

Date Preached	30-Oct-2022	Date Initiated	11-Oct-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Prop 26, Yr C

" [Zacchæus] was trying to see who Jesus was ...  
and [Jesus] looked up at him and said, ↓ 'Zacchæus.' "



Stop me if you've heard this one before: "Why did the chicken cross the road?" ↓ Now, we all know this groaner's punchline: to get to the other side. But did you know there are countless alternative versions of this silly joke—some of them even *funny?! "Why did the chicken cross the road?" ¶ Because she was free-range. ¶ Because he was social distancing. ¶ Because the road betrayed her first. [wait a beat] Or perhaps my personal favorite: "Why did the chicken cross the road?" Just **beak**-cause he could!*

As much as I love to laugh, I'm not a good joke-teller; so, usually I avoid them in sermons. But the question that kept occurring to me as I pondered today's story of Zacchæus was on all-fours with that sorry old pedestrian-chicken joke: "Why did Zacchæus climb the tree?"

At first, the answer ... like the punchline to the chicken joke<sup>1</sup> ... seems head-smackingly obvious: to see Jesus. Jesus has come to town, and, as always, He's attracted a big crowd. So Zacchæus, being "short in stature," as St Luke tells us, climbs a tree to get an unobstructed view of Jesus. Logical enough: Who among us hasn't shuffled about on the sidelines of a sporting event or a parade, to get a clearer view? "Why did Zacchæus climb the tree?" To see the celebrity coming through town.

But what if this isn't the *only* answer? Just as the alternative punchlines to the chicken joke are funnier—more satisfying—than the obvious original, might there be richer reasons for Zacchæus' arboreal amblings than just getting a good view? How might this story speak to us if we think about his climb *spiritually*, rather than merely *pragmatically*?

- Perhaps Zacchæus, moved by Jesus' example, climbs the tree as a show of humility. Tax collectors are despised figures in the Jewish community of Roman Palestine. They ally themselves with the occupying Empire. They extort from the populace *far* more than the taxes they truly owe ... and pocket the excess as personal profit.<sup>2</sup> And Zacchæus isn't just *a* tax collector, but the *chief* tax collector: the boss bandit. If he wanted to, he could get a front-row seat by putting a couple pennies in a few palms ... or by dangling the threat of some phony, trumped-up tax bill.  
¶ But instead, Zacchæus, like a powerless child, climbs a tree. He stoops well beneath his social station ... exposes himself, no doubt, to the crowd's jeers and catcalls ... and risks not only his pride but also his safety as he struggles to shinny high enough to see over everyone else's heads.

---

<sup>1</sup> It's an oldie, if not necessarily a goodie. One resource I read said this joke had appeared in a magazine called *The Knickerbocker* back in 1847.

<sup>2</sup> This is, in fact, a fairly common model of revenue collection throughout history: The taxing authority sells the right to collect taxes to the highest bidder, who is then entitled to try to wring as much as he can out of the taxpaying public. He pays the state the taxes actually due (or some fraction thereof) and gets to pocket the excess, as profit.

- Perhaps Zacchæus climbs the tree not only to raise his eyes, but also to lift up his heart: ↓ an act of consciously turning toward God.<sup>3</sup> Something is stirring within Zacchæus ... a sense that his rapacious ways have not only wronged his fellow citizens, but also dishonored God.<sup>4</sup> As this spiritual awakening dawns in him, Zacchæus realizes he's on the verge of something big ... something life-changing ... something life-giving, even. And this feeling ... this heartfelt *certainty* ... compels him—however he can—to get to where he can look Jesus right in the eye and hear His every word.
- And perhaps—consider *this!*—perhaps Zacchæus climbs the tree because *Jesus* wants to see *him*. I recently attended a lecture lamenting our modern, self-glorifying tendency to overlook ... or even outright *dismiss* ... God's activity in our daily lives. That's a topic for another day, but: ↓ Embracing the prospect of God's *actively calling* to us ... *pulling* on our hearts, in *real-time* ... transforms a charming little vignette into a magnetic account of Jesus' all-encompassing, ever-loving claim on our lives: Zacchæus climbs the tree not of his own will, but because Jesus calls him to: so Jesus can pause a moment ... turn His gaze upward ... look directly into Zacchæus' eyes ... and then open this little man's heart to love and grace; to mercy and charity; to goodness and care and generosity and blessing.  
Why does Zacchæus climb the tree? Because Jesus longs for him to know how deeply he is loved ... and called, in turn, to love *others*, as well.

\*\* \*\* \*

We're right in the middle of stewardship season here at St Andrew's. Pledge cards have gone out ... announcements and *Epistle* articles remind us of all the compelling reasons to give ... and follow-up phone calls are being made. Those are the logistics ... the mechanics ... and they, too, have the makings of a terrible joke: Why do we have a stewardship campaign? To give the Stewardship Commission something to do!

But when we hear the story of Zacchæus' climbing the tree in a *spiritual* key ... when we observe how freely and generously he opens his purse in response to Jesus' call—pledging fully *half* of all his possessions to the poor ... the Sunday school simplicity of this tale blossoms into a powerful, positive illustration of one of Jesus' most consistent, passionate messages in the Gospel of Luke: Our attitudes toward money and possessions ... toward accumulating and hanging onto ... toward comfort and security ... are a **huge** facet of our faith; of our living as Christians. The more we allow these things to tempt and control us, the less we allow Jesus **in**. The more singularly focused we are on our private, personal well-being ... to the detriment of the parish, the community, the stranger and the world ... the *less faith* we have.<sup>5</sup> Far from climbing a tree to see—and be seen *by*—Jesus ... we slip to the back of the crowd, hoping He'll pass by without even glimpsing us.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a good sermon (albeit one in a different ultimate homiletical direction) could explore Zacchæus' tree climbing as an act of *repentance*.

<sup>4</sup> ZACCHÆUS is a common Hebrew name.

<sup>5</sup> I wrestled with this statement, for it seems too stark ... too absolute. It would be more comfortable—more comforting—to say, "the less our faith grounds us" or "the less our faith centers our lives." But Jesus can—and *does*—claim *all* of our lives, in their entirety. The more we clutter and hedge them with worldly cares and worldly 'security,' the less room we afford Him; and this *is*, I think, "less faith."

<sup>6</sup> This is, of course, an idle wish. He sees and knows all, including the means we use to avoid Him; to keep Him (we think!) at a safe distance.

So, ↓ I invite you ... sometime this week ... to imitate Zacchæus: Set aside ten or fifteen minutes. Take out your check book or bank statement or portfolio report ... sit quietly ... and *climb a tree*: Climb way up high! Up past your customary pledge; up past all your calculations and concerns. Climb out onto a limb that doesn't feel entirely secure ... so you can *really see*. ¶ Look at your finances in humility and grace: *not* as the product of a life's labor ... *not* as a source of either worry or comfort ... but as the merest *sliver* of all the good Jesus has given you ... and still *has in store*. ¶ Look at your resources not just with your eyes, but also your hearts: See *Jesus* amidst those dollar signs; see, in them, the opportunity—no, the *calling!*—to spread His Good News: to praise and worship; to teach and learn; to sing and serve; to make new disciples; to **care for** and give **hope to**. ¶ Let your household finances look at *you*: Let Jesus gaze up at you from all those credits and debits; all those gains and losses ... and contemplate *Him*—real and present—looking right **up** at *you*. ¶ And then, take out your 2023 pledge card ... and just like Zacchæus, follow your heart wherever Jesus may lead it.

Do you dare to climb a tree to see Jesus? What you see ↓ may change your life!



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington*  
*St Andrew's Parish*  
*Kent, CT*