

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

November 3, 2019

Proper 26C / Ordinary 31C / Pentecost +21

The readings this week:

- Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
- Psalm 119:137-144
- 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
- Luke 19:1-10

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Camouflaged by Shame

I grew up in a culture that was peppered with prejudice about all sorts of people and people groups. A product of the height of Apartheid, and a white male South African, I was fed a steady dose of all the stereotypes that went into making up our society. It may surprise you that the stereotypes weren't all about race! Many of them were about other physical features, like, "Never trust anyone whose eyes are too close together."

Another of these cultural biases was located around persons of short stature. Short man syndrome or a Napoleon Complex, was used to judge people of less than average height who competed aggressively with those who were taller. Behind the bias lay an unspoken principle: short people should know their place. Interesting that there isn't a short woman syndrome, are women just expected to be small?

Coming this week to the most famous short man of the gospels, Zacchaeus, I find myself wondering if the short man syndrome was a bias in the days of Jesus? If it was, poor Zacchaeus had to face a double whammy. Short of stature, and also a tribute collector, what a difficult incarnation to carry.

All this nostalgia for the prejudicial upbringing of my past also dredged up a song from my youth. It was written by another short man and performed by his short self and his tall partner. The opening lines were, "When you're weary, feeling small..."

Are you old enough to remember "Bridge over Troubled Water" by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel? It was 1969, so you may not want to admit to that.

I think those opening lines would have got Zacchaeus' attention if he had heard the song back in the day.

Zacchaeus knew what it was to be weary and also what it was to feel small.



In the shame based culture of his time (is there any other kind?) being a tribute collector was tantamount to being a spy and a traitor. The only difference was you were required to

perform your treachery in public! Collecting the extorted tribute from the Jewish populace and then handing it over, sans your sizeable administration fee, to the Roman oppressors would not have endeared this profession to your peers.

I can't help wondering if the tree climbing that Luke tells us was to get a better view was not also an attempt at concealment and camouflage? Zacchaeus knew who he was, he also knew what he had done. He saw the shame in the looks his fellow Jericho-ers, including some of his family, gave him as they looked down on him literally and in every way. Zacchaeus was quite happy to be concealed in the sycamore-fig tree that day. To catch a discreet glimpse of the travelling Rabbi, that so many were speaking of.

Zacchaeus was a lurker. Drawn to the teacher Jesus, he didn't believe he had anything to offer and certainly believed he was not worthy to receive anything, so he lurked in the sycamore-fig tree, the very tree that was ironically a symbol of the nation of Israel and of blessing. Knowing what we do now about the outcome of this narrative, the sycamore-fig tree was an inspired choice.

I sometimes find myself wondering how many Zacchaeuses are in church, or even reading this blog. People who are drawn by the promise of healing and wholeness from Jesus, but who have experienced too much shame and have been looked down upon just once to many, for them to risk disclosure of their need? They lurk in the back pews, or don't even attend church, constantly reading blogs like this trying to find some redemption from the harsh judgement they see in the eyes of others. Sadly, the most despising and diminishing looks come from the disciples of Jesus.

Here is the good news. Jesus is drawn to shame. Shame and sadness are the pheromones that attract the amazing grace of Jesus. Just one look up the tree of shame and concealment and Jesus encounters the one who is lurking there. No longer will Zacchaeus have to lurk up the tree of shame and blame, he will now be able to sit under that tree in the blessing of God. How? Because, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."

This is not merely a story for Zacchaeus. It is a call to each of us as Small-people. Let us risk climbing from the perches of false guilt caused by prejudicial bias where we have been lurking, and leering at the world.

"For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Wow! Zacchaeus, how you've grown! You are taller down here than when you were up the tree.

~ an excerpt, Peter Woods, [The Listening Hermit](#)

Reflecting on the Word



___ 1st Reading: [Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4](#)

What does it mean to be a prophet today? What would that look like in your setting? As believers, we learn in Romans 12:12 to always be hopeful, to be patient in trials, and to be persistent in prayer. How could these directions help you if you were asking the question Habakkuk asked? In what ways do people struggle with Habakkuk's lament today? How can the issue of unpunished evil become a roadblock for someone? We can take our questions to God or we can let them drive us away. Why are some people hesitant to approach God with honest questions? How does God's love, as it was revealed in Christ's sacrifice for us, sustain our hope? What do Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection teach us about the future of evil? [Mt. Salem Baptist Church](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 119:137-144](#)

What is the basis for the righteous laws of God as described in verse 137? Why did Jesus overturn the tables in the temple? Was He angry? How does the Psalmist view himself in this section? Why is this section of the Psalm so relevant to the postmodern relativism of our day? How do we experience life according to verse 144? How are our days filled with turmoil and anguish? What causes turmoil and anguish in our hearts? What resolves it? How does the world confuse good and evil or right and wrong? Provide a few examples. [Generations](#)



Praying Toward Sunday

God is the rock to which you cling,
your hiding place.

This doesn't mean that now you should go
where no one can find you.

Instead, this week, I invite you:

come down out of your own sycamore tree.

Jesus is coming to your home,
to where you work
or learn

or play.

Don't be afraid. It'll be all right.

Today salvation has come to this house,
because you too are a son or daughter
of Abraham and Sarah.

~ [Long Green Valley Church of the Brethren](#)

It is our terrible ability to refuse to become. ... When we grasp that self is mere potentiality, something of our total dependency on God is forced upon us. It is a revelation most painful to human pride and yet the acceptance of this lies at the heart of all true growth. It is in the light of this imperative for man to recognize his true condition, that one can see blessed meaning in the afflictions, frustrations and ever-present curtailments and disappointments which are his lot. Without these, would we ever come anywhere near to a sense of truth?

~ Ruth Burrows, Interior Castle Explored,
via Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12](#)

What does Paul see in the church in Thessalonica that is filling his heart with gratitude to God? b) Why is it "right" to thank God, as Paul does in verse 3? What does it reveal about our hearts if we don't often thank God? What do you think these phrases really mean? a) "May make you worthy of his calling"? b) "May fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power"? c) "So that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him"? d) "According to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ"? What are some things that you are thankful for in the lives of fellow believers? Thinking about your own life, your community, or the world, what kind of things most make you desire to see God's justice done? How can remembering God will bring about justice in the end help you as you relate to others day by day? [Lake Shore Church](#)

___ 4th Reading: [Luke 19:1-10](#)

What are some of the first things you would do if you knew Jesus was coming to your house? Would you take more time preparing your heart or house? In what ways can past sins and guilt keep you from wanting to be in the presence of Jesus? The religious leaders in this story didn't believe Zacchaeus deserved to have Jesus talk with him. How can you fight against the attitude that some people are more deserving of grace while others have fallen too far away? Jesus didn't mention anything about money, sin, or the need to repent when he was talking with Zacchaeus. Do you associate the presence of Jesus with Holiness and the need of repentance? Why was it important for Zacchaeus to take actions that supported his change of heart? What does it mean for believers today to not only repent, but to surrender the areas of their life that are drawing them away from God? How do you do this? [First MB Church](#)