

“Salvation Tense”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 18:31-19:10
April 2, 2017
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Listen now for the Word of God from the Gospel according to Luke:

Then Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” Then he shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

Stop. Hold up. We can't go any farther, because we, as interpreters of the Biblical text have a decision to make in this last little bit of the story — the part where Zacchaeus responds to Jesus. We must choose our own adventure. We're about to come across some verbs. Now, Luke put those verbs in the present tense, but when I was a kid I was taught that they're future verbs - things that are going to happen. Greek absolutely has a future tense, and Luke knows how to use it: we just heard how “they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” Those are both “future indicative” conjugations, if you're scoring at home. But many scholars and translators believe that the verbs we are about to read, though they are written in the present tense, really ought to be read in the future. So let's try it that way. Ready? Here goes:

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

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

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Here we find a story of redemption. Jesus has spent his ministry seeking out and saving the lost. He’s been looking for folks who do not yet realize they’ve received the gift of God’s grace. He’s been teaching them and healing them and transforming them. And they respond in repentance: with minds expanded and new direction and a path to follow and hope discovered.

Zacchaeus is the last of the lost that Jesus has found on his way to Jerusalem. He was a chief tax collector, and therefore a known sinner. He was working for Rome, following the orders of the empire. He was, it seems, known to defraud folks from time to time. But he’d heard something about this Jesus fellow, and he wants to know more. He climbs the tree because there was a crowd and he was short in stature. (Incidentally, the Greek isn’t clear about whether the “he” who was “short in stature” was Zacchaeus or Jesus. But we’ll save that for another sermon.)

Jesus spots him up in that tree and somehow knows the name of the lost one he is seeking. And in typical Jesus fashion, he tells Zacchaeus to come down, for the Lord will be his guest. Given Jesus’s previous encounters with the rich, we bet he’s going to tell Zacchaeus a story, or to challenge him. But as Zacchaeus hurries down, we imagine his heart growing — like the Grinch! — three sizes. This invitation has transformed him. He has, very publicly, experienced the grace of God. In typical “the crowd” fashion, the crowd grumbles about Jesus going off to spend time with the agent of Rome. They do not know that the heart has grown in response to grace.

But then, the repentant Zacchaeus declares that he *will* give to the poor. He *will* enact justice for those he has wronged. And Jesus blesses the transformation, declaring that salvation has come to this house, because Zacchaeus has been restored to the fold as a son of Abraham. He was lost and now has been saved.

Well, that was fun. Shall we go get some coffee? Oh wait! We have to check out the other adventure. Let’s try reading that last part with the verbs in the present tense now, as they are written in the Greek. Remember, the crowd has just grumbled about Jesus going to Zacchaeus’s house:

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I *give* to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I *pay back* four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Here we find a story of redemption. Jesus has spent his ministry seeking out and saving the lost. He's been looking for folks who have not been offered God's grace — those cast aside, ostracized, judged, and abandoned. That woman who was a "known sinner" who crashed the dinner party at the Pharisee's house. Widows and sick people. He's been healing them and restoring them to their communities and teaching everyone to look out for them. And they respond in proclamation: with eyes opened and mouths shouting good news and they have joined the crowd that follows Jesus, looking for hope among others that society has ordered to despair.

Zacchaeus is the last of the lost that Jesus has found on his way to Jerusalem. He took a job as a tax collector, and worked his way up, and has done very well for himself. And he has paid the price. He wears the label of "sinner" everywhere he goes. He is not welcome in anyone's home in Jericho. He can hear the whispers behind his back about the little lackey of the emperor. He is an outsider among his own people. He has been judged to be an agent of evil because of his wealth and because he works for the government. He is a scapegoat for all that is wrong.

Jesus spots him up in that tree and immediately sees that he is apart from the community.. In typical Jesus fashion, he tells Zacchaeus to come down, for the Lord will be the guest of the one who is not welcomed. As Zacchaeus hurries down, his heart is pounding. This rabbi who heals, this rabbi who speaks of a new reign of God has acknowledged him, singled him out, known his name, and established relationship with him. This invitation has transformed him. He has, very publicly, experienced the grace of God. In typical "the crowd" fashion, the crowd grumbles about Jesus going off to spend time with the agent of Rome, that deplorable little man. But they do not know Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus declares that he *gives* to the poor. He *enacts* justice for those he has wronged. Right there, in front of everyone, he confesses that he has, quietly, been a bearer of grace, a worker for redemption. We don't know what the crowd was thinking, because Jesus jumps in, declaring that salvation has come to this house, because Zacchaeus has been restored to the fold as a son of Abraham. He was lost and now has been saved.

Well, so which is it, preacher? Which tense are these verbs in for Zacchaeus? Is this a story of a repentant sinner, or of restoration to community? Are we to learn that an encounter with Christ changes us? Or is it that we need to reexamine our perception of who is in and who is out when it comes to God's grace? Are we supposed to be transformed with a renewed concern for poverty and injustice, like Zacchaeus? Or, like the people of Jericho, are we supposed to check our assumptions when we encounter a child of God and seek relationship, when scapegoating would be easier?

Yes. Both. All of it.

Upon coming down from the mountain after the transfiguration, we read on Ash Wednesday how Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. Over these weeks of Lent, we have heard how he has gone on his mission of salvation. He has taught about God's love that is so deep as to go in search of any who are lost. He has taught about God's love that is so extravagant as to welcome all. He has taught about God's love that sees us, draws near to us, and suffers with us. He has taught that ignoring injustice and suffering

separates us from God and from one another. He has lamented over Jerusalem, the city where prophets go to die.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is many nouns: rabbi, healer, troublemaker, storyteller, Son of Man, provocateur, community organizer, preacher, restorer. On his way to Jerusalem, he is also many verbs, all in the same tense, but not past, present, future. Everything he does is in the tense of *salvation*.

His teachings and his stories are for salvation - regardless of time. As he approaches the holy city and confronts the brokenness he will find there, and is met with resistance and fear and political power and violence, he first stops to help two people. He meets this blind man who wants to see, immediately after the disciples fail to see what he was telling them about what was ahead. The crowd told the man to be quiet, but he would have none of it. He saw salvation. And salvation saw him. And Jesus gave him sight. And he followed.

And then Jesus spotted this chief tax collector in the sycamore tree and showed him mercy. And Zacchaeus heard salvation, either salvation from his place as an outcast or salvation from his sinful life. And salvation had come to his house.

On the way to Jerusalem — on the way to Gethsemane and Golgotha and the tomb and beyond — everything is done in salvation tense. It doesn't matter whether it's Jesus himself some two thousand years ago, or all the saints who have walked this long walk, or us, in 2017, who have walked with pebbles in our shoes, or future generation of Christians who will make this pilgrimage of suffering and seeing and storytelling and service and sorrow and sacred sacrifice. Salvation was. Salvation is. Salvation will be.

We find ourselves nearly at the gates of the city, with our world broken in so many ways. We need repentance. We need restoration. We need redemption. We need to be given sight. We need to be seen despite the crowd. "Salvation!" we have cried. "Salvation!" we cry. "Salvation!" we will cry, despite the shushing of the faithful.

We are nearly at the holy city. The city where the prophets are killed. The city of turmoil and the temple and the touch of God. Dare we enter it? It's a scary place that will leave us vulnerable. It might be best to go hide behind a tree, or to avert our gaze, or to deny that we ever meant to follow him on this path. But if what we seek is salvation *from* brokenness and *for* life and *with* God, there is only one way forward, with stones marking the way.