

“Living Salvation”
November 2, 2025
Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

If you attended Sunday School or went to church camp or vacation Bible school as a kid, you probably know this story about Zacchaeus through song. “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he...” You remember it, right? I only know the first verse, but I assume there are more. Anyway, it’s a story we tend to associate with children. The idea of someone needing to climb a tree to get a view of a parade is something kids can relate to. But it’s not just a story for children.

This encounter is the third one between Jesus and by-standers that begins with the rich ruler who wants to inherit eternal life, then goes to a beggar who wants his sight. The three of them together reveal some interesting similarities that are easy to overlook. In the first case we have someone who is rich and probably powerful, but who can’t let go of his riches to commit himself to follow Jesus. In the second, we have someone who is extremely vulnerable and goes to great lengths to be noticed, even when the crowds try to silence him, and receives what he wants from Jesus and becomes a follower.

Now, we find Zacchaeus, who is a little bit of both these characters. On the one hand, he is wealthy and powerful, but on the other he’s forced to go to great lengths to get a glimpse of Jesus, and he’s despised by the crowd. We’ve already learned that Jesus has a tendency to hobnob with “tax collectors and sinners,” so it shouldn’t surprise us too much that he makes a point of noticing Zacchaeus. But it feels like there may be something else going on here than meets the eye.

Now, a tax collector in Judea at that time was probably a social pariah. The way the system worked was the collector was responsible for the Roman tax, whether they were collected or not. So putting the squeeze on their neighbors to pay up was part of the deal. But who would agree to do that if there weren’t anything in it for them? Tax collectors were allowed to charge a fee in addition to the taxes, and they often used local muscle to enforce it. So, on the one hand tax collectors were collaborating with the occupying Romans, making Roman domination that much easier, and on the other hand many of them were taking advantage of their neighbors and getting rich in the process. We can see why folks would resent Jesus making nice with people like that.

But is it possible Zacchaeus was a different kind of tax collector? I realize this is pure speculation, but earlier in the gospel when John the Baptist was preaching at the Jordan, we’re told, “Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’” Suppose Zacchaeus was among those people and he actually took John’s words to heart. He’s not been told to stop being a tax collector; to be honest, someone had to do it or else the Romans would just send in the troops. John tells them to do it differently, to collect the taxes with integrity.

When Jesus stops his procession through Jericho to invite himself to Zacchaeus' house, it might be an acknowledgment of something already happening. Jesus may not be trying to teach Zacchaeus a lesson so much as teaching something to the crowd that despises him. When Zacchaeus tells Jesus what he's doing, giving half his possessions to the poor and repaying anyone he's cheated four times the amount, the verb in Greek is in the present tense, not the future. It's possible these are things he's already doing and not things he now plans to do. Zacchaeus may be already living salvation before Jesus sets foot in his home.

There's a lot happening in this story. It connects to so much that's already been said about and by Jesus. For instance, if we imagine that Jesus is teaching the crowd something about their biased attitude toward a tax collector, we're reminded of what he says earlier about judging others: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" Or when we see how Zacchaeus has apparently changed we remember Mary's song before Jesus was born: "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." It sounds like Zacchaeus has intentionally submitted himself to that reversal, not fearfully but joyfully.

All these themes are coalescing around this story as Jesus prepares to make his entry to Jerusalem and his passion. While he embodies salvation, he also recognizes its presence in the way Zacchaeus lives. And I think that's the heart of the lesson in this story. Salvation isn't something we sit passively waiting to happen to us. Salvation is something we live; it's revealed through our actions in the world. So, rather than thinking of it as a reward after we die, we're encouraged through Jesus' life and ministry to consider living salvation in the here and now. Zacchaeus is a gleeful example of someone living salvation who is overjoyed to welcome Jesus to his home.

Today as we remember those we've lost over the past year, I suspect we'll find many examples of people who lived salvation through the ways they reached out to others with love and compassion. The people we honor weren't perfect, they all had flaws, but they all loved the people in their lives in the best way they could. Their salvation was evident in their generosity and compassion toward others. So, for us they are all saints and their memory is sacred. Please turn to the list of the Saints whose memories we honor today....