

“Have you climbed a tree lately?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 and Luke 19:1-10

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

A long time ago, a young man was desperate to find God. He traveled far into the desert, where lived an old man who spent his days praying to God. The young man asked, “Why is it, Abba, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?”

The monk opened his eyes, smiled, and began to tell a story: “One day my dog and I were sitting here quietly in the sun, as we are now. Suddenly, a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by his barking. What a sight it was, as the pack of dogs ran barking across the creek, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged and frustrated. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit.”

The young man felt confused: “What does that story have to do with seeking God?”

The monk replied, “Why didn’t the other dogs continue the chase? They had not *seen* the rabbit.”¹

They were Jesus’ first words to his disciples: “Come and see” (John 1:39). We need to see God, experience God. That’s what kept the dog chasing the rabbit; he had seen the rabbit. And that’s what kept the monk in the desert all those years; he had experienced God.

That’s the problem in our two Bible readings today: we’ve got people who can’t see God.

The prophet Habakkuk [**huh-BAK-uhk**] sees no evidence of God in the suffering and injustice of the world. The prophet and his people have prayed to God, but heard no answer. They have asked for help, but found no hope. He asks, “Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble [*but I can’t see you*]?”

Zacchaeus can’t see God either, or in this case, Jesus. Luke tells us three things about him: he’s the chief tax collector, he’s rich, and he’s short. He may be short in height, or it may be that he is small in the eyes of his neighbors, who hate this man who has driven them into poverty and colluded with their oppressor. At the time, the Roman Empire sold the right to collect taxes to individuals, who would then up the cost, in order to make a profit. He’s the reason his neighbors are hungry. Somewhere, deep inside, he wants to be good again, to be Jewish again; he wants God. But he doesn’t know how.

¹ Pamela Cooper-White, in her *Feasting on the Word* commentary, recounts this story from the desert fathers and mothers, as told by Edward Hays in his book “In Pursuit of the Great White Rabbit: Reflections on a Practical Spirituality,” 1990.

I also suspect that, for both Habakkuk and Zacchaeus, the problem isn't just that they can't see God, but they feel God can't see them. They feel forgotten.

Maybe you've felt that way too. So many things in life can crowd out our view of God, making it hard to see our mysterious Parent and Savior. Sometimes we're distracted. Sometimes we're hurting. Sometimes we've just gotten into a rut. But whatever the reason, we can't find God anymore.

What I admire about Habakkuk and Zacchaeus is that neither give up. Habakkuk says: *if I can't see God down here, on the ground, in the thick of the pain, I'm going to get a higher view.* He stations himself on the ramparts to watch for God. He may be speaking literally or poetically, but whatever he does, it works. God sees him and says, "There is still a vision for the appointed time." *You will see me.* "If [that vision] seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come" (2:3). Then, God explains that the vision will come to those who look, not with these regular eyes, but with the eyes of faith. Later, Habakkuk will do just that when he says, "Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines... yet I will rejoice in the Lord... God, the Lord, is my strength" (3:17-19). Faith is a higher view, a longer-range view. Faith sees the embers of dawn even when it is still night. Faith sees the green shoot of life even when it is still winter.

A higher view is exactly what Zacchaeus needs. Zacchaeus can't see Jesus, so he climbs a tree. He sees Jesus, and what's even better, Jesus sees him; he calls to him and says he's going to stay at his house.

The people grumble and say that Zacchaeus is a sinner. The people don't see what Jesus is doing. They didn't climb a tree. They've still got tunnel vision.

Zacchaeus, though, has had a change of perspective. What happened in that tree? What did he see? Did he see the faces of the people he had hurt? Did he see how Jesus loved them, not just the pretty ones or the powerful ones, but all of them, the little ones especially? Unprompted, Zacchaeus (who has seen and been seen) says that he's going to give half of his possessions to the poor. He calls Jesus "Lord." And he says that if he's defrauded anyone, he will pay them back four times as much.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Can't see God? Take a pointer from something every child—and apparently every prophet and tax collector—knows: climb a tree.

We spend so much time on the ground, looking down. We are serious, concerned with bills and careers and worries. Even our pleasure is often a hiding. We are not fully present.

Do you remember what it was like to climb a tree? The scrape of bark on your bare skin. The crisp scent of leaves sparkling in the sun. The breeze unfurling your hair. Your muscles taut, as you leap from branch to branch. Your feet freed of the earth, flying. The challenge, the sheer fun of it. We imagined fairies; we became Peter Pan, fighting pirates. We were surrounded by nature. If we waited long enough, quiet enough, a bird might even land beside us. We were present with something alive, and old, and sacred. And though we may not have had the words for it, God was

as real for us as that tree. We could dream and talk with God, up there, in the leaves, where hurts could not reach.

I climbed a tree a week ago, in my backyard with my son, and I felt some of that come back to me. I realized, like Habakkuk and Zacchaeus, God wants our full presence, our heads lifted up, our feet scrambling up tree trunks, our arms in canopies of leaves and bird nests.

David Anderson writes in his blog “Canopy Watch”: “Anyone who climbs a tree as an adult comes down a kid again. Life is new again, and it is good.”

But this isn’t just about trees. It doesn’t really matter if you can climb a tree or not. Climbing a tree with Emerson, I was reminded: I’m *not* a boy anymore. I could really hurt myself. I’m also a far greater pull on gravity than I once was.

What children, prophets, and wee tax collectors are telling us is that we need constantly to find new vantage points. God cannot be seen at normal angles. God can only be seen slant, from the corner of your eye, beneath things, above things. It doesn’t have to be a tree; find something else. Find your own “watch post.” Be silly. Read a poem or a verse of Scripture. Go for a walk. Explore a new place. Lie on your back in the grass looking at the sky. Jump into a pile of leaves. Volunteer somewhere new. Sing. Be quiet. Go out onto that beautiful lake. Don’t wait for the crowd of things that obscure your vision to move; do something about it.

Here on Earth Day, it’s so easy to feel daunted by the environmental problems we face; it gets to where you can’t see any hope. What we need is for people to fall in love with nature again, to experience it. Go out onto that lake, and see how the will to save it rises in you like a tide.

To see hope, to see God, we have to look through new eyes. The Bible says, *Look, I’ve made all things new—fresh, like a child. Eager, hungry, imaginative.*

Right before the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus says that we all must become children in order to receive the kingdom of God.

God is best seen through kaleidoscopes, microscopes, telescopes, through tree branches and under ocean waves and atop mountains, in swirls of dance and peals of laughter and veils of tears, from headstands and in books and when you’re with someone, seeing through their eyes, their joy, their pain.

It was our first night in the Adirondacks last summer. Emerson walked outside the cabin with me. He looked up, and shouted, “Look at the stars!” He stared in amazement, his mouth agape. I hadn’t even looked up. I wouldn’t have noticed those beautiful stars if he hadn’t said anything. But when he did... well, I don’t know where I saw God more clearly: in the sky or in his face.

God is here—ready to be seen—if only we’d climb a tree, look up. **Amen.**