

Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 2, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Psalm 84: 1-4, 10-12; Luke 18:31-19:10

Grace to you and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

It's not far, now. Jesus and his disciples are in the home stretch. The road to Jerusalem from Jericho was about 18 miles. It would be a climb. Jericho is some 825 feet below sea level and Jerusalem about 2500 feet above sea level. Jesus has his face set toward Jerusalem, following God's will into a deadly hornet's nest of Roman and religious leaders. Jesus has his eyes wide open. As usual, Jesus has eyes that see what others miss.

For the third time, Jesus predicts his death. With brutal details, he tells them he will be killed and on the third day rise again. "But they understood nothing about all these things," the gospel reports. It says the meaning was hidden from them. They couldn't get their minds around it. Because they didn't want to believe it? Couldn't let go of their own ideas for what seemed a much less appealing one? There are many ways to be blind. It's not unusual to play ostrich with the unpleasant. As the joke goes, denial is more than a river in Egypt. As they stepped around the elephant in the room, the disciples miss the chance to share their worries and fears with the very one who is still there to offer them comfort and strength.

As if on cue, Jesus and his disciples actually encounter a blind man outside Jericho. The blind man has to ask his neighbors about the crowd going by. "Jesus of Nazareth is going by." The blind man can't see but he does. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus is not just from Nazareth. He's from God. They tell this man they consider sin-damaged and an outsider to be quiet but he won't miss this chance to meet Jesus. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and asked to see the man calling to him. Respectfully, without presumption, he asks the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Let me see again." Jesus says, "Receive your sight." The blind

man who had not been blinded to the power and love of Jesus regains his sight. The men who would NOT let an opportunity to know Jesus go by, gets a new life. He follows Jesus, glorifying God. And the towns that had not seen the potential of the blind man and Jesus meeting, now see and praise God. There are many ways to be blind to what is right before us — Jesus and the blind man, or Lazarus whom we pass in our days. Jesus gives us eyes to see what we might miss.

Into Jericho we go with Jesus. Here we meet a man, judged to be unworthy and wicked - Zacchaeus. Strike number one — He's the chief tax collector. He and those in his charge collect taxes for the Roman oppressors. He's considered a collaborator with the enemy forces. Strike two — he's rich. The unspoken assumption is that he got that wealth by corruption and exploitation of his fellow Jews. Strike three — he's short — small in more than stature. This is how Zacchaeus is presented to us. We're meant join others who disdain him for his blindness to justice and compassion.

Yet . . . Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. Was it curiosity or something more that drove this grown man to cast aside all dignity to run and climb a tree? Yet it seems those who seek Jesus tend to find Jesus is seeking them. Jesus stops right under the sycamore tree where the short man sits. "Zacchaeus" — Jesus knows his name (?) — "hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Jesus sees what others miss.

This is not usually told as a miracle story, but I wonder. Here is Zacchaeus, a grown man and town official caught up in a tree. Instead of shrinking back, he hurries down to stand in front of Jesus. Was it simply celebrity awe that lured him down? Surely the rest of the town was either scowling or laughing at him. This stranger has invited himself to Zacchaeus' house and he welcomes Jesus. Now the crowd grumbles. What respectable rabbi goes to a tax collector's home, the house of a renowned sinner

and traitor? *Now* who is blind to Jesus and what he is about? Might we too, think there are people God shouldn't waste time on?

What happens next can be interpreted in two ways — depending on how you translate the Greek verb tense. Traditionally, we hear Zacchaeus promise he will give half his possession to the poor and he will repay anyone he defrauded with exorbitant interest. The verb indicating present and on going action. Through his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus is seeing differently. He sees the poor and those he has hurt. He looks on them like Jesus would, with compassion and care. His declaration is an outrageously generous response to Jesus. "Today salvation has come to this house." He is as much a beloved child of Abraham as those who thought him a loser.

Some Biblical scholars think the Greek verb tense indicates action Zacchaeus has done or is already doing. Instead "I will," it should read, "I am giving half of my possessions to the poor and repay those I've defrauded." If that is the case, Jesus just turned things upside down again. Jesus lifts up the rejected one whom others have assumed rich by corrupt and Jesus calls the rest of us on the blindness of our presumption & stereotypes. This man whom you judge wrongly is as much a child of God as you. Standing before Jesus and the truth, will the others be healed of their blindness? Will we? In either interpretation, "Jesus is again at work seeking out those who are lost (whether through their own actions or those around them) in order to find, save, and restore them."¹

When you walk with Jesus, you notice different things. On this stretch of the road to Jerusalem we seem particularly challenged to check our vision and toss aside the blinders. We can't detour around the pain of Good Friday to get to Easter. We're not to charge by a blind man or step around the tax collector when you walk with Jesus. When you're with Jesus he will point out those "among us, both in and outside our congregation, . . . who have been left on the margin, who have been ruled out of

bounds, who might surprise us by their generosity and faith, and who just want to see Jesus but have been kept at bay” and he will ask us to stop with him to care for them. It’s not always comfortable to keep in step with Jesus, though it’s the very best place to be. We may wonder if we have what it takes, if our sight and hearts can ever be healed to see and love as Jesus does. Then, as if to speak to our doubt, the blind man and Zacchaeus at Jericho show us that the “chief attribute of all disciples is this: a desire to see Jesus and a corresponding joy in his presence.”²

It’s here at Jericho — on his way to Jerusalem and all it will mean — that Jesus again enacts “the promise that anyone --anyone! -- who desires to see Jesus will. More than that, anyone who desires to see Jesus will, in turn, be seen by Jesus and . . . have their joy made complete.”³ In the waters of our baptism, in the Word of God proclaimed, in the bread and the wine that bears his presence, in a community come together in his name, Jesus says to us, “Salvation has come to this house.” Jesus calls each of us by name, “Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house and reign in your heart.” And then, amazingly “Jesus follows us home”⁴ as we follow him. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 4/1/17

ENDNOTES

1. David Lose, “Commentary on Luke 19: 1-10” post on October 31, 2010 on www.workingpreacher.org

2. David Lose, “Commentary on Luke 19: 1-10” post on October 31, 2010 on www.workingpreacher.org

3. David Lose, “Commentary on Luke 19: 1-10” post on October 31, 2010 on www.workingpreacher.org

4. Meda Stamper, “Commentary on Luke 19: 1-10” as posted on www.workingpreacher.org