

Copyright April 6 & 7, 2019. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church

**Title:** Journey to Jerusalem: See

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Luke 18:35-43](#)

**Text:** [Luke 19:1-10](#)

**E-mail:** [Randy Spleth](#)



We are one week and one city from finishing our journey to Jerusalem. We started it five weeks ago when Jesus "...set his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51b) It was the beginning of Lent but for Jesus, it was the beginning of his journey to the cross. He was determined, focused and made it sound as if it was almost impossible to follow

him on this journey. He told would-be disciples to "Leave the dead to bury the dead. Don't kiss family good-bye. Don't look back." Perhaps Jesus said, "don't look back" as much for himself as for the crowd that would follow.

They run into problems immediately when "...they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem." (Luke 9:53) Luke is telling us that a detour was at hand. Jesus was so determined to make his way to Jerusalem that he'd taken the straight route through Samaria. But because of his rejection, he decided to take the longer, more traditional route, crossing over the Jordan river to the east, traveling south through the Decapolis and Perea and then crossing back to the west over the Jordan River at the ancient city of Jericho.

Jericho was a veritable Eden, famous for being the oldest city in the world. It was an oasis of date palms and balsam, a tree from which medicine was extracted. It was a source of great income and was exported all over the known world. Mark Anthony presented Jericho as a gift to Cleopatra, with Arabia thrown in. Herod the Great built a winter palace in Jericho, making it something of a resort for people fleeing the colder weather of the Palestinian hill country. Jericho lay along the great caravan routes and was a beehive of commercial and human activity because of the abundance of water and many springs. But it was also the last stop for Galilean pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> The Holy City was an uphill climb 15 miles to the southwest. This is the city that Jesus arrives one week before he finishes his journey to Jerusalem. And Luke wants us to see what is going on.

Imagine if you will, outside the city of Jericho, beggars lined up and down the road hoping to engage the wealthy traders, sun seekers or faithful pilgrims in acts of compassion and mercy, hoping for a small coin. "As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging." (Luke 14:35) Evidently, there was a large crowd traveling with Jesus and the blind beggar, who Mark names Bartimaeus, hears them coming. Big crowds can make a lot of noise whether they are an NCAA final four or walking with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. The beggar asks what's going on and he is told, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. So, he shouts, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 14:38) Those near him try to get him to shut up but he persists. He is in position to experience the presence of Jesus, something he knows he needs. He shouts again, "even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 14:39b). Jesus stood still and asks the man, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." (Luke 14:42-42). Bartimaeus gets up, glorifies God and follows Jesus. It's just a prelude to what is going to happen in Jericho. Jesus, journeying to Jerusalem, one week out, wants us to see. And a guy named Zacchaeus wants to see as well.

As Jesus enters Jericho, we are introduced to him. "A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich." (Luke 19:1-2) There is a lot here to see. As the chief tax collector for the Roman government in this prospering city, he was very possibly, the most hated man in Jericho. He worked for the occupying forces and would have been regarded as a traitor by his own people. He and his cohorts could stop any person in Jericho and assess duties on nearly everything in his or her possession. A cart, for instance, could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and for the merchandise that it carried. <sup>2</sup>

Zacchaeus had a required quota to send to Rome but anything over that amount he was free to keep. The system was ripe for abuse, and this passage tersely states: "he was rich" as if that were an indictment. It was. He had accumulated his wealth in service to the Roman invaders at the expense of his fellow Jewish citizens. Ironically, the name Zacchaeus means "the pure one" and "the righteous." But likely, his name had turned into a sneer on the lips of his fellow Jews. The mention of his name evoked a sarcastic grin of disgust.

This is what Luke wants us to see. Zacchaeus. He is a collaborator who is wealthy enough to have it all. He has the resources to fill his life with "stuff" that will make it comfortable. If he wants it, he can buy it. Apparently, it isn't enough. He is lonely, isolated; the personal, social, and

religious price of his wealth and position is too high.<sup>3</sup> He is literally up a tree.

Have you ever been up a tree? I don't mean have you ever climbed a tree. I was never a tree climber when I was a kid. I had a cousin who could climb anything, even a sycamore. The sycamore trees of Jericho were a fig tree and shouldn't be confused with the sycamore of Europe and North America, which is a different species. But we aren't talking about climbing a tree yet even though Zacchaeus will. He was up a tree.

Have you ever been up a tree? You know what I mean. Has there ever been a time in your life when you just didn't know which way to go? Has there ever been a time when you felt abandoned, even by your family and friends? Has there ever been a time when you were positive that nobody loved you? Has there ever been a time in your life when the problems you were experiencing (marital problems, substance abuse, financial difficulties) made you feel like a total failure, made you feel that you were totally inadequate and you couldn't cope with life even one more day? If you can answer "yes" to any of these questions – and I imagine every one of us has experienced at least one of those feelings – then you know what it's like to be up a tree.

