

Our Second Reading for today comes from the Gospel according to Luke 19:1-10

9 [Jesus]*He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 When 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." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." 8 Zacchaeus 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." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

The word of God for the People of God

THANKS be to God

Let us Pray. Creator of the sun and stars, the earth, and each of us; May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh God, our rock and our redeemer.

Zaccheus was a wee, little man,
And a wee, little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree,
For the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Savior came that way,
He looked up in the tree,

Spoken: And he said, "Zaccheus, you come down from there,"

For I'm going to your house today.
For I'm going to your house today.

—

I wonder how many of you grew up singing that song, or have taught it at VBS or Sunday school,

or maybe it is a brand new song to you, and if so, I feel so glad that I have gifted you with a new earworm to rattle around your head...

Zaccheus does not just have a catchy song attached, but at least for me, it is one of those stories that has a vividness to it, that it sticks with you.

We have a grown man, who while short in stature, decides to climb up a tree, just to get a chance to see Jesus, and ends up hosting Jesus for a meal.

I also, wonder how many of you have heard a sermon, that goes something along the lines of, look at Zaccheus, he is a tax collector and a sinner, and upon seeing Jesus, Zaccheus becomes the model of repentance, changing his sinful behavior of economic oppression and into a positive use of the resources given.

And this is not a bad interpretation of the text at all... however, there is a detail that may complicate that just a bit.

While the NRSV renders, Zaccheus' words as "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."

In the Greek the verb to give, however, is in the present tense. I give, I am giving.

Scholars debate, and land on either side of the debate... is this a future promise, an action that is present from this moment moving forward, or a recognition of how this tax collector has already been practicing his position and occupation.

For the purposes of today I'm not sure it matters because no matter where you land on that spectrum of possibilities,

it is clear that generously using wealth to help those in need, and fairly using the position of authority you occupy are the desired behavior that brings salvation to Zacchaeus' house,

and Zacchaeus is now embodying that type of right here right now living that we should strive for as followers of the one who comes to seek out and save the lost.

And Zacchaeus, who was clearly looked down upon because of his profession, and also because of his stature, would be an outsider, and pushed to the side.

Yet Jesus always seems to bring in those who society would try to push away.

In chapter 18 of the gospel according to Luke,

15 People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. 16 But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 17 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

While the same word for little children is not the same little as used for Zacchaeus, and with his height, and behavior, as respectable grown men do not climb trees, that is childish behavior

as well as Jesus' instructions to come closer, all in combination places Zacchaeus with those children whom Jesus' welcomes in his midst.

Making this connection, Scholar David Lose muses

"then we might ask who among us, both in our congregation and outside, are those who have been left on the margin, who have been ruled out of bounds, who might surprise us by their generosity and faith, and who just want to see Jesus but have been kept at bay."

And part of our calling is to not just be recipients of that salvation that comes from the one who spotted Zaccheaus up in that Sycamore tree, it includes our active participation, and the use of our whole lives.

Zaccheaus not only gives half of what he has to the poor, he also commits to not defrauding others.

It is a matter of how he uses what he has, both monetary resources, but also how he operates in his job, a position as tax collector in which he could easily exploit those from whom he collects, that crowd that grumbled and called him a sinner...

Yet face to face with Jesus Christ, he commits to practicing good stewardship of the resources and the position of power he occupies.

When I was in middle, and high school I took trumpet lessons with JOSEPH TRZCINSKI.

And there were two phrases he would use that I will never forget:

First, is that playing the trumpet is a physical thing... a true statement.

And Second, and more relevant to my point today... practice does not make perfect... practice makes habits. Improved practice makes improvement, and it is only perfect practice that makes perfect.

His point was, that in order to internalize the desired outcome, of becoming a better trumpet player, it required work and intention, and practice that was focused on improvement, not just going through the motions.

This attitude of practice, of internalizing, and of making habits second nature, whatever that practice, may be takes work.

If that is right economic practices, preaching, trumpet, cooking, taking care of the planet.

Zaccheaus, committed to both the practice of giving, and at least a piece of economic justice...

I do not know, but I would like to hope that this new, and or continued practice of the wee little man is now written on his heart, like it has become placed in his very being; he has internalized it, he has worked at it, and practiced it

He is practicing, getting better, learning, having this way of life ingrained into his very being.

