

“The Guest of a Sinner”
Luke 19:1-10; Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

¹The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. ²O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? ³Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

^{2:1}I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

²Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. ⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

Luke 19:1-10

¹[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it.

²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way.

⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

⁸Zacchaeus stood there and 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.”

⁹Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

The Sermon

My name is Zacchaeus, and by way of us getting to know each other, I offer you a question:

How long have you been waiting for something to happen?

The other shoe to drop;

A definitive response—positive or negative—to your most fervent prayer;

A return on your investment, whatever that investment may be (money, or time, or energy, or love);

Your plans coming to fruition;

The great turnaround of your fortunes, for which you have been hoping and praying and longing...

How long have you been waiting for something to happen?

Centuries ago, when the Covenant People were threatened by Chaldean marauders invading from outside Israel, and social and economic injustices were making life miserable for people within Israel,ⁱ a prophet called Habakkuk prayed to God:

“Why do you make me see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?”

“Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise (1:3).

“O LORD,” he prayed, “how long shall I cry for help,

and you will not listen?
Or cry to you 'Violence!
and you will not save?'" (1:2).

Sometimes it feels like we're waiting for God to intervene and *do something* about socioeconomic or geopolitical circumstances that are so much larger than we are. They make us afraid for our families;
afraid for our futures;
afraid of the unknown, which some protective instinct in our psyche warns us is treacherous if not downright malicious.

And sometimes we're just hoping for something to happen within ourselves; and maybe then, with God's help, *we* can contribute something to the integrity and hope and justice that God wants for the world.

My name is Zacchaeus. It's an old Jewish name, a common name, and it means "innocent" or "clean."ⁱⁱ Which the people around me find somewhat ironic.

And the question is as relevant to them as it is to you, and to me:

How long have you been waiting for something to happen?

In 1893, the editor of the *Northwest Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, E.V. Smalley, wrote about the emotional difficulties of the people who had been coming from Europe to settle in the vast and lonely plains of what is now called the American Midwest, and often suffered a condition that came to be known as "prairie fever," a result of the unforgiving living conditions, the unrelenting wind howling over an ocean of grasslands, and above all, the isolation of the open plains.

"These people," wrote Mr. Smalley in 1893, "came from cheery little farm villages. Life in [Northern Europe] was hard and toilsome, but it was not lonesome. Think for a moment how great the change must be from the white-walled, red-roofed village on a Norway fiord, with its church and schoolhouse, its fishing boats on the blue inlet, and its green mountain walls towering aloft to snow fields, to an isolated cabin on a Dakota prairie...

"No brooks babble under icy armor. There is no bird life after the wild geese and ducks have passed on their way south. The silence...rests on the vast

landscape, save when it is swept by cruel winds that search out every chink and cranny of the buildings, and drive through each unguarded aperture the dry, powdery snow.... A barbed-wire fence surrounds the barnyard. Rarely are there any trees, for on the prairies trees grow very slowly, and must be nursed with care to get a start....

“Neighborly calls are infrequent because of the long distances which separate the farmhouses, and because, too, of the lack of homogeneity of the people.... They were strangers to one another when they arrived in this new land, and their work and ways have not thrown them much together...”ⁱⁱⁱ

My name is Zacchaeus. And I didn’t need to be out on the windswept prairie to know that kind of isolation. Even in a booming town like Jericho, I knew something about feeling alone. That had become the story of my life.

I am a tax collector. And not only that; I had become a *chief* tax collector. That may sound like a venerable position that was constantly occupied, but it has been noticed that that term, “chief” tax collector, “appears nowhere else in Greek literature.”^{iv}

With the Romans in charge as the occupying power, the social structure needed “a civil service to collect taxes and enforce order.”^v The system was called “tax farming,” where “the tax collector was assigned a certain amount to collect, and then was allowed to collect as much more as [they] could to cover administrative expenses.”^{vi} And we tax collectors tended to have a fairly expansive sense of what we could charge people for “administrative expenses.”

We tax collectors came from among the people. We were middle and lower level government employees, and we thought of ourselves as being, socially, above everybody else, and as you can imagine, they despised us for it.^{vii}

When I started out as a young bureaucrat, I thought, “This is the life; I’ve finally got my own money.” But as I moved up toward becoming a chief tax collector, I started to think, “What’s really nice is that I’ve finally got *your* money.”

And so I was not what you might classify as “well liked.”

