

Zacchaeus

I've lived with the song in my head all week, so you might as well have it in your head too...who all knows Zacchaeus? If you know it, sing it with me – include actions if you know them:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
And a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree (pretend to climb a tree)
For the Lord he wanted to see.

And as the Savior passed that way
He looked up in the tree,
And he said, "Zacchaeus you come down, For I'm going to your house today!" (cup hands around mouth)
For I'm going to your house today! (clap to the beat)

Sunday school songs are great. They're fun, they stick with you and can still become ear worms 60 years later. They're a way for kids to remember Bible stories. And they don't have to address any sticky theological issues that might be the reality of the story.

Let's start with the whole business of being short. I can relate. Trying to see when I'm in the midst of a crowd is pretty tough. I doubt if I could still climb a tree – even if I can I'm probably not likely to try.

But short isn't just a physical thing with Zacchaeus. He is a tax collector. By now, you know what the Jewish people thought about tax collectors.

Like most nations in history, the Roman Empire relied on taxation or some sort of mandated contribution from its citizens. Perhaps when you were in school, you learned about the engineering marvels of the Roman Empire.

Their highway system revolutionized travel. And they built roads to last. You can still see parts of the Appian Way, one of the most famous highways. It's still used, only just for pedestrians.

They built a sewer system – also revolutionary. And they build aqueducts to carry water throughout the empire. Many of them are still standing and a few are even still used...2 thousand years later.

That kind of building requires taxes.

But taxes also supported the Roman Army – the very army whose troops marched in the streets of the towns and cities all over the Empire to maintain order...the army who crucified dissenters or anyone who was perceived to be a threat to the throne.

Taxes enabled the rulers – like Herod and Caesar – to build lavish palaces.

In particular, a poll tax – a uniform tax on every resident of the Empire was deeply resented. It was completely regressive – it was the same whether you were rich or poor. It was a very oppressive tax for which the ordinary Jewish peasants got little in return.

Tax collectors in Palestine were Jewish men who were charged with collecting the tax. They were already viewed as traitors. But then you add the fact that many were corrupt and extorted far more than they were supposed to.

Zacchaeus was short not only because of his body size. He was also viewed by his fellow citizens as short of the Jewish ideal - someone whose ethical shortcomings were painfully obvious to everyone.

Yet he is precisely who Jesus calls out to. Now, notice that Jesus didn't actually call Zacchaeus to repent. He didn't even ask him to do what Zacchaeus says he's going to do. Jesus didn't tell Zacchaeus that he should sell everything and follow Jesus like he did the rich ruler last week.

All Jesus said, was "hey Z! I'm coming to your place. Think I could get some dinner?"

This prompts Zacchaeus to promise to make amends for his dealings. The story is often preached as a story of repentance, triggered by Jesus' call to him.

And I think it is. But what struck me more this time was Jesus' remark that "he too is a son of Abraham."

What Jesus did seems to be separate from what Zacchaeus said. It doesn't appear that Jesus' desire to connect with Zacchaeus really had much to do with Zaccheaus' repentance.

What Jesus did was take in the whole scene. Seeing a rich man in a tree would have been unusual. Clearly the people gathered did not show Zacchaeus any deference – they didn't allow him to move to the front so he could see. Jesus apparently knew that Zacchaeus was despised by his fellow residents of Jericho.

The response of the crowd to Jesus reaching out to him confirmed that impression. They don't like this guy. He's a sinner – the worst kind. The kind that exploits them and works for the oppressor. They can't imagine why Jesus would pick him.

And I would argue that we might have the same reaction as the grumblers gathered around Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Then, before Zacchaeus even has a chance to make good on his promise, Jesus announces his salvation.

What is meant by salvation here?

As 21st Century Christians, we have been conditioned to believe salvation is mostly about going to heaven after we die. And maybe that is part of this.

But it isn't just about that. Israel was formed to be God's people. They were to be God's blessing to the rest of the world. And if someone had placed themselves or been placed outside that community, they would be lost.

Salvation in this instance was about being brought back in to the community of God. In our more individualistic society, salvation can also be seen as primarily individual. If I believe in Jesus, I'll go to heaven when I die.

But in the Bible, so much was primarily addressed to a people, not a person. Salvation is really about salvation of the world.

One of the definitions of salvation is to heal or make whole. Salvation means making a people whole. And they can't be whole if one of its members is lost.

What does it mean to be lost then found?

Zacchaeus was lost from the people because of two things – his own actions as a tax collector, and the community who pushed him to the edge because of it.

In this story, Jesus deals with both. He calls Zacchaeus to come down. He joins Zacchaeus at his house. It would seem that Zacchaeus is changed by this whole encounter.

He promises to be fairer. He is in a sense restored to a version of himself that is more what God wants. But he doesn't say he'll stop being a tax collector.

The other part of salvation is the community. Salvation for Zacchaeus would also be that his community accepts that if Jesus could hang with him as he is, then maybe they ought to accept him for who he is as well. He is still one of them.

Salvation can be understood in a lot of different ways, and yes ultimately it does go beyond death to eternal life.

But in the here and now, salvation is restoration and healing – restoration of people to their communities and making both the person and the community whole. That seems to be what Jesus is accomplishing here.

Like a lot of these stories, we don't know anything about what happened later. Did Zacchaeus make good on his promise? Did the people in the community try to connect with Zacchaeus in a less hostile way?

One thing is sure – the story leads us to think about the people we consider lost. What would Jesus do with them? What does he call us to do?

Salvation comes to us in the person of Jesus...in the here and now and in the hereafter. The process of salvation is a long one of unwinding the effects of human sin. That won't get completely done in this life.

But while we're here, we are called to ask ourselves some questions – in what ways am I like Zacchaeus, contributing to the oppression of fellow citizens? In what ways am I like the crowds who grumbled at the grace shown Zacchaeus? In what ways are our communities not whole – who are the lost?

However we answer those questions, we can hear Jesus words as words to us too – Today salvation has come to us, because we too are children of God.