Perhaps this new relationship is placed within him, reminding us of the passage that Debbie read for us from the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is a pretty gloomy book, our tradition often places and identifies Jeremiah as the author of the Book of Lamentations, the tone and subject matter of lament occupies a large swath of the prophetic work of the “weeping prophet”

The text for today comes from the middle of the book, and a portion that is known as the book of consolation.

Kelly J. Murphy

“The book of Jeremiah was written in a specific place and context, offering hope to the exiled Judeans that the covenant with their God would continue in a new fashion, mended after the disaster of 587 BCE. Yet the book of Jeremiah also transcends its context. The words of comfort in Jeremiah 31:31-34 can speak to all of us who are suffering in the world now, to all of us who might feel like Rembrandt’s Jeremiah. After all, no matter how broken the world might seem, “the days are surely coming, says the LORD ... ”

When this passage comes up in the lectionary, it usually is just Jeremiah 31:31-34

With Earth Day tomorrow, I chose to include verses 35 and 36, specifically for verse 35.

because:

Thus says the LORD,
 who gives the sun for light by day
 and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
 who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
 the LORD of hosts is his name:

It is a reminder that the God, who cares for us, created the wonder of solar eclipses, the constellations, the waves and tides, and all the animals that live in this wild, wonderful, and enchanting creation.

A creation, that in many ways is suffering

In October of 2021 William Shatner, who is known for his on screen portrayal of Captain Kirk in stark, boldly going where no one has been before, although on TV sets, actually went into space

I read an excerpt from his book, *“Boldly Go: Reflections on a Life of Awe and Wonder,”*

And in it, Shatner, reflected on how fragile the earth looked in the vastness of space, of how much this small blue orb we live on provides for us.

He wrote quote:

“It was among the strongest feelings of grief I have ever encountered. The contrast between the vicious coldness of space and the warm nurturing of Earth below filled me with overwhelming sadness. Every day, we are confronted with the knowledge of further destruction of Earth at our hands: the extinction of animal species, of flora and fauna . . . things that took five billion years to evolve, and suddenly we will never see them again because of the interference of mankind. It filled me with dread. My trip to space was supposed to be a celebration; instead, it felt like a funeral.”

It is a sobering reflection.

This small planet in the vastness of the cosmos is truly an incredibly fragile earth, a magnificent and wonderful creation we share with one another as human beings that supports our lives,

And we share it as creatures, as plants, animals, mountains, mesas, and bosques, eagles and roadrunners, whales and ants, yeast and redwoods.

Within this creation, human beings were placed in a specific role, in Genesis 1 humanity is granted what is often translated as dominion, sometimes as steward and take care...

We, human beings, might be the proverbial tax collectors of the planet...

With the power and the means to exploit the planet, other species, and the natural resources of this fragile planet.

Humanity has a history of taking too much, of mistreating, and unjustly using that position within creation that God placed us;

And it is easy to feel discouraged, to weep, in the face of the climate crisis.

In fact, I heard a story on NPR this week, about how psychologists, and researchers are noting and studying the rise of climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety...

Yet in the middle of the weeping prophet, we find words of comfort and hope.

In the face of despair, if it feels like all is lost, we place our faith that "The days are surely coming"

And that a covenant of care and stewardship is needed to be written on our hearts, as we provide comfort in the midst of despair

God is doing a new thing, and there is hope that salvation is coming in Jesus Christ, and through the work and care of the church.

When we can live as God wants us to, with justice, in our economics, in our interactions with the environment...

Using our talents, positions, and resources responsibly and faithfully.

Perhaps we can write that covenant in our very hearts, we can internalize care, for the poor, for the vulnerable, for the planet, for the least and the lost.

Anathea Portier-Young wrote

“Jeremiah’s declaration of God’s renewed covenant, enfleshed within the very guts of God’s people and written on their hearts, surprises with visceral and vital imagery of intimate knowing and belonging.”

She goes on saying

“The ancient Israelites understood the heart as a faculty. They knew the heart as the seat of will (Jeremiah 7:24), invention (Jeremiah 14:14), reasoning, discernment, and judgment”

I do not know if Zaccheaus experienced an enfleshed living covenant within his very guts, but I would like to think he did.

I do not know if you will experience God writing love and justice, generosity and faithful stewardship and creation care on your heart, but I pray that God does.

That God, helps you, helps us, to practice generosity, justice, gratitude, responsibility, in giving, living, and in each and every aspect of our lives.

Amen.