

Looking Up – Luke 19:1-10

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Do you remember ever climbing a tree? Now, I realize this might be testing your long-term memory. But, you might have some recollection of at least trying to get up into a tree as a kid. Or, did your parents build you a tree house at some point that you spent time in? Or, if you're a hunter, maybe you remember being in a tree staking out a deer you wanted to nab.

Soon after I arrived here, I remember walking out the office doors here to my car. And on several occasions, suddenly a child would fall out of the magnolia tree right next to mailbox. And it was usually one of the Sharp boys, Katina's kids. They loved to play in that tree.

If you're in a tree, you truly do get a different perspective. It's adventurous up there, challenging even. You use your creative skills to discover which branches to stand on to lift you higher. And then, when you get into a clearing you like, you see what you couldn't see from ground level. There are no impediments, nothing crowding your sight lines.

I don't know as though there's another story in the Bible about somebody climbing a tree then this one in Luke 19. Zacchaeus, being a shorter guy, climbed a tree to get a view of the guy from Nazareth who had been gaining a reputation for a unique brand of teaching and for claiming to be a not-so-typical prophet—actually more than just a prophet.

He was intriguing enough, Jesus was, for this former Jewish peasant turned wealthy tax collector for the Roman Empire, to navigate the branches and leaves within a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of this one-of-a-kind teacher.

What's Zacchaeus thinking? Is he intrigued by a message of forgiveness and newness of life that Jesus offered? And if so, why is he intrigued? Is it because he has regrets over his conduct as a tax collector on behalf of the Roman empire—an empire that oppressed the very people he claimed as his heritage?

It's curious as to whether Zacchaeus wanted to be noticed. Did he only climb the tree to see Jesus? Or did he also want to put himself in a position to be seen by Jesus? Was he hiding amid the branches? Or did he position himself so that it was obvious to Jesus, if he was looking up, that he was there?

Today, sycamore trees grow to be 70-100 feet tall. Unless they were far shorter back in the day, it would've been impossible for Jesus to notice Zacchaeus if he weren't looking up. If Jesus only cast his gaze onto the immediate crowd standing around him, there's no way he would've spotted Zacchaeus in that tree.

Jesus had his head up. He had his head up. And when one's head is up, it's amazing how much more can be noticed or accomplished with our eyes.

Angie Batey, and every other choir director in the world—ever, harps on her choir members to get their heads out of their music when they sing. It was to the point this past Wednesday night in rehearsal where she told us to put our choir folders down completely and just look at her and sing.

What happened was greater projection of our voices and...a greater connection we made with her as the conductor. When singers' heads are up, it also heightens the probability that we will make a connection with those listening to us sing. The music will more greatly come alive.

I remember being screamed at by basketball coaches when I was in school to "get your head up." When you're dribbling the ball, when you're playing defense, when you're running down the court, "get your head up." You're more open to read the defense, see an open teammate, or steal a pass.

In this day and age, if we're walking down the sidewalk and have our heads in our cell phones, there's a good chance something bad will happen. We'll run into somebody or something that might leave a mark.

Jesus had to have had his head up on this day. He couldn't have seen Zacchaeus without doing so. And because of that, he transformed his life.

In the world in which we live, might Jesus be calling us to more readily have our heads up? So that we can see the world around us? So that we can see the Zacchaeus's in our midst?

When Jesus saw Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus was humbled and grateful. When Jesus told him he wanted to stay at his house, the house of a tax collector, he melted in front of him in remorse and appreciation.

“I’ll give half my possessions to the poor,” he said. “And I’ll pay four times back to anybody I’ve defrauded.”

He was changed. And it only could’ve happened by Jesus looking up and seeing him.

Too often, we don’t take time to notice our surroundings—to notice the grieving widow, or the poor cashier, or the lonely teenager, or the struggling student. We don’t look up to see the friend who just got bad news and would tell us from the expression on her face if we were just looking. We don’t look up to see the folks who need somebody to stand with them—just stand with them—in their fight to right an injustice against them.

Too often, our heads are down, our eyes trained on only what is immediately in front of us—our own lives, our own concerns for the ills that have befallen us.

And indeed, there are moments so heavy and impactful that we only have the strength to barely lift our heads up to eye level. It’s in those moments when we depend on others to see us.

At some point, however, we’re called to look up, too. Even amid our pain or uncertainty, to lift our heads so that we can use our eyes to look up beyond our immediate surroundings does two things.

First, it helps to get us out of our own boxes of self-focus. Sometimes, the best cure to what’s ailing us is to look up and see the needs of others. When we project our energy onto others, we distract ourselves—even for a while—onto something greater than ourselves. And that can make our hearts sing. It can expand our vision beyond our own circumstance.

And of course, looking up might mean that somebody sees us looking at them. Just as Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus, which led to a pivotal moment of change and newness of life, so can our looking at somebody be the way by which somebody else sees Jesus.

The second thing lifting our heads does is open ourselves to the beauty of God, a reminder that God is always present.

Yesterday, I spent some time with Tyrone and Margo Gregory at their home. Tyrone has entered the final moments of his earthly journey after walking with cancer for some time.

Their home, like many in this area, is surrounded by trees, grasses, and shrubs. And it sits at the end of a cul de sac with a backyard that overlooks a very scenic, wooded landscape. After spending some time inside with the both of them, I walked outside with Margo to get in my car and leave. And the two of us stood there for a moment in the driveway distracted by the beauty of the fall colors that were apparent by the leaves still on the trees, the leaves that had fallen, and the still green grass and shrubs that were all around us.

And Margo remarked on the beauty of the change of seasons that happens at this time every year. I obviously affirmed that with her and said in response that, despite the seasons that change throughout our lives, God is the one who remains constant.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our Lord stands forever.

In that moment, in concern for Tyrone, clouded by the reality of his condition, we were able, in the driveway, to lift our heads. To look up and see the world around us—many reminders of the beauty of God's creation and God's ever-present concern.

I don't know if you're watching this year's World Series taking place between the Philadelphia Phillies and Houston Astros. There's a fine player for the Astros named Jose Altuve. He plays second base for the Astros and has been one of their best players for some years now. And because of that, you'd think that Altuve would be 6'3", 6'4" or something in that height range. At least 6'0".

But no. Jose Altuve is only 5 feet, 4 inches tall. At some point when he was a young player, you'd think scouts would've passed on him because of his short stature. His diminished height would no doubt have compromised his ability to be a major league hitter and fielder.

But somebody saw Jose Altuve, several scouts probably. And at least one believed he had what it took to play in the big leagues. I doubt he

climbed a tree. But somebody had their head up and noticed this short kid and gave him a chance. And we now see the results.

Jesus saw the short tax collector named Zacchaeus because he had his head up. He looked up and saw him and changed his life.

Jesus sees us every day. He doesn't miss us. And he asks us to look up and see what's around us. It could make a difference in the world.