

Title: Experiencing the Gospel through the Body
Date: 10/30/2022 (Proper 26, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/LccoS1ZfOHk?t=1124>

O God, the righteousness of your decrees is everlasting;
Grant me understanding, that I may live (Ps: 119:144)
Amen.

In 2012, I found myself on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There had been an opportunity to go the year before, but when the deadline came, I worried about safety, I worried about spending that much money on a trip, so I didn't go.

By the time they were recruiting for this pilgrimage, I was more worried about not knowing my purpose for existing, not knowing why I was here and what I was meant to do. My constant prayer was, "God, I will say yes to whatever you put in front of me, and trust that eventually I'll end up where you are calling me to be." So, when my priest invited me to go, I was inclined to say yes.

Another reason to say yes was that the first stop was going to be Petra, in Jordan. I've wanted to go to Petra ever since I saw the façade of the Treasury in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and then saw it in my World History book and realized that it **actually existed**. It's also a movie that touches on faith. To date, it has ended up in at least one paper and one other sermon.

At the beginning of the pilgrimage, both Iyad our guide and Mark my priest talked about the land as the **fifth gospel**. Reading passages of scripture on the spot it took place, or on the spot where *some* people think it took place, adds another dimension to the readings.

You read the parable of the Good Samaritan and then see how dry and barren and desolate the road is between Jerusalem and Jericho. You sail around the Sea of Galilee on a boat that's supposed to be a replica of boats from Jesus' time. It's bigger than the boats you see in the paintings, and still when you close your eyes, you **feel** the way the waves rock and push the boat, even on a relatively calm and sunny day. If the wind picked up, the rain started falling hard, and the sky grew dark, you'd probably wake up Jesus if you could.

On that pilgrimage, we drove by one of the trees believed to be Zacchaeus' sycamore tree.¹ It was behind a fence, and an armed guard stood in front of it with his machine gun. Seeing the tree added a dimension of **physicality** to today's gospel.

Often, we focus on processing the lessons with our minds and with our hearts. We read commentaries and learn about the culture and history of those times. We engage in the practices of self-reflection and group discussion.

Adding a dimension of physicality helps the words come off the page and into our body and into our life. Sometimes our body knows how we feel and what we think before we can put words to it.

On one hand, we might think we're fine...but the tension in our neck and shoulders say otherwise.

On the other hand, smiles and smells can help our body relax and know that a place that's new to us can be home, even before we write out our pro and con list. The body knows, and the body remembers.

Experiencing these stories as the people in them did

can be a helpful reminder that

Jesus didn't come to this world to help us develop better theories about God, he came to make a concrete, tangible difference in our life, in the narratives about ourselves and our place in the world that we carry around in our body.

Let's explore what that looks like with today's gospel.

Jesus entered Jericho, and as soon as Zacchaeus heard the news, he rushed to the gates. By the time he got there, a large crowd had already gathered. Zacchaeus was short, so he couldn't see over their heads to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Imagine trying to squeeze through all these people to get a better spot. He tries to find the right gap at the right place at the right time. But when you're short, taller people look right over you so they don't make room for you. And not only was he short, he was the *chief tax collector*.

He's a representative of the Roman Empire; he is the tax collector of tax collectors. Everything that this crowd knows and feels about tax collectors, all of that is amplified when it comes to him. Moreover, he is a rich tax collector; he has consistently charged people much more than what they owe the empire.² This means that he's probably not very popular among **this** particular crowd.

So, while some are inclined to ignore him, others might decide to give him a hard time. After all, this is the rare instance where they have some power over the chief tax collector. A knee here, an elbow there. They closed ranks against him, blocking his way because Jesus was **theirs**. He came to bring good news to the poor; what could he possibly say to this rich man, this sinner?

Unable to make his way to Jesus, Zacchaeus tried to guess where Jesus was going. Desperate, he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree. By this point he was out of breath and stressed and exhausted. He knew what this crowd thought of him, and he was glad not to be among them. He sank his tired body into the branches of the tree and waited.

When Jesus came to this place, he looked up at him and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Zacchaeus felt a bolt of energy course through him.

Jesus **saw** him! Not only did Jesus see him, Jesus called.him.by.name. Even more exciting, Jesus asked something of him. Most people want something from Jesus, but here he was, a man who could offer something **to** Jesus. This filled him with energy and a sense of purpose, “so he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.”

After making himself as small as he could to fit through the crowds, after defending himself against them, he stood a little taller, a little straighter, because Jesus is coming to **his** house.

The rest of the crowd was annoyed by this. They muttered under their breath about Jesus being “the guest of one who is a sinner.” By this time, they shouldn’t be surprised, but they were still upset that this honor was granted to someone who already has so much. How was that fair?

Whether or not Zacchaeus heard them, he could guess what they were whispering. Still filled with the joy of having been seen and named and welcomed by Jesus, he made a pledge. “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

He said this out of joy and gratitude that Jesus sought him out with open arms. Jesus did not shame him into making amends. Jesus did not judge him for being the chief tax collector. Jesus showed him that despite what he has done, he can still be right with God. So, instead of being defensive and putting up walls, he felt safe enough to be open and admit what he knew in his heart. With the word “defrauded,” Zacchaeus admitted his guilt and promised to make things right.

This was far more than the law called for, far more than the people he defrauded would have expected. Jesus was more generous with him than he dared hope, given his profession. In response, it felt right to him to open **his** arms and extend that same generosity to the poor and those he overcharged.

Hearing this promise, Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

In the Magnificat, we hear that the hungry will be filled with good things, and the rich will be sent away empty. God does not do this by playing Robin Hood. God does not hack into bank accounts to redistribute wealth. Giving away his wealth and making restitution to those he defrauded is a sign that Zacchaeus is attuned to God, that he is walking the way of Jesus.

Something shifted in him, his definition of living a good life was no longer based on the wealth he has accumulated. Now that he feels like he can be right with God, he makes things right with other people by making reparations to those whose backs his wealth was built on. He wants the world to look more like the Kingdom of God, so he gives half his fortune to the poor.

Jesus said, “The Son of Man has come to seek out and to save the lost.” God sees us and loves us for who we are, no matter how tall we are, no matter what our job is, no matter the standards we use to judge ourselves.

How does your body feel when you hear those words?

How does your body feel when you say words like this to yourself, to each other?

I’m going to ask you to repeat after me. So, find a partner, or close your eyes and repeat after me.

You are a beloved child of God.
God takes great delight in you.
God is pleased with you.
God loves you.
Exactly as you are.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2nZCBQx-RQ>

² Johnson, E. E. (2010). [Exegetical Perspective](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 4, p. 261). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.