

*Asking Jesus, Pt. 6*  
***Today I Must Stay at Your House!***  
*Luke 19: 1-10*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Palm Sunday, April 10, AD 2022  
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Palm Sunday is one of the best days of the year. How great to return to our procession and our picnic after three years. And what a spring day we got! The story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem reveals a brief hour when the world seem to understand that our savior has

come. In 1894, French painter James Tissot captured the energy and the joy of Jesus' arrival in the Holy City. The people waved their palms and shouted Hosanna. This day has long been associated with children. Perhaps because the child in all of us loves a festival and a parade. Ancient icons often show a child up in the tree branches cheering along the procession.

**Who's Asking?** So it seems fitting that our passage for today involves the story of a man who climbed a tree. Zacchaeus sought to see Jesus. But there were some problems. First, Zacchaeus, as the old song tells us, was a wee little man. He was shorter than most adults. And Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. He made his wealth from over-charging his own people on the taxes owed to the Roman government. Everybody hated him. So when a short guy tries to make his way through a crowd of people who despise him, he might find that people "accidentally" got in his way and kept blocking his view.



So Zacchaeus ran ahead of the parade of people and climbed a tree by the roadside. You can see how a sycamore fig tree has multiple trunks close to the ground. It would be easy climbing, even for a middle aged man in a robe. From the leafy branches, he could get a view as Jesus passed by.

**The Question Within the Action.** Zacchaeus did not say anything from his perch in the tree. Technically, he didn't ask Jesus a question or request anything. But wasn't the fact of this rich business man scrambling up a tree a kind of request in itself? Luke tells us that Zacchaeus wanted to see *who Jesus is*. He wanted to know what Jesus is all about right now. What significance might he have for Zacchaeus in this present moment? How might entering a relationship with the person of Jesus today change the course of Zacchaeus' life? By climbing the tree to get a glimpse of Jesus, Zacchaeus asked more surely than if he'd spoken it, "Who are you Jesus? Could you be someone important to me, right now? Are you the one I've been longing for?" Zacchaeus was energized by what he had heard of Jesus. He hustled past the crowds, threw caution and dignity to the wind, and climbed up the sycamore fig to get a glimpse.



**Jesus' Reply.** Let's go back to the painter James Tissot. He did a series of 365 watercolors from the life of Christ, many of them quite striking. Here he shows this scene from the point of view of Zacchaeus in the tree. The tax collector peeps through the branches as Jesus passes by with the crowd. Now I have some personal insight as to what happens next. I grew up as a climber of trees. Near my house in south Florida was a

street full of banyan trees, not only easy to climb, but most excellent for lounging on a branch. Many days I would read my Bible while perched 15 feet above the sidewalk. Up there, I learned something besides Scripture. I learned that grown ups almost never look up. They pass under the beautiful spreading branches of a giant tree without one scrap of notice. I didn't have to hide. I was right there, but almost no one ever saw me.

So I think it's significant that "when Jesus came to the place, he looked up." Jesus saw what other people miss. He noticed what in today's terms would have been a banker in a \$1500 suit who scuffed his Italian dress shoes scooching up a live oak. Jesus processed the scene quickly. This was not a teenager. This was a rich man who somehow did not have his usual front row box seats to any event he liked. This man was motivated but not loved, hiding but also desperate to be noticed. Jesus stopped. Saw him. Called to him by name. Invited himself for a meal and a night's lodging. "Zacchaeus! Hurry and come down. I must stay at your house today!"

How that must have burned the people who had invited Jesus to dine with them. The prominent and the powerful wanted to host the most intriguing man of the hour. Jesus was the “it” guy of that day. The people’s hero. Maybe the nation’s hope. And he invited himself to stay with the scoundrel everybody hated. Zacchaeus! Get out of that tree and get your house ready to receive me! I’m on the way over right now!”

Zacchaeus sought to see Jesus, who he is. And he got more than he dared hope. Jesus wanted a relationship with Zacchaeus. He would confer honor upon the hated Zacchaeus. Jesus would be his guest. All that goodness, all that holiness, all that power, all that love, all that acceptance and mercy would come under the roof of a lonely, compromised, ruined man. The most wonderful man in the world wanted to hang out with little despicable Zak. Jesus answered the unspoken plea of the man in the tree. See me! Find me! Save me from this life I can’t get out of!

