

**Sermon for October 30, 2016 (Proper 26, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: Habakkuk 1:1-4,2:1-4; Psalm 32; Luke 19:1-10

Title: Today Salvation Has Come

A number of years ago, three contractors were touring the White House on the same day as part of a builders' conference. One was from New York, one from Missouri, and the third from Florida. At the end of the tour, the guard asked them what they did for a living. When he learned that they were builders, the guard said, "Hey, we need the back fence repaired. Why don't you guys take a look at it and give me your bids?"

First, the Florida contractor made some quick calculations and said, "I figure the job will run about \$900 -- \$400 for materials, \$400 for my crew, and \$100 profit for me."

Next the Missouri contractor came over and said, "Well, I think I can do it for \$700 -- \$300 for materials, \$300 for my crew, and \$100 profit for me."

Finally, the guard asks the New Yorker for his bid. Without batting an eye, the contractor says, "\$2,700."

The guard was surprised and said, "You didn't even measure anything! How did you come up with such a high figure?"

"Easy," the New Yorker replies, "\$1,000 for me, \$1,000 for you, and together we hire the guy from Missouri!"

This, my friends, is similar to how tax collectors operated in first-century Judea.

The Gospel of Luke turns now toward the final destination of this story, which of course is Jerusalem.

Jericho is an important stop on the road up from the Jordan River and to Jerusalem. As the Lord went through the town, a crowd gathered around this suddenly well-known man.

Zacchaeus too was curious. He was trying to see who Jesus was. He wanted to know more about this prophet who spoke with authority and healed the sick.

The text also states that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and that he was rich.

These are NOT minor points.

At that time, tax collectors were looked down upon as a general rule of thumb. Not much has changed in that regard. I don't imagine that the term "IRS agent" inspires warm and fuzzy feelings within anyone here this morning!

No one likes being forced to give their money to a government which they perceive as not caring about them.

And the note about Zacchaeus being a rich man is also very important. This is the Gospel of Luke, after all, and in this Gospel, Jesus is continually critical of those with wealth.

Just a few verses before this story of Zacchaeus, Jesus is reported as saying that "it is easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25).

Well, guess what? Here we have a very special camel!
Zacchaeus represents a rich person who enters into the kingdom of God.
But it costs him. Make no mistake about him.

There is a cost. And it is one that Zacchaeus alone must pay.

Before we go any further, let's review briefly how this work of tax collecting was done.

Roman officials found people in each district or region who were willing to pay for the right to collect tax in the name of the Roman Emperor or the Roman Senate.

Each of these men paid the tax in full up front for the time period in question. And in exchange, they received imperial authority – carte blanc, if you will, to recoup their investment however they saw fit.

It was a smart strategy on Rome's part. These Romans were not stupid, after all! In this way, Rome received a determined sum of tax money and the risk involved in collecting those funds was transferred entirely to the local agents.

These locals, like Zacchaeus, would then collect enough to pay for the next fee required by Rome – so that they could keep their license and position, also to pay off any debts they owed, and, of course, to have a nice profit margin for themselves.

And if they were any good at it, they could devise a number of creative ways to collect much more than the required minimum.

So, Zacchaeus spent his adult life coercing his neighbors into paying him for the privilege of living under the rule of Rome, even though none of them had ever ASKED for this privilege, and despite the fact that they did not WANT to be part of the reign of Rome.

But on THIS day, on this one day when Jesus of Nazareth walks through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, the tables are turned. Zacchaeus becomes the one who pays for the privilege of living under the rule of God.

Now let's be clear about this. Did God require these things from Zacchaeus? Did the Lord ASK Zacchaeus to give half of his possessions to the poor? Did the Lord demand that Zacchaeus pay back four times what he took unethically from others?

No, God did not require this from Zacchaeus.
It was Zacchaeus himself who required these things.

Because money was what Zacchaeus pursued above all else.
Because he was trapped, enslaved by his lifelong pursuit of money.

In order for Zacchaeus to become free, in order for him to enter life in the kingdom of God, this is what he needed to do.

Can you see why this is so? Why these actions were so important?

Imagine an addict hitting rock bottom and pledging that she will never use again, but the next day you see her getting high. Do you now believe in her promise to become clean?

Imagine that Zacchaeus broke bread with Jesus at his table and became his disciple, his student, and yet the next day he went back out into town and collected tax payments with the same tactics of ruthless coercion. Would you believe his confession of faith?

Habakkuk says that “the righteous live by their faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). And the letter of James says that “a person is shown to be righteous through faithful actions” (James 2:24).

It is quite likely that Zacchaeus DID go back out and continue to collect tax payments once the Lord left Jericho. But I guarantee you that his tactics and his strategies were now very different!

NOW, he collected taxes as one who lives and works and walks in harmony with God!
His faith was made real in his new approach to life and his work.

Nevertheless, the hero of this little story is NOT Zacchaeus, after all. Once again, the hero of this story is Jesus the Lord, the one who overcomes the false barriers constructed over and over again by human societies.

Remember that Zacchaeus is labeled at the beginning of the story as a chief tax collector. That was his job, after all. But, in the minds of his peers and neighbors, “tax collector” meant untrustworthy, unacceptable. It meant worthy of sneers, of shame, of disgust, or even deserving of curses.

In their eyes, Zacchaeus was “a sinner” (Luke 19:7), one who did not deserve the blessing of God.

But who was Zacchaeus in the eyes of Jesus? What label did the Lord put on him? “He too is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9).

This, my friends, is why I personally find the way of Christ to be so refreshing and so appealing.

Jesus grew up in that society. He knew what people said about tax collectors.

And yet, when he looked up into that tree in Jericho, he did not see an unacceptable tax collector. He did not see one who ought to be rejected and despised.
He saw an individual who needed help in finding his way back home.

You and I live in a moment of time when labels are attached to every single one of us. And it seems that, for so many people, the labels that we wear are the most important thing of all. If you can get the label right, then you know the person.

The political campaigns have each one of us labeled and categorized in dozens of different ways, so that they can target their advertising with incredible precision.

They call this micro-targeting, which uses hundreds of different big data points to label each individual voter.

But what I wonder is this: kind of labels does God use?
When God looks at you, what label does God apply?

Perhaps there is only one relevant label after all: you are a human being, a child of God who needs to come back home.

And if we are to walk in the ways of Christ, then this is the only label that we ever need to use.

“Today, salvation has come to this house.”

Soteria is the word translated as salvation here, and it means deliverance, safety, protection. It implies wholeness and peace and harmony and goodness.

What Jesus restored to Zacchaeus is his dignity.

What Zacchaeus learned on this day is that he too is invited to experience life with God, which is very different than ordinary human existence.

And what about you? Will you allow Jesus to restore your dignity? Will you continue to choose life with God rather than the shallow labels of ordinary society?

And will you follow Christ in seeing each person as an individual who needs help finding his or her way back home?

May it always be so among us. Amen.