I had attained a lofty position, but I heard the whispers, and I knew how they made fun of me. People had noticed that I have always been small in physical stature. And in their eyes, the higher I rose as a tax collector, the lower my social stature fell, so when they said I was “small in stature,” I knew it meant a lot more than what I used to hear on the playground.

An early practitioner of psychiatry named Harold S. Hulbert^{viii} said, “Children need love, especially when they do not deserve it.”^{ix} I have no idea what he means by the second part of that statement, but I know he was right about the first. Children need love, especially when they do not deserve it.

So now I was raking in money from all those people that I had always thought had deliberately excluded me from all the fun. But even now, as a successful adult, I still felt like teenagers often feel—alone even around others; worried about my inadequacies.

Simone Weil wrote in her spiritual autobiography in 1942, “At fourteen, I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my [sibling] brought my own inferiority home to me. I did not mind having no visible successes, but what did grieve me was the idea of *being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides*” (emphasis added).^x

And when that happens, we find ways to say to the world, “Take me seriously.” But a lot of times, the way we do that only makes it harder for us to be taken seriously, or even accepted—much less *loved*, which I am not sure I ever understood until that day I found out Jesus was coming to Jericho.

Only the community of Jesus-followers seems to make such a big a deal out of loving others. Some outside the Christian family talk about it; many practice it; but for those who follow the Way of Christ, it is an essential, core belief.

God is love (I John 4:8, 16);
and Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God-with-us (Matthew 1:23),
the embodiment of God’s love;

and Jesus said, “Love your neighbor” (Mark 12:31),
and “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27, 35),
and “Love one another. Just as I have loved you,
you also should love one another” (John 13:34).

But sometimes we make it harder than perhaps it ought to be.

And in our insecurities and our desperation to be accepted and respected, we put up armor, proactively defending ourselves against rejection.

There was a Mom not too far from here who was trying hard to put life back together for her and her daughter after traumatic events including an abusive husband who was no longer in the picture. They had moved to a new location, and the Mom had found a decent job, but the daughter was having trouble in school. And as young people sometimes do, the daughter was struggling to land on an identity, to settle on a public face to present to the world. And having moved to a new school, she did what many of those who feel introverted and insecure do: she went the route of being a “Goth.”

For those who may not be familiar, “Goth” is short for “Gothic.” It’s the kids who dress all in black, faces preternaturally pale, hair dyed jet black. Fashion is fashion, and that’s fine; but there is a style of engagement that goes along with the Goth subculture, and it doesn’t tend to be a big smile and a warm handshake. More like trying to find empowerment by fostering a brooding, mysterious, vaguely hostile sense of foreboding.

You know: you put up your armor and go out to face down the world.

The daughter had sort of charted out this course for herself as she entered her strange new school, and it wasn’t long before many who knew the Mom were made very sad to learn that the daughter, after only a few days, wanted desperately to drop out of school—because, she had said in despair, “Nobody will talk to me.”

That wasn’t the route I had taken, but I had ended up in a similar place. When I wanted to demand that people take me seriously, my weapons were achievement, and power over people; and the more I exerted my power, the more of their money I could take, and the more money I had accumulated, the more power I could exert.

I had waited my whole life for something to happen that would validate me, something in which I could finally say, “I’ve made it.” Something to put the world on notice that I could be, and it was *time* for me to be, taken seriously.

But the more money I made, and the more power over people I exerted, and the higher my “achievement,” the more alone I became. And somehow it felt like all these plans I had made were not working.

How long have you been waiting for something to happen?

When I had not a friend in the world—and I couldn’t blame anybody for having zero interest in offering me friendship—when I had not a friend in the world, I heard that this man from Nazareth who was turning the world upside down was being called a friend even to people like me (Luke 7:34).

Which, when you think about it, must have cost him a great deal.

And one day, I heard that this same person, who was teaching such radical love that he was even being called a friend of tax collectors and sinners, was passing through my town.

As soon as I heard that, I ran out to see him, but there was a crowd, and I couldn’t see anything.

And believe me: when you’re as unpopular as I was, you can be pretty sure that if there’s a crowd, and I want to see something, they’re going to be “accidentally” standing right in my way, “accidentally” bumping into me and knocking me over—“Oh, sorry, Zacchaeus; wow: couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

But I felt like my chance was finally coming to see something new, something amazing, something that would toss me a rope ladder so I could crawl out of the isolating, miserable hole I had spent my life digging myself into.

So I ran ahead, and I climbed a sycamore tree to be able to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way.

I had spent my whole life waiting for something to happen, and at this very moment, it was coming down the street toward me, toward that sycamore tree.

