

Wisdom of Solomon 11: 22-12:1
2 Thessalonians 2: 13-17
Luke 19: 1-10

The Wisdom of Zaccheus
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Mary R. Brownlow

The urban dictionary defines adrenaline junkie as “Someone who gets high on adrenaline and possibly addicted to it. They usually supplement this addiction by doing activities that give them adrenaline rushes such as shoplifting, gambling, skydiving, stock market trading and possibly fighting.” Perhaps you now people who pursue some of these activities, and wonder why. Now you know. It’s a chemical addiction.

I recently read an essay that speculated about “transcendence junkies.” The writer speculated that, actually, all human beings crave transcendence, and go about looking for it in a number of ways. We are transcendence junkies, looking for experiences that take us out of the mundane world, out of our small concerns, away from our private worries, and into a larger realm. Some would call it the world of the Spirit, some would call it a deep connection to all of creation, some would call it an awareness of God. Some seek this transcendence in song, some in contemplation, some on mountaintops. I don’t begin to guess or assess whether this is also a chemical addiction of some kind – it could be the way we humans beings are born.

The passage read earlier from the Wisdom of Solomon (by the way, King Solomon had nothing to do with it: it was written in the century before Christ by a Jew in Egypt) is a description of a transcendence moment. The writer has a sense of the immensity and power of divine love, contrasted with the smallness and fragility of creation: “like a speck that tips the scales or a drop of morning dew.” It reminds me of the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, who had many visions, including this one: “...he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.” A transcendent moment: feeling part of something both small and immense, feeling loved beyond measure, feeling the mercy of God.

Our Gospel reading gives us another moment, one that is a lot less lyrical, one that is almost comical. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem: on a journey that we, the readers, know is leading to betrayal and death. He has followers, and he is something of a sensation on this trip, attracting attention from both friends and enemies. He goes through the bustling trade center of Jericho: a place where princes build palaces and there is a lot of money to be made. And so we meet Zaccheus, whose name means “pure” or “innocent.” That is the first bit of comic irony: this “pure” and “Innocent man has made a lot of money collecting taxes. Then, “he was trying to see who Jesus was.” People who are trying to “see” Jesus in the Gospels want to do more than lay eyes on him. They want to **see** him, to gain some insight and understanding of his identity. But Zaccheus has a problem. It has to do with getting high enough to **see** Jesus. One thing I realized about the text this year was that it is not clear whether Zaccheus was “short in stature” or whether Jesus was short in stature. It doesn’t matter: the crowd was in the way. And I am thinking that this crowd was not going to make things easy for the tax collector.

Zaccheus needs to be taller, he needs to get higher, he needs to transcend the circumstances of his everyday life. So, of course, he climbs a sycamore tree. Another comic note: a rich, well-dressed adult climbs a tree to watch a procession – maybe hoping to hide, maybe feeling ridiculous, maybe feeling a childlike excitement – but in any case, an odd picture. If he was trying to escape notice, it doesn't work. Jesus sees him, knows him, tells him to hurry down, and invites himself over for dinner. So much for concealment in the leafy branches.

I wonder if Jesus was somehow drawn to this eager little man, who owned so much but was lacking so much, whose name meant “pure” but whose life was not, whose profession was shameful and isolating, who was sending out unseen signals of hunger for transcendence. I have heard it said that “shame and sadness are the pheromones that attract the amazing grace of Jesus,” and that this is truly good news.

Here is more Good News: Jesus does not allow Zacchaeus to stay up in the tree. It may have been a logical attempt at getting higher, getting a good view, or a childish attempt at rising above the crowd. But it turns out that salvation is found down on the ground. And it seems to involve Zaccheus coming face to face with both the welcoming face of Jesus and the grumbling faces of his neighbors. In fact, Jesus and Zacchaeus seem to be isolated in their connection: the crowd does not like the fact that these two have found each other, and that this sinner is getting special attention. So I raise the question: is this about the conversion of one person – Zacchaeus' transcendent moment – or is about the conversion of a whole community?

Perhaps the salvation that comes to Zacchaeus' house is the restoring of his relationship within his community. Far from being a heady spiritual moment, full of song and prayer and heavenly voices, it is a nitty-gritty description of money transactions, there in the dusty street, surrounded by grumblers. By calling Zaccheus down, singling him out for a visit, and enabling this scene, Jesus has robbed Jericho of its favorite scapegoat. He has upset the balance and allowed the short rich man to redefine himself as an expansive and generous man. Jericho has an opportunity to reorganize itself around this generosity...or not. We don't know what happened, only that salvation was offered to this individual and to his community.

Earlier I spoke of those modern terms, adrenaline junkies and transcendence junkies. Some, and maybe all, of us are seekers, and at times we go out on a limb, looking for something to give us new life and new purpose. There is another term that has been coined in the last few years: a word for people who have a facebook page but never post anything on it. Instead they just read other people's posts, and follow their lives. They are called lurkers. I am a lurker on my own facebook page (except for playing Scrabble), though I do post things on the church's page. Lurker has become a metaphor for someone who is a social media spectator – perhaps an enthusiast, perhaps a grumbler – but definitely a non-engager.

Today I want to celebrate Zacchaeus, because he did not stay home the day Jesus walked through town. He did not lurk; he was engaged on a search. He climbed a tree, ridiculous as that was. And when he was called down, he was joyful. Someone had called him to transcend his small life, and he was ready. I celebrate the deep wisdom that sent him to search and to respond. I hope that people will still stand on table tops, and climb trees, and go out on limbs when necessary to see what God has to offer us. And when we hear words of welcome and challenge, I pray that we will respond with joy and find a changed community.

Amen.