers, and he was curious.

All of his ill-gotten power and wealth however would not bring him to the front of the crowd to see this hero of many, so he climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus up close as he passed by.

But Jesus did not just pass by with the entourage as Zacchaeus expected. Instead, Jesus stopped beneath the tree and greeted a man by name even though they have never met, called him down to the midst of the very people he continually exploited, and invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' home.

The crowd was outraged, confused and offended as would be expected. Their hospitality and affection had been put aside for Jesus' personal attention and conversation with the Scrooge of Jericho. How could this Jesus possibly be the man that they thought he was if he was so eager to be with Zacchaeus of all people?

Jesus calmed the people, encouraged them to see that his goal, his vision, was to seek out and to save the lost. Zacchaeus who had climbed the tree to see a celebrity pass by and then go back to counting his coins as usual, was transformed in an instant, at the sound of Jesus' voice calling him down from the tree. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Jesus called Zacchaeus, not just by name, but to who he was, and to who Jesus was. Zacchaeus and Jesus were joined in a face-to-face encounter, where truth was broken open and laid bare. The anticipated glimpse of a celebrity became a life-altering healing and redemption.

"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."

The conversion from sinner to sincere was instantaneous. Even Scrooge endured a night of haunting and the visits of three ghosts before changing his ways and softening his heart. Zacchaeus descended a tree and into the depths of his own heart and soul because Jesus had the vision to call him by name, to seek and to save the lost.

Zacchaeus perched himself in a sycamore tree to see Jesus from a distance and was surprised and then transformed by truly being seen by Jesus, and by seeing Jesus for who he truly was. Friends, we too are perched atop a distant view. From the height of 2000 years we can look to this dramatic encounter and vision as in the past, or we can see that it is just as true and welcoming for all of us right now. We are called by Jesus to climb down from our present perch, to stand face-to-face on solid ground with Jesus, to see that each of us are the lost he came to save. We all have a Zacchaeus streak in us, we all have some ways of not being the better, the best, selves we can be. We acknowledge that every time we offer our prayer of confession and receive the words of assurance and forgiveness. Jesus showed Zacchaeus, shows us, that God loves us even through the ways we fall short, God does not wait until we feel we are ready. God's love abides and abounds.

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."

Jesus knew his vision, his mission his purpose, and he pursued it throughout his earthly ministry. The Pentecost Spirit has continued to keep the vision strong and going. The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost, and that vision has never wavered.

Visions take time to emerge, to gain traction and to take hold. Zacchaeus experienced a rapid conversion in the midst of a vision that is 2 millennia old and still going strong. Visions are long-term aspirations.

The prophet Habakkuk stood atop the watchtower rampart, prayerfully waiting and watching for an answer, a vision, from God.

Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

The vision that Habakkuk received to share with the world was to trust in God, that there was an appointed time for the relief and justice being sought.

Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. Habakkuk was to spread this vision, write it large and grand and bold for all to easily see and understand, and to motivate others to act toward this common goal.

What is our vision Smith Church? What is our long-term aspiration to write large, grand and bold for all to see, understand and be motivated by? In this era of sound-bytes and elevator speeches, what is the vision we offer a hurting world running by? How is our vision a part of Jesus' own vision to care for the lost, for the Habakkuks and Zacchaeus' of our time?

How large and bold can we write that Smith Church breaks down walls and is open to all to create a visible, active sign of God's presence in our community and beyond? Amen.