And then the most amazing thing in the world happened: He looked up into the tree, and called me by name. He called me “Zacchaeus.”

And I remembered that there was a version of me, somewhere deep under my history, somewhere far below the layers of self-importance that I had labored my whole life to put on, somewhere deep inside the “me” that I had become,

and that original version of me had been named “innocent” or “clean.”

The New Testament writers will say that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (II Cor 5:17). They are not wrong when they say that. But for me, Zacchaeus, I’m still awestruck to realize that the transformation brought about in me was about rediscovering the person that God had created me to be in the first place.

One late afternoon in April, 2016, a tour bus in Jericho carrying 13 clergy from the Asheville area came to a place that had been a public square since ancient times, and pulled up near a sycamore tree that is at least a couple of thousand years old. It’s easily 30 feet tall, with a wide, low trunk, and branches that would be easy to climb and that would give anyone a commanding view of someone who was passing by.

The Palestinian Christian bus driver asked the group, who had had a long, hot day of looking at various sites including a lengthy outdoor lecture in another part of Jericho, if they wanted to get out to look at the tree. Tired, weary, and a little bit jaded by the commercialization they had encountered during two weeks of seeing possible but mostly unconfirmed Biblical sites in Israel, they said no.

He pulled up in front of the tree anyway, and gave them a chance to take pictures. Out came the cell phone cameras, as the tourists inside crowded over to the windows on that side of the bus.

And as they pulled away a couple minutes later, the thought quietly drifted like a thought balloon over the passengers on that bus:

What if that really was the tree?

We are, in this present world, in this life, so close to the hand of God; so close to the actual, physical places where Jesus walked, so close to the breath of the Holy Spirit.

The whole world is a thin place.

Jesus stood there, and looked up into the tree, and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

And I hurried down, and I was so happy to welcome him.

And I could hear people grumbling and saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

How long have you been waiting for something to happen?

My whole life had been learning how to do whatever was necessary to gain personal advantages, with plenty of financial gain, even at the expense of others—even my own people, the people who raised me—whom my greedy appetites impoverished.

“In a corrupt system,” said Fred Craddock, “the loftier one’s position, the greater one’s complicity in that system.”^{xi} For that reason, repentance cannot solely be a matter of the heart. “Repentance bears fruit.”^{xii} When Jesus calls you or me, and something finally happens in us, a little more justice happens in the world.

I said, “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.”

And he said to me, “Today salvation has come to this house. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

And only then did I realize that his visit with me wasn’t a side trip, or a detour from his mission. It was exactly what he came here for.^{xiii}

“I am small and despised,” says Psalm 119,

“yet I do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,
and your law is the truth.
Trouble and anguish have come upon me,
but your commandments are my delight.
Your decrees are righteous forever;
give me understanding that I may live” (Psalm 119:141-144).

And so I pray with Ted Loder:

“O God, let something essential happen to me,
something more than interesting
or entertaining,
or thoughtful.

“O God, let something essential happen to me,
something awesome,
something real.
Speak to my condition, Lord,
and change me inside somewhere where it matters,
a change that will burn and tremble and heal
and explode me into tears
or laughter
or love that throbs or screams
or keeps a terrible, cleansing silence
and dares the dangerous deeds.
Let something happen in me
which is my real self, God.”^{xiv}

Today is a day in worship in which we re-dedicate ourselves and our resources to God.

How long have you been waiting for something to happen?

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October 30, 2016

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- ⁱ Kent Harold Richards, “Habakkuk,” in Meeks, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993, p. 1396.
- ⁱⁱ *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993 (n. Luke 19:2), p. 1996.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (Kindle Locations 2365-2391). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.
- ^{iv} Fred B. Craddock, *Luke (Interpretation: A Guide for Preaching and Teaching)*. Louisville: John Knox, 1990, p. 218.
- ^v Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible (Revised Edition)*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995; p. 224.
- ^{vi} Matthews, 1995, p. 224.
- ^{vii} Matthews, 1995, p. 224.
- ^{viii} <http://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/catalog/inu-ead-nua-archon-167>
- ^{ix} “Sunbeams,” in *The Sun*, Issue 479 (November, 2015), p. 48.
- ^x Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*. New York: Putnam, 1951; p. 64
- ^{xi} Craddock, 1990; p. 218.
- ^{xii} Craddock, 1990, p. 219.
- ^{xiii} Craddock, 1990, p. 220.
- ^{xiv} Loder, Ted. *Guerillas of Grace*. LuraMedia, 1986