



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

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Sermon: "Come on Down!"

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Isaiah 1:10-13, 16-18

Luke 19:1-10

This may come as surprise to you all, but I am told that when I was very young living in New Jersey, I spoke English with a very thick Southern-Spanish accent. Now I am not quite sure what that sounds like, but the source of my distinct sound must have come in part from my mother (speaking to me only in Spanish) and from my babysitter, a gentle 85-year-old woman from Alabama named Essie Mae Turner.

Essie had grown up dirt poor on a farm, and anytime she took care of my siblings and me, she taught us how to cook homemade French fries on a skillet, how to say yes ma'am and no sir when spoken to, and how to use our imaginations to escape to far off places. I cherished my time with Essie. But perhaps the most unexpected thing that I loved, was that she instilled in us great appreciation for her all-time favorite show: the Price is Right.

When Essie turned on the TV we would hear the screams of joy as people (with bright yellow name tags) were called down to the stage to make their best guess on the "actual retail price" of a toaster, or a vacuum, or a vanity set.

Every time host, Bob Barker (with his thin microphone) announced, "Susan...come on Down!!" that lucky someone would jump to their feet and sprint down to the stage. You could feel the energy shoot out from the TV, and for all of us watching, we couldn't help but be overcome by this hopeful feeling that someone's life was about to be transformed - in a big way.

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I wonder how Zacchaeus felt the moment Jesus called out his name. We know he hurried down from the tree. We know he welcomed Jesus into his home. But what did he feel like "the moment" he heard his name soar up from the ground and hit his ears through the branches?

And what compelled Zacchaeus to climb up that tree in the first place? The text of course tells us that he was hoping to get a good look at Christ, but I wonder what else prompted him to occupy a balcony seat that day.

Perhaps he felt that he needed to separate himself - to keep away from an entire city of people who despised him,

to keep even a safe distance from Jesus who he feared might judge him.

It must have been a troubling reality for Zacchaeus. He was a social outcast who benefitted from exploiting his peers. They criticized and loathed him for it. Isolating himself high in a tree was perhaps the only way that Zacchaeus could exist in community.

We can certainly understand that urge to isolate ourselves. In the midst of a complicated time in our world – Aleppo, Mosul, an all-consuming election, and the daily challenges in our own lives – we know what it's like to want to skip the morning headline, to take a step back, to observe the world below from an isolated perch.

We watch from a distance as new bombs are dropped in cities abroad, and while countless folks across our own city still yearn for a warm place to call home. We watch in solitude as racial and religious tensions continue to mount across our nation, and as walls are being built up in our own families.

We watch as human connection (in its most basic America form) becomes something strategic or even hazardous: playing out in our presidential candidates' ambivalence to shake hands. We watch as people of every color and creed seem to be moving farther and farther away from one another – closing our ears to each other's stories – becoming even strangers to ourselves.

We watch solo from the tops of our own trees, from the living rooms of our private homes, from the security of our favorite church pews. We watch because it is so hard to trust in God's promise that if we come down we will be equipped to respond.

What sort of vulnerability and courage would we need to get moving, to scramble down and engage in it all?

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Zacchaeus also lived in a complicated and divided world. Although we paint him as this goofy Rumpelstiltskin type who clumsily rushes up a tree, we know the he was detested. He was a rich tax collector in cahoots with the Roman superpower – hired to extract money from his fellow citizens – and even pocket a little for himself on the side. They considered him to be a sell-out, a trader. In fact, maybe Zacchaeus was literally short in stature, or maybe he was just the one who was the most looked down upon by all.

Yet the society he benefited from was the same one that Jesus was turning upside. Surely Christ should have been the last person Zacchaeus went running to find that day. What was he hoping would happen? Did he think that he could convince Christ to take pity on him or pardon him for any wrongdoing? Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't what he found.

Zacchaeus thought he was looking for Jesus, but it was Jesus who was looking for him.

When Christ entered the busy square, Zacchaeus didn't need to shout out to him, or flail his arms, or beg for a moment of his time. Zacchaeus said absolutely nothing – promised nothing. Jesus simply looked up – at this grown man in a tree - and called out to him by

name saying, “Zacchaeus hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

Jesus knows Zacchaeus. He knows his pain. He knows his shortcomings.

And in this moment, we learn that Jesus does not only go seeking out those who are lost, but goes seeking out Zacchaeus in particular – inviting him out of his somberness, out of his sin, out of his solitude and into a life that is fresh, abundant, and relational.

In a world where we so persistently isolate ourselves, this text is a celebration of God’s constant desire to connect. When Jesus reaches out to Zacchaeus, just as Jesus reaches out to us, theologian Calvin says he extends a divine invitation to be in communion with the light of God and to be reflections of God’s glory in the world.

Jesus says, “Zacchaeus...come on down.” In essence: “Zacchaeus, hurry and be in holy relationship with me, encounter others anew through me, finally live into your holy calling to reflect God’s light here on the ground.

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The bestselling book “Into Thin Air, tells the story the 1996 Everest Disaster that tragically took the lives of several impassioned climbers. The most heart-wrenching scene is that of a radio communication between Rob Hall, a seasoned instructor, and his wife Jenn who is home pregnant with their first child.

