

Luke 19:1-10 **“A Tree for Zaccheus”**

Some of you may have gone to St. Louis last month to watch the Cardinal's victory parade. I didn't go but I heard that the crowd there was enormous; that spectators lined the streets twenty and thirty deep. And I can guarantee you that every little child who was there with his father was put up on Dad's shoulders when Albert Pujols and company passed by.

Zaccheus did not have the luxury of sitting on his dad's shoulders, or on anyone else's for that matter. He was a short man and when Jesus passed by the crowd there was enormous. He wanted to see. He was curious. Obviously he had heard about Jesus and he wanted to take a look at this Man from Nazareth. And so we meet him in Luke 19 sitting up in a sycamore tree. It was a good spot for him. He could satisfy his curiosity without getting too involved. Sitting in a tree gives you a “bird's-eye-view,” but it also keeps you at a safe distance from all the “goings-on” down below.

I was able to see with my own eyes this summer that there are many such trees in East Africa. Jesus is passing through in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan and there are people literally by the hundreds and thousands who are sitting up in their trees watching because they want to know who Jesus Christ is. And the crowds are attempting with all their might to prevent these “Zaccheus” from hearing about Jesus—crowds of Muslims; Al Qaeda terrorists who refuse to allow their people to see Jesus.

I met a man from Somalia who told the sad story of some of his children who had been kidnapped just because he wanted to see Jesus. A woman showed me the bruises on her face. She had been beaten because she was baptized as a Christian. A young couple who had just gotten married and were curious about Jesus—they were just trying to peer over the crowds at Him to find out who He was—and terrorists killed the husband and tortured the wife.

In East Africa there are many trees full of “Zaccheus” and they want to see Jesus. And although the crowds there are hostile to them, these “Zaccheus” keep climbing their trees. They refuse to turn away from Jesus Christ who is passing by.

And these trees are not just in East Africa. Union, Missouri has many such trees. Washington, St. Clair, Beaufort—all over Franklin County there are trees with “Zaccheus” sitting in them. There are people who live next door to you; people who are friends of yours; people within your own family who are sitting up in their trees. They're curious about Jesus Christ, but for some reason they cannot see Him too well. Perhaps the crowd is in the way. Perhaps they feel unwanted. Perhaps they have never been invited to come to St. Paul Lutheran Church and see Jesus.

And those “Zaccheus” up in their trees are not just out there...right here within the walls of this sanctuary there are “Zaccheus” up in trees. In a way, each one of us is a Zaccheus. We like getting a “bird's-eye-view” of Christ, but we prefer not to become too committed to Him. We'll come to a Mission Festival here at church but we prefer not to tell our neighbor what Jesus means to us. We have a Bible in our home but we'd prefer not to study it with the pastor on Sunday morning. We talk a good talk about what fine Christians we are, but when it comes right down to it we're often more committed to deer hunting, work, and chores around the house than we are to Jesus Christ.

We're "Zaccheus" and we like it just fine up in our trees. But Jesus sees us in our tree and He calls to us. "Come down," He called to Zaccheus, "for today I must stay at your house." Sitting up in a tree is no way to follow Jesus, and so He invited that short little man to get down out of his tree. Jesus was going to His house. The crowds may not have liked it too well, but that is the reason why He came to our world. He came to call lost sinners down from their trees.

And that's happening today in East Africa. Jesus is calling sinners to come down out of their trees and follow Him through life. It's not easy to be a Lutheran Christian in Sudan. Churches are scattered here and there and it can take hours to travel the bad roads in order to worship on Sunday mornings. Many people are still in mourning over the deaths of loved ones who were killed. For twenty-one years civil war destroyed much of their way of life and tore families apart. Malaria and AIDS take thousands of lives each year. And there is always the threat of persecution for being a Christian. But in the past five years the "Zaccheus" are coming down from their trees in droves. The Lutheran Church in Sudan has doubled in size within that short amount of time.

Jesus is calling you today to come down from your tree. He knows the problems you are facing in life right now. He knows your guilty conscience. He knows your doubts and uncertainty about whether God truly loves you and accepts you. And that's why Jesus climbed up His tree for you. He did not hesitate. At a place called Calvary Jesus climbed up the tree of the cross and there He died. And He did this for you. He did this to bring you down out of your tree and put you beneath His tree. You see, Jesus' tree is the place of refuge, for those who stand beneath His tree are washed and covered in the blood and water that flow from His side.

When you remember your baptism you are standing beneath Jesus' tree, for the water from His side is the same water at the font which cleanses you of your sin and makes you His forgiven child. When you come up to the Lord's Table you stand beneath Jesus' tree, for here His blood which was poured out for you is given to you in the cup of salvation.

Zaccheus became a believer, a follower of Christ, not because of his commitment to Jesus, but because of Jesus' commitment to him. This short little man will spend eternity in heaven not because he was willing to give his money to the poor, but because Jesus gave up His life for him. Zaccheus learned that day that there truly was a tree for him, but it wasn't his sycamore tree—it was Jesus' cross.

And that is your tree also. No other tree is a place of refuge. The trees that you and I like to sit in cannot give us salvation. How blessed you are, therefore, that your pastor, week after week, preaches Jesus Christ to you from this pulpit; that he gives Jesus Christ to you from this altar and from this font. Friends, you are gathered here today beneath Jesus' tree. And that is where He invites you to stay. Not physically within this House, but trusting that Jesus died for you; hearing His word of pardon from your pastor's mouth; being nourished with His body and blood from the hand of your pastor.

Each one of you "Zaccheus" is loved by your Savior. He calls to each one of you to remain beneath His tree. He suffered, died, and rose again for each one of you. You are forgiven. Even if you're not as committed to Jesus as you should be (and not one of us is),

He forgives you. Even if you are afraid to witness for Him to your neighbor, He forgives you. Here and now each of you is forgiven. God holds nothing against you. Every “Zaccheus” is precious in His sight, and that means you. There is a tree for each one of you, but it’s not the one that we like to sit in—it’s Jesus’ cross because there is where He gave Himself for you.

Now it may not be that God has in mind to send you to East Africa, or to South America, or Haiti, or to one of our mission fields somewhere in the world...but what a blessing you are to all the “Zaccheus” around the world because you support those who are sent. You pray for them. You give your dollars to enable them to lead many “Zaccheus” to Jesus’ tree.

And I also pray for you that God would keep your eyes looking up—up in the treetops here in Union and all over this county. Because there are “Zaccheus” up in those trees—friends, neighbors, loved ones—and they’re waiting for you. What a blessing you can be to them to show them the tree of their Savior; to tell them what Jesus did for them; to invite them to come down from their tree and stand here beneath Jesus’ tree. Because Jesus is here. He is here in Word and Sacrament for you, and He is here for them.

My fellow “Zaccheus,” what a privilege it is for me to be here with you today; to have the opportunity to tell you the good news that no matter how long you have been sitting up in your tree, Jesus’ tree is for you. May God in His grace keep you always standing here beneath that tree. Amen.