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## *Zacchaeus the Innocent*

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**A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**

Luke 19:1-10

*"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."*

-Luke 19:5

Ah! the innocence of youth! Ah, the freedom to climb trees! Like every little boy and little girl who loves climbing trees, I love the story of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus, who was apparently a tax collector and apparently rich, was also short. He could not see this Jesus person, so he climbed a tree, a sycamore tree, in order to catch a glimpse. Maybe Zacchaeus was the first tree hugger.

Zacchaeus was certainly a model for me in my innocent and naïve childhood, my tree-hugging childhood. I loved climbing trees, and I had several trees from which I could see over the world. There was a sprawling white oak tree which I reached by climbing, first, to the top of our swing set. There was a tall and engaging sweet gum tree at the corner of our pasture. I remember a magnolia tree that reached even higher than my grandmother's bedroom.

In trees, I felt like I could see the world. I could watch people go by, people who were oblivious to my presence. How delightful that I could see them, but they could not see me! With that kind of overview, I felt like I could understand things. I could gain perspective and vision.

Now I am grown (mostly!), but I still climb trees. Maybe most of us do. And there are lots of reasons we climb trees. Maybe for contemplation, but also maybe for avoidance. Maybe for reflection, but also maybe in loneliness. Some of that time is a necessary part of life. And some of that time is merely lonely avoidance.

At whatever age we are, there comes a time in life when we must climb down and get our feet back on the ground.

Maybe Zacchaeus, our lonely and excluded tax collector, needed some perspective. He needed to be in the tree, to get an overview, to grasp the situation. Or maybe he really wanted to be unseen, to be removed from the crowd, to be by himself for a while.

But today, Zacchaeus is spotted.

I see people in trees all the time. I see people at churches in trees. I see people in this very cathedral who are hiding in the trees. Consider all the trees which people climb at church. There are some who are simply observers. They are, if you will, voyeurs at church. They watch and watch and watch, and never get involved. They are in the voyeur tree.

Others at church are the merely curious. They have heard much about Jesus, but they do not really know Jesus yet. So they show up with the crowd, but they are not really part of the crowd. They are alone and in the curious tree.

Some climb a tree because they have been excluded. They have a job that is despised or frowned upon. Maybe they have an identity that is misunderstood, or even hated. They are in the excluded tree.

Some climb a tree because they are rich. The rich, after all, do not have to be part of the crowd. The rich can afford to be in places where the rest of the world cannot visit; they can afford privacy and time alone. Sometimes, they can afford to build beautiful mansions in their tree, so that they don't have to touch the ground at all! They are in the rich tree.

Some climb the tree simply because they are alone. They have no one to be with. They have no one to eat with. They have no one to laugh with. They are in the lonely tree.

At church, we have lots of people in the trees. The life of church proceeds, with its joy and companionship, but also with its dirtiness and work and frustration. So, there are some who prefer to climb trees, to be unseen and unsullied and unspotted in the world. Innocent!

Today, my message is to all of us who are in the trees: Jesus does see you. He has spotted you. Jesus sees you just like he saw Zacchaeus in that sycamore tree. When no one else saw Zacchaeus, Jesus did. When you think no one sees you this morning, perched in your look-out spot, watching the world go by, Jesus sees you.

But Jesus also understands you. Even with all the reasons we might be in a tree this morning, Jesus knows every single reason. And Jesus says, "Come down. Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."

At the Cathedral of St. Philip, today, this Fall, this year, it is time for us to come down from our trees. Friends, it is time to get involved at the Cathedral. It is time to get involved in the life of the church. It is time to let Jesus stay with us.

You who are merely watching today: Come down. Jesus wants to eat with you. You who are lonely: Let me join you, Jesus says. You who are despised: Jesus says I want to be with you. You are excluded: Jesus says I want you to be with me. You who are rich, who sit so uncomfortably above the world: Jesus says come down and rejoice as an ordinary person. Let's eat together!

No matter what tree you are in, Jesus needs you involved. Jesus needs you with the people. Jesus needs your life and fellowship, your skills and vision. And Jesus does not just want you involved. Jesus actually wants you to host one of the fellowship meals. Jesus wants to have supper at your house today. Jesus wants you to let him stay overnight.

When Zacchaeus heard those words, he came down. And the scripture says, "Zacchaeus was happy to welcome him." Zacchaeus was happy! When Zacchaeus climbed down, his life was changed. He said, "I will get involved. I will share what I have. I will make restitution and amends for any wrongs I have committed. I want to be part of this beloved community." And he was happy!

Friends, for whatever reason we climb trees, I know that the climb can be necessary and fulfilling. I like to climb trees myself. In trees, we acquire perspective. We feel like we understand the world.

But in trees, we can also miss the world. We can watch the world go straight by beneath us, without our ever having been a part of it.

Jesus, I believe, wants us to be involved. Our perspective, our vision, is no good if we do not also touch the world. Our understanding of church is no good if we are not also involved in church. Our vision is no good if we do not also have the will to climb down and make it happen.

Zacchaeus *saw* Jesus from the tree. But he did not actually *know* Jesus until he came down from the tree. In the same way, we might think we understand Church when we gaze at it from afar, when we sit alongside the faithful and observe. But we do not actually *know* the Church until we come down from our trees and get involved. We might think we can see the world fine from our trees. But we do not actually *know* the world until we come down from our trees.

The name "Zacchaeus" means "innocent." And what a name that is. It is easy to be innocent, young and innocent, clean and naïve, while we watch the world from the trees of the world. We don't have to get our hands dirty in the affairs of ordinary life.

But Jesus wants us let someone stay at our house. Jesus wants us to make dinner, with all the fussing and mixing and cooking and dirtying pans that dinner involves. Jesus actually wants us to feed someone else, to care for someone else, to host someone else. That someone, no matter who he or she looks like, will be Jesus himself - the Lord of life and love.

The person who wants to stay with us is Jesus, the same Jesus whose perspective on the world did not come from merely staying above the fray, watching the clamor and clutter of the earth below. Jesus came down to earth; he "came down from heaven," we say.

Thus, the attitude of Jesus is from below. The great perspective and vision of Jesus, the very love of Jesus, doesn't come from his staying in trees; it comes from below. The love of Jesus emerges from below.

Zacchaeus, hurry and come down. Jesus must stay at your house today.

When we descend from our innocent perches to the affairs and responsibilities of the world, we become true adults. When we descend, we grow up. We learn to live with dirtiness and imperfection, especially our own. We learn to make amends and to give to others, just as Zacchaeus did. We learn to take responsibility for our own life; and, thus, we learn to take responsibility for the world.

When Zacchaeus came down from that tree and hosted Jesus, something powerful happened. Jesus called it "salvation." And Jesus issues the same invitation to the Cathedral of St. Philip today. Come down. I must stay at your house today.

Today, today, salvation has come to this house.

AMEN.

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