

For the last month we've been reading from what is called The Travel Narrative in the Gospel of Luke, that starts in Galilee at 9:51 when Jesus "sets his face towards Jerusalem," and it ends today in Jericho, Zacchaeus is the last story before entering Jerusalem.

Read Luke 19:1-10.

Is there a story, book or movie or play, that you love and that you would love to hear again for the first time?

Although I would guess most of you didn't name the Zacchaeus story, there is a good chance that the Zacchaeus story will change enough today that it will be like hearing it for the first time.

When I was a kid growing up in Minot, ND, there was a restaurant that had optical illusions on the placemats, I'm guessing that were meant to help you pass the time as you wait for your food. An optical illusion is where, what we visually perceive or "see" is different than the objective reality. Optical illusions prove wrong the sayings, "What you see is what you get." and "Seeing, is believing." The designers of optical illusions set us up to see one thing when reality is something different. Look at these pictures (duck or rabbit, man face or profile, top of bridge). I think a sort of optical illusion is happening to us with the Zacchaeus story—we are being lead to see one thing and reality is different.

Zacchaeus' story is about wealth and privilege. Chief tax-collector is a term not seen anywhere else until Luke uses it in the Bible. It literally translates to ruler-tax-collector and if you've been reading along in Luke you would see this term and think about the stories thus far: Jesus told the story of The Rich Man and Lazarus and Jesus just

told the ruler to "sell all" and that, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, then a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God," these stories have primed us to expect that Zacchaeus is another rich person who needs to have his priorities changed by Jesus, that he has a problem with money that Jesus is going to have to teach him how to be compassionate. But his name is Zacchaeus, which means innocent or blameless.

It says he is "short" in stature, which could mean he is short, but the Greek word is *helakia* means diminished, so it could mean Zacchaeus is so diminished or despised, that his standing in society, in Jericho is very low. You can imagine that as the crowd gathers to see Jesus, they are elbow to elbow. Zacchaeus is seeking Jesus but when people see who is trying to get a glimpse of Jesus, no-one let's him in, so he climbs a tree.

The translation of the Bible we usually (like 97% of the time) read in worship is the NRSV, the New Revised Standard Version. It is a really good translation, not perfect, but really good. There are many decision to be made when translating. And the NRSV translators made two of them in verse eight of chapter nineteen. There are two verbs in this verse and they are translated as future tense: Zacchaeus says, I will give to the poor and he will repay four times as much to anyone he has defrauded. This translation makes the Zacchaeus story a classic repentance story—like the narrative has set us up to believe—Jesus comes and fixes Zacchaeus. But the verbs are present tense: Zacchaeus says, "I already give to the poor and when I am complicit in this tax system that is so corrupt, I repay people four times as much."

If the verbs are translated as present tense this is Zacchaeus saying, “Look Jesus everybody hates me and shuns me because I am wealthy. But regularly I give away half my income and if I do get caught up in this inherently corrupt tax system, I don’t just give them their money back but 4x what I took.” It could be that Jesus has just come across the most virtuous tax collector. Reading it this way it is still a story of salvation for Zacchaeus because the crowd has now realized and we as readers have now realized, “Dang I prejudged this guy. Maybe you can actually be a wealthy person and still find a place in the Kingdom of God.”

So which way is it? Is this an optical illusion? Is truth the way we have read the Zacchaeus story, where upon encountering Jesus Zacchaeus repents and changes his ways. Or has Zacchaeus always been a virtuous person and salvation looks like reconnection to the community that has despised him?

I think you can read it either way. Jesus’ presence here is dramatic, he says, “today salvation has come to this home,” salvation isn’t just Jesus coming to pronounce forgiveness of sins that yields eternal life. Salvation inaugurates a whole new way of life and living that is deeply communal, that is deeply justice oriented, that is deeply about liberation from all kinds of oppression, whether sin, demons, social systems. And this salvation is public, Zacchaeus is reunited with the community.

The last line of the reading Jesus says, “I have come to seek out and save the lost,” and this is still true. Like Zacchaeus we long to see Jesus, but something won’t let

us in, maybe our business or our priorities. But Jesus is persistent and calls to us, “I’m coming to your house today. I coming to bring wholeness and abundant life to you. I’m coming to restore health to your community. I’m coming to reconcile those who are despised.

In fact Jesus is already here, working in and through us, and in and through our neighbors.