

the view from the sycamore tree

When I was at St. Paul's in Cary I read a book about surviving in youth ministry, which is how I spent much of my time there. You know, youth ministry is probably a lot more complex than most of us might think. It requires a surprising range of skills in planning, relationship building, communicating with teenagers and parents and clergy supervisors (which essentially means 3 languages), organizing trips and events, managing social media, leading worship services and youth group meetings, and of course making sure you have a vibrant and active prayer life.

Most of you have not had that exact job description, but if you lead a life or have a career that is similarly fractured in its diversity of obligations then this might just resonate with you.

I know, because many of you have told me, that this is not just limited to church folks. Many of you have said that what wears you out isn't the amount of work, it's the sheer number of little component parts that must be oiled simultaneously or in succession or just in whatever manner keeps the machine from grinding to a halt.

What captured my imagination in this book was what the author called *balcony time*. Whatever your vocation, especially if it has anything at all to do with the care of God's children, time to step aside from the push of the job and indeed go up, to climb "into the balcony" is essential to staying connected to God. This isn't simply time away from the grind: it's time to step away from the demands of the moment (which will of course always be there) in order to think and dream, to listen and to notice.

The readings tell us this morning, though, that the act of climbing into the balcony is more than just an exercise in perspective or self-preservation: that movement up into a place of greater vision is in fact a holy act of reaching for God. Zaccheus doesn't climb into a balcony. A short man, he climbs into a sycamore tree in order to get a look at Jesus. The prophet Habbakuk doesn't climb into a balcony or even up a tree: he climbs a rampart, a watchpost, a raised fortification to listen for a vision, any word, really, from Yahweh in a time of injustice and violence.

Balcony time is about stepping away from routine, but in Habakkuk's day routine meant life or death, and his very survival meant going to a place where he could be more awake, more vigilant. For Habakkuk, danger was real and hope was a vital necessity. He said to God,

How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you “violence!” and you will not save?
 Destruction and violence are before me;...
 So the law become slack and justice never prevails.

How many people today would claim those words today as their reality? We would never know, unless we were courageous enough to step up to the watchpost to join the prophet, to see the devastation that he sees, and to listen with him for the word of God.

You see, he climbed the watchpost because his civilization was dying, and he could do nothing else but wait on the lord for a vision, or an answer, or even just a word of comfort. He said,

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the
 rampart.
 I will keep watch to see what God will say to me.

And God responded, in a way that sounds great at first but if we really listened to it would shake us to our core. The Lord said,

Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,
 so that a runner may read it.
 For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
 If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come
 Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them,
 but the righteous live by faith.

Habakkuk received the word that he needed when he went to the watchpost: God replied vigorously with a promise that the holy covenant still holds, that we as creatures of God are still responsible to one another even if our society has largely ignored or forgotten that. In shorthand, God was still God. I think that sometimes when we’re swimming in the soup of violence and selfishness the very first thing we need is to be reminded that that is an aberration, that it may be how humans can be but it isn’t what God created us to be, and that our true natures long for union, not strife. That’s the message that Habakkuk got on the rampart.

Now, I should disclose here what more or less happened next. He didn’t go back to the people to receive a warm reception. He still had to be the prophet because they -and please don’t be shocked – preferred things the way they were, and so their immediate future was a very sad one, leading them away from their homes and into exile in Babylon. I’ll leave it up to you as to whether or not the word for

Habakkuk was good news for the people, but I think it was because it was a reminder that however they chose to live their lives, God was still their God and that the righteous, living by faith, were still witnessing to something that was life-giving and real.

It was an act of great hope and great faith to climb to the watchtower. What I want to suggest is that the watchpost, the balcony, and the sycamore tree are profoundly holy places.

As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was an agent of empire who clearly enriched himself at the expense of all those people in the crowds. He knows himself to be the sinner that he is, though, and is genuinely repentant, once up that tree, upon seeing Jesus. The folks in real danger are grumblers, all those look-e-loo's who can't fathom that a man of God would consort with someone so beyond the pale.

But for Jesus, there is no human being who is beyond the pale. That's a core truth for Christian living.

When Zacchaeus climbs that sycamore tree, two things happen. One, of course, is that by stepping away from the push and pull of the crowd, he is quite simply able to see Jesus. Remember that crowds are never neutral in the gospel, and I'll bet that Zacchaeus' relationship with just about everyone down there was charged with power and fear and resentment, and that being above this mess freed him to see the Lord. But when he gets up and out, a second thing happens: Jesus notices *him*.

What does Jesus say? "Climb down. Let's eat." Climb down; let's eat. What is so incredible here is that with these simple words that would have sounded great with a smooth North Carolina drawl (though I don't know how that would sound in Aramaic), Jesus hold Zacchaeus accountable. Because remember that he was a sinner, he had defrauded the people, he was probably (in the words of the Christian Fathers), kind of a jerk, he realized instantly upon hearing Jesus speak to him that he needed to change. And so he says right there and then – in the tree, even – that he will give half of all he owns to the poor, and quadruple the money he took. This – this – is what transformation looks like.

But even as Zacchaeus is held accountable, even as he owns up to his responsibility to his neighbor, he is also held and loved by Jesus to the very depth of his being.

Jesus then said that he had come to seek out and save the lost. A big part of being found, though, is climbing that tree or that rampart to begin with.

But... we cannot stay there. We can't stay in the balcony, or we won't get back to the work of our lives. We can't stay on the watchpost because that difficult, prophetic message *isn't going to deliver itself*, is it? Zacchaeus couldn't stay up in the tree because reconciliation would happen down among the crowds. But perhaps most importantly, it was time for him to come down because that's where Jesus stood, beckoning him back into union with the world, starting with a simple meal. Come down, for now that I've seen you I want to be with you in your own home, and in your heart. Come down so that we can break bread together, and begin this new life of wonder and grace.

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