

A Call and a Dream

Luke 19:1-10

Sample Sermon

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A Call and a Dream

Zacchaeus. Just his name is enough to elicit a snicker. We remember him as something of a cartoon character. As children, we sang a little ditty about him; we drew pictures of him in Sunday School and made him out to be a sort of “Mini-Me” caricature.

The story of Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus is one of the best-known biblical texts from the New Testament. It is such a human story...a short man scrambling up a tree to see Jesus. All of us have known the burden of being too short to see over others at some point in our life, and so we identify with the words in verse 3: “**He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd.**” The resulting story borders on the humorous and the cute.

And yet, let me challenge that notion today and suggest that this is one of the most powerful and provocative stories in all of scripture. It introduces the very radical notion that God has a distinctive call and dream for each of us and will stop at nothing less than total transformation of who we are.

Let’s take a careful look at Zacchaeus and the world he lived in. Jericho was a veritable Eden. An oasis of date palms and balsam groves, it exported its products all over the known world. There was a day when Mark Anthony had presented Jericho as a gift to Cleopatra, with Arabia thrown in. It lay along the great caravan routes, and was a beehive of commercial and human activity.

Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector for the Roman government in this prosperous city. He probably had a staff of collectors, and he was, very possibly, the most hated man in Jericho. He worked for the occupying forces, and he was regarded as a traitor to his own people. He and his cohorts could stop a 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.

He would send in a portion of his collections, and anything over that amount he could keep. The system was ripe for abuse, and this passage tersely states: “**he was wealthy**” in v. 2, as if that were some kind of indictment, and it was.

He had accumulated his wealth in service to the invaders and at the expense of his countrymen, and he was regarded as human filth. Zacchaeus, whose name meant “the pure one” and “the righteous,” had turned his name into a sneer on the lips of his fellow Jews. He was a standing joke.

The money was nice, to be sure. But to live as an outcast among your own people, with no one to call a friend, no social life, no involvement with others except those who wanted to use him for their own ends. It had to be a lonely and depressing existence.

And then along comes Jesus. The word is out that this Messiah is different. Why in the stories he tells, it is the tax collector who is the hero and the Pharisee who is the foil! (See Luke 18:9-14). This Jesus comes into town with a reputation for being comfortable with those on the fringes of society: children, women, and those rejected by the trends of culture found in him a listening ear and a warm reception. He was worth checking out.

That was easier said than done. Zacchaeus was short, and seeing over or through a crowd was a real chore. Trying to squeeze through a crowd to the front was no sure thing, either. In the confusion of the moment, sharp elbows would fly when the townspeople saw the hated Zacchaeus vulnerable in the crowd. His only hope was to skirt ahead of the crowd and find a sycamore tree with its low, spreading branches that afforded a ringside view of the way Jesus was to come. And so he waited there, probably not quite knowing what to expect as Jesus came into view.

And then the most amazing thing...Jesus stopped and looked up at him. (v. 5) We know Jesus had eyes that saw what others missed. This uncanny vision allowed him to see into people and into situations that anyone else would have missed. He didn't miss Zacchaeus. Luke says he saw him and said simply, **"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."**

Zacchaeus wasted no time scrambling down from the tree, and he **"welcomed him gladly."** I'm sure he did. No one came calling for Zacchaeus unless it was to complain, and houseguests had to be a rare exception to his lonely life.

I suppose Zacchaeus could have stayed up in the tree and rebuffed the call of Jesus. Plenty of people do. It is certainly much easier to go on with our life and to continue being preoccupied with our agenda than to allow a Messiah to invite himself over for lunch and delve into our inner core. It is risky business to allow such a person into that part of us where our true self resides. But Zacchaeus takes the chance and invites Jesus into his home. It was a lunch to remember.

This was all a bitter pill for the townsfolk to swallow. What kind of so-called Messiah would even acknowledge, much less eat with, the most notorious sinner in town? Luke says they began to **"murmur"** or to **"mutter."** You can count on that, and plenty more.

We do not know all that happened at Zacchaeus' house. We do get to see the results, and those results tell us a great deal. Zacchaeus makes a two-pronged pledge: to give half his yearly income to the poor, and to return any stolen funds four times over. Jewish law only required restitution of the money taken plus twenty percent...but Zacchaeus thought four hundred percent was more appropriate.

Something in that encounter with Jesus changed Zacchaeus' eyes as well as his wallet. Now he could see people in need where before he only saw people he needed to fleece. Is that not one of the most dangerous things the call of Jesus does to our eyes? He changes how we see other people. No longer do labels work: poor, rich, Democrat, Republican, white, African American, Hispanic. Now we see people who are as valuable and as needy as we are. Now we see real people with real needs.

Salvation comes to Zacchaeus' house, and he is forever changed from a taker to a giver. This man had made his living taking from others, and suddenly, after one meal with Jesus, he is giving money away like he is the United Way of Jericho. As a pastor, I've observed it time and again. When Christ takes up residence in a life, we become generous. Somehow he loosens our grip on our wallet or pocketbook. Giving becomes an opportunity, not a requirement.

But the giving that God's call evokes is not just financial. Perhaps even more costly is to give him our vocation, our future.

