

Advent 3; December 14 & 15, 2014

“Hark the Glad Sound, the Savior Comes: To Those Who are Caught in Sin”

Luke 19:1-10

^{19:1} Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

One time a fitness center offered a \$1000 prize to anyone who could demonstrate that they were stronger than the owner of the place. Here's how it worked: The owner was a muscle man, and he would take a lemon and squeeze it until all the juice ran into a glass. Then he would hand the lemon to the challenger. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice out of the lemon would win the \$1000.

Lots of people tried – weight lifters, construction workers, even professional wrestlers. Nobody could do it. Then one day a little skinny came in and signed up to try. After the laughter died down, the owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed it to the little man.

The crowd got quiet when the little guy squeezed not just one more drop out of the lemon, but he squeezed 6 drops. The owner couldn't believe it. After he paid the \$1000, he had to ask the man: *"So, what do you do for a living?"* The man replied: *"I work for the IRS."*

Tax agents have never had a good reputation because people of all ages have felt that they are being squeezed for more money. Long before the IRS even existed, there was another tax collector who lived. His name was Zacchaeus. Judging by the reaction of the crowd when they grumbled about Jesus going to Zacchaeus' house: **"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner,"** Zacchaeus appears to be guilty of squeezing more money out of the people than Rome demanded.

You see tax collectors were like franchises. The Roman government assessed the area and what they felt the tax should be, and then they sold the right to collect those taxes to the highest bidder. The tax collector was expected to give a certain amount of tax to Rome, but whatever was over that amount, he was free to keep. Since Jericho was a city that was known for its wealth, Zacchaeus had become very wealthy.

Zacchaeus was a little man, at least in height. But he had become a big man, at least as far as power and influence were concerned. Luke describes him even as **"the chief tax collector."** He was kind of like the regional director of the IRS. No wonder that Zacchaeus had grown rich. He was at the top of his game.

But with this wealth, influence and power came also a darker side – the hatred of his countrymen. Tax collectors in Israel were considered the worst of sinners. And by and large, the tax collection business was corrupt. The Romans did not pay these tax collectors for their time and effort. They simply told them to add a service fee to their collections – and they didn't care how much those fees were. The only thing they cared about was that they got their tax money. Many tax collectors took advantage of the system. Their corrupt and sinful natures took over, and they lined their pockets at the expense of their countrymen.

Zacchaeus was stuck in sin. Even though he had gathered great wealth, there was a huge hole in his life because he was caught in sin, and he needed to be rescued. There was something that intrigued him about Jesus. What exactly Zacchaeus knew about Jesus we are not told. Perhaps, he was intrigued that one of Jesus' disciples, Matthew, had been a former tax collector as well. Maybe he had heard what Jesus had told others when he went to the house of Matthew: **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'**

For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:12-13) He wanted to hear what this Jesus had to say. But Jesus also wanted Zacchaeus. He wanted Zacchaeus to know that **"the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."** He came to those who are caught in sin.

It won't be long till we celebrate the birth of Jesus. The trees are going up. The lights are going on the trees and the houses. Presents are being bought and wrapped. The carols are play on the radio and in our homes. We are preparing to welcome the baby Jesus once again to this world through our words and songs. Yet, the purpose as to why the Son of God would come to this world can be summarized in those words to Zacchaeus: **"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."** From the moment he took his first breath in the stable in the presence of his sinful parents to the dying breath between two sinful thieves on the cross, he **"came to seek and to save what was lost."** He came for sinners.

If Jesus didn't want to have contact with sinners, he would have had to stay in heaven. He came to wash sinners clean of their sins. But this dirt could only be removed by one thing – the holy, precious blood of Jesus. So, Jesus came to take away the sin of sinners. We are not told how the conversation went with Zacchaeus at his home. We do know the results of their meeting: **"Today salvation has come to this house."**

Zacchaeus' life and heart would be changed by Jesus. We see that change in his promise: **"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."**

Jesus comes to us today – to sinners who are caught in sin. He comes to pull us out of the pit of sin and give us life. He did that through the waters of baptism. Through the washing of water and spirit, we are children of God. Everyone unkind word or thought we have is forgiven in Jesus. Every time we put the worse construction on everything, we are forgiven in Jesus. Every time that we fail to reflect the love of Jesus in our lives, he continues to love us. Trust those promises.

As we prepare for the coming of Jesus at his birth, let us remember Zacchaeus – a man caught in sin. Let us take comfort in those words of Jesus: **"Today salvation has come to this house, For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."** Amen.