

Sermon October 30, 2016 “Straining to See” Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 Luke 19:1-10

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?" Habakkuk cried out to God, unable to see God's hand in the midst of the overwhelming challenges of his life and the life of his people.... God seemed absent. Suffering seemed to be the only reality.

But as the book continues, it is evident that Habakkuk found his certainty in a God who continued to be God *despite* all evidence to the contrary. "The righteous live by their faith," he concluded. Live by faith even when positive results are not seen...(Ideas taken from *The Immediate Word*.)

What do we see in life? Certainly this week we see the growing uncertainty of the presidential election, the complexity of our world situation. We see how hard it is to love each other, and how it can seem impossible to really *live* while we make a living... We see how fast our children grow up, and start to realize how little time there really is... But most of the time we don't see much. We tend to go through our lives racing from "gotta do this" to "have to do that," and in the process we grumble and resent much of what we have been given away. We do not usually see the full meaning of our own lives until something threatens them.

Several years ago, our house answering machine received a call intended for my husband, who was away on a trip. A woman was on her cell phone, hysterical. Her words went something like this: "Pastor, this is Allie. I almost died just now; a car came into my lane, and I swerved, but then I almost hit a telephone pole, and then I swerved so much back and forth that I almost lost control completely...but I didn't...and when I stopped, two women stopped because they had seen what happened, and a man stopped too, and they came over to my car and told me that I almost rolled over. I almost died, and the first thing I thought of was God. God didn't let me die, and my baby's here with me, and he's okay... I haven't been to church in a while, but I had to call, because I thank God that he didn't let me die..." To even tell you about this message, I get the chills, for there was in this woman's words raw emotion.

Her vehicle didn't roll over, her four-month old baby didn't get hurt, and she was alive. I spoke with her soon after the near-accident, and she claimed that she would never look at life in the same way again; for her it was a new gift. Even the folks at her job who aggravated her in the past became for her people she needed to hug the next day. For a while, at least, this woman's life and outlook were different. I wonder: Must it take a crisis for us to see life and what is meaningful more clearly?

Today's Gospel is the familiar story of Zacchaeus, who was not just a tax collector, but the CHIEF tax collector, very rich and apparently quite willing to pressure his fellow Jews into paying more than they owed the Roman government in taxes so that he himself could be rich.

Note that this story comes soon after Luke's telling about the Rich Ruler, who could not give up his possessions to follow Jesus. For some reason, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. We don't

know why. But we do know that in spite of the surging crowd, Jesus noticed this little man propped up in the tree and stopped and invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house. Jesus even knew his name. That's the way Jesus was and is: always noticing the one left out, the one society would look reject; always offering folks new ways of looking at life; always knowing our names. If we really let today's scripture speak to us, we will see that there is a challenge for those, back then and today, who want to be Jesus' followers, because Jesus' choices can be upsetting and even offend us.

William Willimon, speaking about today's gospel lesson, told of his own disappointment with Jesus' choice years ago: "I had known him since high school, but not well. He was from the other side of town, the side where rich people lived. His father was the owner of one of the largest textile mills in our textile town. His house had large white columns, sort of like in *Gone With the Wind*.

"All the girls liked him. Why not? He was always the first to wear the latest styles in clothing. He could always find a way to buy beer even when it was illegal. His money seemed to solve every problem and to smooth every rough place. AND he was the first to get his own car. In high school!!

"I spoke to him in class and in the hallways, but he rarely spoke to me. He attended one of those swanky colleges in the Northeast. Not that he had the grades to be accepted at one of those schools, but his dad's money, as always, smoothed the way for him. I lost track of him after that.

"Then, at our tenth high school reunion, I was shocked when he rushed towards me, grabbed me at the opening dinner, and said something like, 'They tell me you are a preacher! That's great! Would you believe it? I have been born again!! I've accepted Jesus Christ into my life and now I'm changed! Aren't you happy for me, preacher?'

"I told him I was happy for him, but I don't know that I was completely honest. Of all people to have 'accepted Jesus' into his life! I was frankly shaken.

"To tell the truth, I was aghast that Jesus would have someone like him, a person I had always regarded as disreputable. And according to today's scripture, it's a bit more accurate to say that the wonder was that Jesus had accepted him into Jesus' life! I grumbled." (*Will Willimon's Pulpit Resource*, vol. 44, no. 4, p. 17)

So the people who saw Jesus stop and look up into that tree and call to Zacchaeus were grumbling, offended that this special man would waste time on such a horrible man. When they heard that Jesus invited himself to go home and eat with Zacchaeus, they were totally horrified. Didn't Jesus know what a creep Zacchaeus was??

Today, too many people who declare themselves to be Christian don't give much evidence of having anything changed in their lives. We've all probably run into a so-called "Christian" who may go to church and wear a cross, but who has no problem with lying, stealing, cutting other

people down... Zacchaeus, though, was different, for he let Jesus make a difference in his life.

One more story, shared by Wayne Rice (*Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*), may help us see our own lives in new light. The O'Learys and the MacMillans lived as neighbors at the turn of the century. One day a young man in a suit came to their village to explain that they would soon be able to have electricity for the first time. The MacMillans responded with their typical enthusiasm and filled out the appropriate papers to have their house wired. The O'Learys were more cautious. After all, they had lived for generations without electricity and had managed just fine. They weren't about to throw money after every passing fad. So they decided to wait. If electricity was as good as everyone said, they could always sign up later.

In the weeks that followed, the MacMillans busily prepared their house for electrical power. They clamped wires and sockets to the walls and hung bulbs from the ceiling.

When the big day finally came, the MacMillans invited their neighbors, including the O'Learys, to a grand lighting party. With a dramatic flourish, Mr. MacMillan threw a switch and the bulbs began to glow for the first time. The MacMillan house was illuminated more brightly than it had ever been lit before.

There was a gasp. "How lovely!" someone said.
Then another gasp. "How filthy!" someone else said.

It was true. No one had noticed it before in the dim light, but years of oil lamps had left a film of dingy soot over everything. The walls were grimy, there were cobwebs in the corners, and dust covered the floor.

The O'Learys decided right then and there that they would never install electricity in their home. They would never suffer the humiliation of having their dirty home exposed by the light.

After the party, the MacMillans went to work. They scrubbed the soot off the walls and ceiling, cleaned the cobwebs, and swept away the dust. They had indeed been embarrassed by their dirty home when the lights came on, but within a day their house was cleaner than it had ever been before..

Meanwhile, the O'Learys continued to live comfortably in their dimly lit home filled with soot, cobwebs, and filth. (End of story)

Zacchaeus had Jesus over and ended up cleaning up his act. He paid back those he had cheated four-fold. He found out that letting Jesus in not only brings blessing, it also makes it possible for us to see what we need to change in order to really live.

Life has good times grimey times, and very hard times. We deal with cancer and other health issues, we struggle to help family members. Our world sometimes seems like a "Whack-a-mole" game, as all sorts of wars and crises and disasters keep popping up.

Wherever we are in life, God knows our names, God knows who we really are (the good and the bad!), and God can help us see what we need to see about ourselves so that we can live, really live, knowing that we are loved and that we are called to love others. And best of all, that we are ALWAYS - whether there is evidence of it or not - held in God's loving and neverending care.

May the Light of the World, our Savior, find welcome among us and responsiveness within us.
Amen.