Rob is stuck in a perilous storm on the South Summit, and after a night of subzero temperatures, his hands and feet are now frostbit, he is low on oxygen and energy, and he is running out of time. If he stays up on the mountain much longer, he will certainly die. So, his wife over the radio pleads with him: “Rob, you’ve got to get moving. You’ve got to get yourself down. Come on down. Try my love, try.”ⁱ

This tender scene leads me to think about what we all face as human beings. We all have experienced the hardship of feeling stuck, unable to move forward, unsure about how to come down.

And so we must remember:

Our faith is liable to freeze if we find ourselves trapped on the tops of mountains.

Our embrace is liable to grow weak if we spend all of our energy holding tight to tree trunks.

Our hope is liable to crumble if we isolate ourselves from one another and from God.

We cannot save ourselves. It is God who saves us. God who saves us in community.

Zacchaeus thought he was looking for Jesus, but it was Jesus who was looking for him.

In Jericho, Jesus doesn’t negotiate with Zacchaeus or beg the crowd to show him mercy. Jesus simply calls Zacchaeus back to life, back to this world in all its brokenness and imperfection. This is where Zacchaeus is needed and this is where Jesus is waiting.

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This past week, a beloved member of our Asheville community, a veteran known as “Happy” passed away. Some of you may have known him well, others may have been greeted by him in his wheelchair on Biltmore Avenue.

Happy spent much of his time these past few years keeping a close watch on the interactive “Before I Die...” chalkboard. When folks would write what they hoped to complete in their lifetimes on the wall, Happy made sure they took it seriously and returned the chalk to its rightful place. He would even jot down a few dreams of his own.

He once said: “Today I wrote on the wall, ‘Before I die, I just want to see the gates of heaven open.’ The day before that, I wrote, ‘Before I die, I want to go to Sesame Street to dance with Miss Piggy and make Kermit mad.’ And the time before that, I wrote, ‘I just want to seek,’ and I put a question mark at the end. That way, if they ask me what that means, I can tell them I’m seeking Jesus. ‘Cause that’s who I am.”ⁱⁱ

As I look out this morning, I see a community of distinct people who are in one way or another seeking Jesus.

Some of us still might be holding tight to tree trunks.

Some of us might be inching our way down.

Some of us might be inching our way up.

And some of us might be facing that angry crowd on the ground for the first time.

Wherever we are, Jesus is meeting us there - reaching out - calling out our name- inviting himself into our homes - urging us as individuals and as a church family to joyfully welcome him in. And in so doing, welcome in each other as well.

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In a time that is so complex and troubled, the story of Zacchaeus is one of unexpected courage and radical redemption. Zacchaeus thought he was looking for Jesus, but it was Jesus who was looking for him: this lonely and lost child of God, this fellow son of Abraham.

Zacchaeus had exploited his people for so long that forgiveness seemed impossible, solitude seemed inevitable. Yet when Christ calls out his name, Zacchaeus responds with “Here I am,” and hurries down to face his community, to face his past, and to face his Savior.

And finally, when Christ invites himself into his home and into his life, Zacchaeus feels blessed to receive him. He is overcome, and right then and there, he promises to no longer exploit, or hide, or fear, but to accept the gift of radical redemption and to a life reflective of God’s justice, mercy, love, and boundless hope.

We too are called to that sort of transformational courage - courage to respond to God’s call in our time and place. This will look different for each of us depending on where we are stuck, and how we are frozen.

Courage might look like the mother who prays every day for her sick child to be healed. Courage might look like the *Facebook* post from a transwoman publically sharing who she really is.

Courage might look like the neighbor knocking on the door to say “I need your help.”
Or courage might look like the teenager returning to church after being gone for a long while.

Courage requires a spirit willing to be vulnerable, willing to be changed, willing to ask the hard questions: “what am I holding tight to? What am I afraid to face? What am I pushing away?”

Surely we as a community must courageously help one another come down from our separate trees, so that we can be transformed by a God who is calling us together to bring healing to our aching city and world.

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Mother Theresa was recently named “the Saint of the Gutters” for her many years of service to the poor. She once received a letter from a young admirer who wanted to come work with her in Calcutta.

Mother Theresa responded in this way: “Stay where you are. Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering, and the lonely right there where you are — in your own homes and in your own families, in your workplaces and in your schools. You can find Calcutta all over the world, if you have the eyes to see. Everywhere you find people, who are unwanted, unloved, uncared for, just rejected by society — completely forgotten, completely alone.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, our Calcutta is all around us. It is found in the fractured places in our society, in the people who are lost in our community, and in our own shortcomings and fears.

Zacchaeus thought he was looking for Jesus, but it was Jesus who was looking for him.

And It is Jesus who is looking for us in these broken and isolated places.
Here, God’s voice soars over the crowd, inviting us into radical relationship, offering us life-transforming salvation, and imagining with us a world of endless possibilities.

Can we trust in God enough this week to hear Christ calling our name?
Can we trust in God enough today to courageously come running down?
For it is here on the ground where Jesus is waiting.

ⁱ Krakauer, John. *Into Thin Air*. Anchor. New York: Random House Publishing Group. 1997

ⁱⁱ Clark, Paul. “He Oversees the Before I Die Wall on Biltmore.” Asheville Citizen-Times. August 30, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Murdock, William. “Advice for the ages - find your own Calcutta.” Asheville Citizen-Times September 9, 2016