

Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-4
Luke 19: 1-10
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
November 3, 2013

The latest sign by the road that irritates me simply says “Wake up America!” I do not know which end of the political spectrum wants me to wake up to their version of reality. I do know that I resent being told that I am asleep when what is more likely the case is that I simply do not agree with the ones who want me to wake up. I also know that I have in me a strong self-righteous streak. I still struggle with how people could be so deluded that they insist on opinions that, from my enlightened perspective (*not*), are so wrong. With Lucy of Peanuts I believe that “If everyone agreed with me, they’d be right.” But I know that this is itself a dangerous illusion and I need to hear the very opinions which infuriate me and not banish them. Who knows, they might actually teach me something!

Ok. I feel a little better. I admit that I am rebellious and don’t like to be told what to think. In fact I don’t like to be *told* to do or think anything. This is a flaw, friends and even at my age I have not made much progress with it.

But I *do* believe in waking up. I believe very much in the idea of becoming aware that I have been living according to a set of false assumptions and illusions. I believe that it is possible to begin to realize that the things I have taken to be bedrock truth are in fact not true at all and that there is a better way. But for me this way has nothing to do with political and economic agendas. It is a way of life. It is a way taught and lived by Jesus of Nazareth. And when I follow in that way I encounter a world very different from the shouting fear based voices which yell at

me from the side of the road. It is the reality of the Kingdom of God. It is the way, the truth and the life of Jesus Christ.

The story of Zaccheus is a story about waking up. Immediately preceding this encounter Jesus has predicted his death and resurrection. The disciples have no clue as to his meaning. Then a blind man calls out believing that Jesus can restore his sight. He is awakened to the trust that Jesus alone is able to open his eyes. Luke sees the double meaning here. This not just a physical healing: it is a spiritual awakening. Now Jesus is entering the city of Jericho, his last stop on the way to Jerusalem and the cross.

There is a man there who is despised because he has made a fortune collecting taxes for the Roman Empire. He does not personally collect the taxes. He is the *chief* tax collector. He has subcontractors who pay him for the right to collect taxes from their fellow Jews. In order to make their payments to him they extort more taxes than the people in fact owe. They accept bribes to turn a blind eye to some. They are disliked; but the real hatred for the man who coordinates the whole operation. This man is named Zaccheus.

It is important that we not sugar coat Zaccheus. He is truly a corrupt, greedy and unethical man. He deserves hostility and scorn. He suffers the just rejection of his community. Yet there is that in him which is in every human soul—the image of God. There is that in him which stands apart from the immoral and exploiting behavior and slowly awakens in Zaccheus what we might call a conscience. He becomes aware, dimly at first but with growing intensity that he has in him a self that is better than this. He becomes aware that wealth gained from exploitation is killing this better self. Yet he has built a life which depends on this guilty money. As this awareness grows he begins to feel the loneliness and isolation that he has brought upon

himself. Yet how can he stop now? He has become a prisoner of his life. He hates himself as much if not more than he is hated. Yet he feels powerless to do anything to get out of it.

Friends, if you do not believe in the existence of Satan, at least consider the demonic quality of this state of soul. We may not be tax collectors; but many of us have had the experience of feeling trapped in lives that hurt those around us and also ourselves and we feel that we can do nothing about it. We become resigned to our fate. We say, "It is what it is."

But remember the image of God. Remember that there is in every human soul that which is the presence of God who created us in *love* to be like him. The very turmoil I attribute to Zaccheus and truly experienced in my own life is the result of God's love. The very growth of dissatisfaction with the life Zaccheus is leading is because God loves him so much that he wants Zaccheus to *wake up!* He wants Zaccheus to *wake up* to the fact that there is another life. He is not condemned to live and die as one who hates himself and is hated by others.

This is such an important fact! So often we interpret the stress in our lives as something bad. We are victims of fate. We are being punished for our past. But so often, this is not the case. What we are experiencing is nothing less than new birth into a new reality: and all birth is painful. The old life resists with all its might, trying to convince us that there is not truer and better life. Waking up is scary. Unlike the ones who are so sure they are right that they know we will wake up to their version of the truth, with this awakening there is no such certainty. This awakening requires a deep trust that the one who waking us up loves us. This awakening requires that we have faith that whatever the outcome we will be born into a better life.

The power of this story is not in its conclusion when Zaccheus releases his guilty money. That is the inevitable outcome of rebirth. The power for me is that his personal anguish can

only take Zaccheus so far. It can only take him to a tree from where he can at a safe distance look upon the one man he believes can help him—Jesus. If Jesus passes him by, Zaccheus is lost.

But Jesus does not pass him by! He “sees” Zaccheus—not just the man but the image of god struggling to be born. Not only does Jesus see Zaccheus, he stops the procession to Jerusalem and in a voice full of love and acceptance which overcomes all of his fears,

“Zaccheus! Come down from that tree! What are you waiting for! You are the one I have been wanting to meet! Invite me to your house for lunch! I must eat with you this day!

Friends, this morning we are about to re-enact this very story. We are people who at one time or another—maybe even now—have yearned for Jesus to “see” us from our safe perch. He has called us down as if we were the only people that mattered. He has invited us to invite him into our homes and our lives. We set up the meal; but Jesus is the host. We set up the elements of bread and grape juice and then with a sigh of relief we let Jesus take over.

What are we waiting for?

What are we waiting for!

Amen!