

Sermon – New Heights  
Sunday, October 30, 2016  
Scripture Lesson: Habakkuk 1:1-4 and 2:1-4. Luke 19:1-10  
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Habakkuk 1:1-4 and 2:1-4. The book of this minor prophet is a series of conversations between Habakkuk, a contemporary of Jeremiah, and God. Habakkuk questions God's motives during the Babylonian invasions. Although his longing to understand the human situation finds no direct answer, Habakkuk is encouraged to hold on to what is right and receives a glimpse of an answer as God contrasts the proud with those who live by faith. Hear now what the spirit is saying.

*1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. 2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? 3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. 4 So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

*1 I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, and what God will answer concerning my complaint. 2 Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. 3 For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. 4 Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.*

Our second scripture reading is Luke 19:1-10. As we continue our journey with Jesus through Luke's eyes, we marvel at the skill with which Luke weaves his message into this literary work of art. Last week we were bystanders in the temple and heard the contrasting prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We have to admit we were surprised by what we heard. How could a religious person have such contempt for others and a person looked down upon by people of faith show such humility? This week we are given another glimpse into the life of a tax collector and his encounter with the living Christ. Once again we are surprised. This is the word of God.

**1** He entered Jericho and was passing through it. **2** A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. **3** He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. **5** When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." **6** So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. **7** All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." **8** Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." **9** Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

The title of the sermon: "New Heights"

*The text: "So Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way." Luke 19:4*

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, give us the courage to hold on in times of challenge, and to take risks that bring us to new heights and to new understandings of who you are and who you call us to be. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As we celebrate Reformation Sunday and dedicate our 2017 Stewardship pledges we honor the rich history of our faith journey and the leaders who, like Zacchaeus, were willing to take risks and to climb new heights in order to get a closer look at who Christ is. In the giving of our financial resources, we become a part of something larger than our individual lives and we speak to the joy and privilege of belonging to a God who provides more than enough. In this tangible expression of our faith we sow seeds which have the potential to grow into branches of service and hospitality, and for those who are willing to climb trees, a closer look at who Christ is.

Today we remember the courage of a young priest, Martin Luther, who on October 31, 1517, the night before All Saints' Day, that "Hallowed Eve," nailed 95 theses to the wooden door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Next year we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conversation Martin Luther introduced to the church, calling for accountability and the need to be *reformed and always reforming*. Whatever our denomination or faith tradition, this conversation is essential. As the ancient prophet Habakkuk articulates so well. *When we look at the proud, we see that the spirit is not right within them.* Those who set themselves above others and who treat people with contempt have chosen the low road rather than the high road.

In Luke's gospel, we continue with Jesus on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem...a winding and steep path. The meeting of Zacchaeus in Jericho is Jesus' final encounter before his triumphant entry into Jerusalem...where Jesus will climb the tree of Calvary in an act of integrity and obedience.

Zacchaeus, the tax collector, joins the crowd in seeking out Jesus. Word had spread about this young teacher, who brought good news to the poor, gave sight to the blind, and who challenged people to rise to new heights and become all they can be.

We don't know what led Zacchaeus to do it. Whatever it was, Zacchaeus "ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him." Remember when the father welcomed home his youngest son, the prodigal and ran to meet him. We learned that it was considered shameful for a Hebrew man to run. This kind of spontaneity and excitement is not becoming for one in his position. He is expected to be in control. In essence, Zacchaeus was willing to blow all caution to the wind and to risk new heights for a closer look at Jesus.

Why Jesus stopped and took notice of Zacchaeus is unclear. Perhaps he was as astounded as everyone else in town to see this powerful man sitting in a sycamore tree. Jesus stops, looks up in amazement, and invites himself to Zacchaeus' home. *"I must stay at your house today."*

Zacchaeus was not the only one who risked in this encounter. By staying in Zacchaeus' house, Jesus was again crossing the barrier of ritual purity. A tax collector would be rendered unclean. By entering his home, Jesus acknowledges the chief tax collector's dignity and standing in the community. Jesus offered Zacchaeus, who merely wanted to see him, an opportunity to be

recognized prominently. Jesus was exalting a man who had “stooped” to running and climbing a tree. (The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Dr. Alan Culpepper.)

In the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, Zacchaeus becomes a changed man. The road that he had been journeying as chief tax collector takes him to new heights in a dramatic turn. Although he was successful at what he did, Zacchaeus wondered where the road he was on was leading. Zacchaeus was looking for meaning in his life, which he found in this authentic and affirming encounter with Christ.

Zacchaeus' response to being in the presence of God and hearing a genuine call to integrity was one of joy and gratitude...and generosity! He chose to give half of his possessions to the poor and "if" he had defrauded anyone, he would pay them back four times as much. This standard of restitution was a part of the Hebrew law. Although there is no indication that Zacchaeus changed his profession, he lived his life with a new integrity and joy and, through his giving, he welcomed others as Jesus' welcomed him on that day in Jericho.

Last Sunday, Peter and I welcomed unexpected visitors to our home. Nancy and Graham Wood live in England and were visiting her mother in St. Louis. We have been friends for well over a decade. Our friendship grew out of the relationship between our sons, Paul and William, who met at the Webster Groves Presbyterian Church VBS and reconnected year after year.

We sat on our deck and watched the white pelicans in our cove who are passing through Lake Springfield on their way South. We reminisced about our son’s growing up, the hills and valleys that are a part of parenting, especially during times of challenge and disappointment, theirs as well as our own.

We talked about how faith has sustained us, faith and the gift of *transcendent perspective* which we tried to instill in our children and hold onto ourselves. I first came across this concept in George Conway’s book *Giving Good Gifts*. *Transcendent perspective* literally means to be able to look beyond what is in front of us. It allows us to put our present circumstances in the proper perspective... to see things not only from our point of view, but also from another’s point of view and most importantly from God’s perspective!

One doesn’t have to climb a tree to have transcendent perspective; however, it sometimes helps to have the ability to lift one’s self above the fray to see a bit more clearly. In these days of heightened rhetoric and tension, may we risk climbing to a new height to gain a larger perspective and a bird’s-eye view.

I would like to close with “Wild Geese” by American poet Mary Oliver, which was the introductory poem in an anthology given to the Kieffer Family by the Wood Family as a Christmas gift. The first time I heard this poem, I wept. Perhaps I felt like Zacchaeus the day Jesus saw him in the tree and invited himself to his home.

Wild Geese by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

By the grace of God may we find our place in creation with the same joy and gratitude as Zacchaeus found up in that tree... may we soar to new heights like the wild geese, accepting ourselves and one another with exuberance and humility as children of God. Amen.