

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska.
Message from Rev. Israel Portilla-Gómez, Associate Rector
October 30, 2022

Scripture readings

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4: Psalm 32:1-8: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12: **Luke 19:1-10**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)



I want to start this sermon with a question: When was the last time you climbed a tree? Perhaps for someone, it was yesterday, and for others, many years ago that you cannot remember. But I am sure you have done it at some point in your life, especially as children. Climbing a tree has certain risks. I can tell from my own experience. When I was a child, there was a sweet lemon tree in the house with thorns. I climbed up to get some lemons, but I stepped on a branch, snapped, and fell. I have two scars from that fall, one on my shoulder and one on my back. This slide shows the photo my mom took for me; this is the sapling of the tree I fell off. Lemons were my objective. Climbing a tree involved risk. In the Gospel, we see that Zacchaeus did an action very similar to climbing a tree. He had a clear objective: he was looking for Jesus. And for this, he made several decisions, even at personal risk. Who was Zacchaeus?

Luke says that he was a chief tax collector. As a tax collector, he was rich. To understand his job, let us see how tax collection worked.

It was unfolded through a whole web and hierarchy of positions until it was charged out on the common inhabitant.

1. The emperor and the aristocracy
2. The kings-client and the prefects.
3. Chief tax collectors
4. Tax collectors and customs officials

There were three main Roman taxes:

1. Land tax
2. Head tax
3. Indirect taxes: tolls and duties on goods, water, and sales taxes.

I am sure you are familiar with taxes and everything connected to IRS. One of the foremost of the Founding Fathers of this country, Benjamin Franklin, once wrote, "In this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes."

The Jews hated paying Roman taxes because it was a tribute to a false god. After all, the emperors were declared gods. It was also a symbol of their slavery to Rome. According to some calculations, every person had to work three weeks per year to pay taxes to the emperor. However, with corruption and increases in the profit chain, these could have been months. There was no salary for the tax collectors. Therefore, they calculated their salary with the money exceeded. Zacchaeus was probably rich in this unjust system. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus was a person loathsome by the common people.

What does this story of Zacchaeus teach us today?

Nothing can separate us from God's love and forgiveness. Nothing when we persist in looking for God, not even what could be our worst deeds and doings. He finds us. Zacchaeus knew it despite his guilt. He knew that Jesus was going to pass through Jericho and planned how to meet him. He had been in a process in search of him and overcame certain obstacles:

1. The crowd. It was a big one.
2. His Height. He was short.
3. The risk of climbing the sycamore tree

What can happen if you fall from that tree?

Jesus found him. When we look for Jesus, we are found. He called him by his name: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."

Today we have two invitations to act like Zacchaeus and like Jesus. Why?

Zacchaeus was not happy, he had a void in his heart, a void that neither money nor social status for serving the Roman Empire could fill, and this led him to search with a determined attitude. He was taking risks and even climbed a tree. He did everything possible to let himself be found by Jesus. His life changed; he promised to correct his mistakes and be a just man. Having our Lord in his house meant joy.

Let us be like Zacchaeus today. Let us continue looking for Jesus. Let us be found. Jesus seeks and calls us; he wants to live in our (your) house.

Jesus profoundly loves the dignity of every human being, each one of us, and all those whom the world considers lost. People there began to judge Jesus, but none knew Zacchaeus's need and process with the Lord. Those people only judged him by appearance and superficiality, but not Jesus, because

he knows everyone's heart. Let's be like Jesus. Let's continue showing interest in the rejected and forgotten, as we do at St. Mary's with so many of our projects. Let's keep dreaming for our future because together, we are more than enough, and we can make this world a better place. Amen.