Paul Scherer, in describing this story, says that this meeting with Jesus **"redeemed Zacchaeus' past, it transformed his present, and it redirected his future."** From now on, Zacchaeus is on a mission from God. Whatever he did with his remaining days was surely more meaningful and more profound than anything he had known before. By the way, there is a somewhat dubious tradition that Zacchaeus later became bishop at Caesarea...it makes for a nice ending, regardless.

We often say that God's call is found at the intersection of your passions, abilities, and interests and the needs of this world/community.

Across the pages of the Bible, you will find God doing what God does here with Zacchaeus: calling people out of complacency and into a dynamic life of faith. Nearly always, the same common threads appear when God calls us out of our tree:

1. The call comes from **beyond you**, from God.
2. The call is **usually unpredictable**. God goes against the conventional wisdom of every era. God picks the slave people, the peasant virgin, the tax collector, the biggest sinner, the improbable Saul of Tarsus. Someone asked St. Francis why God had called and used him so; his response was: **“God picks the weakest, the smallest, the meanest of those on the face of the earth and he uses them.”**
3. The call is often focused on **mind-boggling, seemingly impossible objectives**. “Build a boat, Noah.” “Lead slaves out of Egypt, Moses.” “Come down out of that tree and become generous, Zacchaeus.” “Preach to the Gentiles, Paul.” Such a call is so challenging that it brings out things in us we never knew were there.
4. Each call is **unique**. No call seemed like any other. Every call of God is customized to you, your particular abilities and life setting.

I believe God is calling each and every one of us to a unique series of tasks in our lives. God has custom fitted you for whatever God envisions for you. This is not about comparing to others or denigrating what you are and are not capable of doing.

I recently heard a speaker describe God’s equipping and dreams for us in a unique way. She said she has three children. One rainy day, she sat them all down at the kitchen table and gave each one a blank piece of paper and a box of crayons. She invited them to create a masterpiece.

Now, all three had the same mother and father. All three had been raised in the same house at about the same time in history. But when they finished and brought her their masterpieces; each was unique.

One of her girls colored a beautiful meadow filled with horses, birds, and green grass and trees.

Another colored a shopping mall...

The little boy portrayed a space ship shooting down alien invaders.

Why didn’t they all draw the same thing? You know...because God had uniquely equipped and wired them, just as God has you.

Here’s a promise: when you find your “sweet spot” of ministry, when you discover where your gifts and passions and the needs of our world intersect, you won’t need any test to know, you will know that you are at home.

What was it Eric Liddle said in *Chariots of Fire*? **“When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.”**

That is where God wants your life to move. That is why he calls you out of whatever tree you are sitting in. If your vocational occupation enables you to do that, great. If not, then find one that does. Gordon MacDonald says that when you are living out of that sense of being in your sweet spot, of living out the dream God has given you, your life makes sense and your stress lowers and you find a kind of peace and contentment you have not known.

He compares it to driving a car from here to Seattle. You can drive in any of the 4- or 5-gear speeds indicated on the gear shift, but the drive is best done in gears meant for speed and economy. To drive that distance in second gear would mean engine wear, fuel waste, and slow speeds. If you are living life doing things that distract you from the dream God has called you to, the goal toward which you are to press, then it is like driving in second gear across country. It is time to slough off low-gear activities and focus on overdrive ones. It means you can’t do everything, just the important things. (From *A Resilient Life* by Gordon MacDonald)

When we answer God’s call and focus our attention on it and move steadily toward it, we will live generous lives. Now, please take money out of your mind. What I mean by a generous life is a life that is not selfish and not materialistic and not obsessed with pleasure. It is a life that finds ways to give itself away. It is to be generous **with what one is**, with words and time and attention and focus. It is to understand, at the deepest level, that this is not about you, it is about God’s dream of what God wants to do with and through you, and to offer yourself fully to God.

Zacchaeus stuns us with his generosity in his willingness to repay those he has unfairly taxed. An even more generous gift was the balance of his life, which he apparently gave to Jesus as well.

I want to invite you to give up your small dreams of what your life can be, and to lift your gaze and consider the larger and more daring call of what God wants to do with and through you. It is a question you need to ask of yourself as long as you draw breath.

When Billy Graham held his historic crusade in Montgomery, Alabama in the 1960s, he insisted on an integrated choir. The newspaper editorialized that Graham had come to Alabama and set the church back a hundred years. Graham's answer was classic: **"If that's the case, I failed in my mission,"** said Graham. **"I intended to set it back 2,000 years."**

That's the kind of call to a large dream that Jesus brings into Zacchaeus' life. This is more than a story for preschoolers. It is a powerful story of change. It turns out to be a reproduction in miniature of the mission of Jesus: received by the outcast, condemned by the authorities, inviting those he meets to live out his dream for them, and the murmuring follows him into Jerusalem.

It starts with a little man in a tree. And it ends with that little man living out a very large dream.

Jesus is coming to town. He has an agenda: to seek, to save, and to change the world one person at a time. Let me invite you to climb a tree and watch to see what he is up to. But beware. He may stop beneath the tree where you sit, no matter how comfortable or complacent or secure or immobile you may be. He may look at you and invite you down to fellowship with him and to be transformed by him. It takes courage to get out of that tree, but the gift of a call and a dream for your life are more than worth it.

In the end, Jesus declares that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus, that he is a son of Abraham. He was just lost. He had gotten confused about why he was here, and whom he was to serve. Like you and me. Thank God, Jesus comes looking for us and invites us to a better life. He comes to call us to his dream for our future. Thanks be to God!