“***A Son of Abraham***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Nov. 3, 2019

[**Hab 1:1–4; 2:2, 4**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=284)

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?

3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

4 So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted. . .

2:2 Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. . . .

4 Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

**Luke 19:1–10**

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. 3He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

5When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” 6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” 8Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “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.”

9Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Habakkuk is one of the greatest of the neglected books of the Bible, although it was not neglected by the Apostle Paul, who twice quotes his remark “the righteous shall live by his faith” (2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11).

Habakkuk deals with the problem of evil: “Justice never prevails. The wicked surround the just” (1:4). Habakkuk provides two or three answers to this problem of evil. One is that answer about living by faith: regardless of what the wicked do, the just shall live by faith. Then he answers that God *has* punished evil nations (3:6–7), that “you came forth to save your people” and stopped those who were “gloating as if ready to devour the poor” (3:13–14). Usually, though, there’s a more close-to-home and personal side to our complaints about evil. We’ve been put down, mistreated, or not appreciated, and our grumblings about evil have this *personal*, emotional side.

Now there is some of that in the gospel story. It’s the evil of judgmental neighbors who look down their nose at a tax collector. And he feels it. Really this is a story of a short man being made to stand tall because of Jesus’ perceptiveness and encouragement. The very first thing Jesus says to him confers honor upon him. Honor was a *great* big deal in that society. Jesus says “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (19:5). It is an honor to be able to host a famed and respected teacher, so Zacchaeus is suddenly raised from the status of observer in a shameful position in a tree, to the honorable status of *host* for an honorable guest.

The townspeople immediately start grumbling against Jesus. It is easier for them to try to lower Jesus’ status than to accept that Zacchaeus’ status has been raised. But neither he nor Jesus pay them any mind. Zacchaeus is having an upsurge of conscience, and he tells Jesus he is going to give half his possessions to the poor, and even more if it turns out that he has over-taxed anyone. He himself raises the possibility that he might be a bit crooked, but we don’t know for sure.

In any case, Jesus speaks just one sentence to Zacchaeus, and the guy’s life is totally changed, something that happened to a number of people whom Jesus met: the woman at the well, Nathanael who became an apostle, the woman who touched the hem of his garment—they all had their lives changed in a matter of moments. Jesus has this effect on needy people, that is, people who *know* they have a need. In reality, we are *all* needy people, even the most Stoic, the most self-reliant, the most robust New Englander. It’s okay that we’re needy.

Each one has a different experience, because each one has different needs, and Jesus knows what those needs are. Now, he isn’t done with Zacchaeus yet. After the guy speaks from a place of moral resurgence, Jesus says “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (19:9). That is a great compliment, and he is signaling to the townsfolk that they need to respect this guy, because he, *too*, like them, is a son of Abraham, a Jew, deserving of respect from his fellow Jews there in Jericho.

So, besides needing to behave better toward the poor of his city, Zacchaeus needs to be liked and respected. After he acts on the former, Jesus takes care of the latter. What would be an equivalent one compliment for you? What would you like Jesus to recognize about you? Maybe he’d say: “well done, good and faithful servant,” or “take heart, daughter.” Or maybe you like to be identified through your parents: “Ron’s kid: you’re doing fine,” or “you daughter of Alta: well done.” Whatever you need to be lifted up, Jesus would say it. Then you would start doing whatever *needed* doing, as Zacchaeus did.

It would certainly make you forget to complain about bad things! It would make you swell with gratitude. Instead of questioning God about bad things, you might ask what *you* can do to relieve someone’s distress or suffering. You can reach out, like Jesus did, seeking to *see* God in others. Although people are not perfect, we can honor the Godliness within them, and uplift it. That could just mean listening to someone, or taking notice of what they’re doing.

Jesus finishes with a final message that restates his entire mission: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (19:10). That’s his mission, saving people. Not judging them, not separating them into groups for reward or punishment, not compelling them to bow the knee to him, nor applying any kind of force, but just seeking and saving the lost.

If Jesus were going to *compel* people, he wouldn’t have said “seek.” That word implies doing some legwork, having to search out and find people who are *ready* to be saved, people who recognize they have a spiritual need. Zacchaeus knew that he needed to treat the poor better. He also needed more self-respect, and Jesus helped with that. So you, also, can treat others well, and have some mercy on yourself, too.

I’ll let Habakkuk have the last word. The prophet says, of those who are arrogant, “Their spirit is not right in them” (Hab 2:4). So get your spirit right with God, if you need to. Regain confidence in God’s guidance, then you’ll know, in your own experience, that “the just shall live by their faith.”