The world is filled with people who are up a tree. We could easily make a long list of things that turn us into tree climbers: the loss of a loved one; the breakup of a special relationship; unemployment; illness; addiction; physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. The list goes on and on. There are many people up a tree today, as Zacchaeus was on the day when Jesus came to town. <sup>4</sup>And because he was up a tree, he decided to climb a tree. This is what motivates him to risk humiliation and climb a sycamore, to put himself in the position to see Jesus.<sup>5</sup> "So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because (Jesus) he was going to pass that way." (Luke 19: 4)

He does and the most amazing thing happens. Jesus stopped and look up at him. We miss what is going on. A great movie director could put it on film if he knew what the text was actually saying. The Greek word describing Jesus look is *anablepo* (ἀναβλέπω) to look upward and see again. It is often used when Jesus looks upward to God to perform a miracle. In fact, it was the very word used when Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "receive your sight."<sup>6</sup> Jesus looks up and into the face of Zacchaeus to perform another miracle, as if to say, "Look at me, see in my face who you really are. Zacchaeus looks into the face of Jesus and hears his words, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him." (Luke 19:5-6)

Please note Jesus doesn't preach repentance but invites Zacchaeus to experience God's unconditional love. He does so with a look and an invitation. Both spark Zacchaeus's repentance. Zacchaeus has been accepted. He has "come into contact with his own dignity" in the face of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

We don't know what happened at the dinner party. We only know that Zacchaeus was so happy that he volunteered to invest his wealth into the community, to do philanthropy on behalf of his experience of seeing himself in the face of Jesus. We just know that Zacchaeus 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." (Luke 19:8b) And we know that Jesus doesn't say one thing about this. He doesn't say, "Great, we'll name a wing at the local synagogue for you. He doesn't say, "it's about time you make things right." It's like Jesus doesn't recognize or even care that Zacchaeus is not just going to make restitution, he is going to single-handedly take on all those poor beggars lined up on the road into Jericho. And he can do it because he is rich and half of rich is, well, a lot of money. It's like Jesus interrupts him and says, "That's nice Zach, but here is the deal. "Today salvation has come to this house, because (YOU) he too (ARE) is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:9-10). Jesus is saying, "Zach, it's not about the money; it about what I came to do, what I'm going to do in a week on my journey to Jerusalem. Don't you see this?"<sup>8</sup>

We don't know if he did see it. We don't know if he put down his Reidel crystal wine glass by his Lenox china and said, 'You are absolutely right. I was lost. Why else was I up that tree? We don't know if he, like Bartimaeus, having received his sight, followed Jesus. We don't know if he was, a week later, in the crowd shouting Hosanna or was at the crucifixion. We don't even know if he was one of the 120 at Pentecost that launched the church.

There *IS* an early church tradition, which dates to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century that says that Zacchaeus become the first bishop of Caesarea. It works. It's another major Roman City which would have needed a tax collector. He was well-educated and an exuberant personality, good at the job. They could have transferred him there. All of this fits; but, we just don't know. We just know that he went from hated collaborator to one who experienced the power of Jesus to truly transform a life. He was lost and then found. His life changed because he put himself in the position to see Jesus, something he knew he needed.

Zacchaeus was a faithful, spiritual man, a "Son of Abraham" who became lost in his lifestyle. He was the head of an unfair, oppressive system that he

neither supported nor enjoyed. He hides behind a mask of position and wealth and thus, people who knew him grumbled that he was a sinner. Perhaps his greatest sin is that until he meets Jesus, he allows few if any to him as who he really is or what he really wanted.

This may be the place where we connect most readily with the story of Zacchaeus. Most of us are faithful, spiritual people who are well, a little if not a lot lost in our lifestyles. There are so many things and so many ways that cause us to be lost, to be up a tree. Jesus came to eat with and drink with us, to seek and to save us, the lost. If you're not lost, or you don't think you're lost, you don't know that you need Jesus. You still need him; you just don't know it, know you need to experience the presence of Jesus.

Many of the people that we encounter on the journey to Jerusalem in Luke's gospel made some effort to come face to face with Jesus. Knowing he was in their vicinity, they placed themselves physically in his presence. They made themselves present to Jesus' Presence. You can too, even today.

If any of this rings true for you, then hear the Good News. Because Jesus came to seek out and save the lost, he wants to come into your home. He wants to be your guest in your life. Let him come. Invite him in. Allow him to look up to you and see who you really are so that you can see him and receive the miracle of sight.

All of this happened on Jesus journey to Jerusalem and it can happen on yours as well. Just wait and see.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wilson, William. From Taker to Giver, Oct 31, 2004. [http://day1.org/813-changed from a taker to a giver](http://day1.org/813-changed-from-a-taker-to-a-giver)

<sup>2</sup> Wilson.

<sup>3</sup> Interpretation: Luke, Fred Craddock, page 218

<sup>4</sup> Dean, Johnny. Where is the Nearest Sycamore Tree? Retrieved by subscription @ sermons.com

<sup>5</sup> Interpretation: Luke, Fred Craddock, page 220.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/anablepo>

<sup>7</sup> Grun, Anselm. Jesus: The Image of Humanity: Luke's Account. p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> <https://sermons.com/sermon/where-is-the-nearest-sycamore-tree/1337817>