**Replying to Jesus.** There was no dawdling in Zacchaeus. Luke tells us that he received Jesus joyfully. Come in, come in, come in! Here is water for your tired feet. Here is oil for your head and beard. Sit down, sit down, sit down. Here’s drink. Food is on the way. The best I have. Whatever you like. Room enough for all your disciples too. Let’s talk, as long as you like. Beds await. Clean sheets, warm covers and soft pillows. Ring the bell if you need anything, anything at all.

Jesus didn’t have to give Zacchaeus a lecture about his behavior as a tax collector. He didn’t have to point out his sins. Zak already knew who he had become. He thought he was locked into that life forever. But Jesus arrival under his roof had opened up everything. Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. Whatever I have defrauded, I will restore four fold. I don’t need any of this stuff. It would be a pleasure to give it away.

So Jesus gave the joyful, thunderous pronouncement for all to hear. “Today, salvation has come to this house! Zacchaeus is also a son of Abraham. He’s just the kind of guy I’ve been looking for. For I came to seek and to save the lost. I came looking for the ruined. I came to rebuild the destroyed. I came to scoop up the spit out. I came to mend the tattered. I came restore sinners to a full place with the people of God.”

There’s so much joy in this story! A man locked into greed and swindling, a man isolated and lonely, despised and compromised gets totally accepted by Jesus. It changes everything. He becomes a believer in love with his savior. He becomes a benefactor for the poor. He goes from being locked into himself to lifted up in the

freedom of worship. He goes from hoarding to giving. From an inward focused life to a liberated, other focused path for fulfillment.

The connections are not hard to see. This is a redemption story. The kind we all long for. But it's crucial that we make these connections for ourselves. Because it's very easy to miss them. There is a *false redemption story* being told to us over and over again. Especially to kids. Especially on social media. Especially in all the stories about young men, young women coming of age. There's a story about your life being told this way: get liberated *into* your true self. Get liberated from others into what you want to be. Choose what you want and demand that others get out of your way so you can be free to be you. That's the way to life.



During the Superbowl I saw an ad for a new NBC show called Endgame. I have no idea what the show will actually be about. But in the commercial, two women rivals are about to face off with each other. The hip hop music track blares these words: "This is my world now, so you'd better bow down. Bow down! Bow down! This is my world now." There it is, I thought. The current story of redemption. Fight whoever stands in your way so you can be liberated into yourself. If you can't live your dream, you can't be you, and you will die. So fight, claw, strive, demand to have your life the way you determine it should be. Get free to be yourself. This is my world now. Bow down!

It sounds so exciting. It is, of course, the path of death. Zacchaeus owned the world around him. He broke the conventions. He made the money. This was his world now, and people had to bow down and pay. He had his dream. But all Zak really wanted was to be liberated *from* himself. "Apart from you, O God, I have no good." That's not pious spiritual stuff. That's the rock bottom truth. Me stuck in me is not glorious. It's stinky, rotting, tedious, needy, paranoid bondage. A liberation story that demands other people give way so I can be me ultimately leads nowhere.

The truth is that I need to be liberated from myself. I need so desperately to be free from the ruin that comes when I get my will and my way. I need to be retrieved from being lost in trying to create my own reality. I need to be redeemed out of demanding and into gratitude. Redeemed out of proving myself and into the grace of Christ's acceptance. Redeemed out of the deep pit of swirling around me

and into the arms of Christ. Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, Jesus said. Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Liberation into more of myself is bondage and death. Liberation into Christ is life and health and peace.

Zacchaeus, I see you. Hurry and come down. Today I must stay at your house! And Zak received Jesus joyfully. He sees you trapped in yourself. The ropes of your own making that get tighter and tighter. He sees your isolation and your need. He has arrived and found you. He wants to come in and bring the freedom and light of discovering that life is all about Jesus. Will you, like Zak, receive him joyfully? Today? This moment? Will you invite him in and release to him all you have and are? So you might hear his words, “Today, this hour, salvation has come to this house!”