

“Don’t Sneeze or You’ll Miss It!”  
Luke 19:1-10  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached October 31, 2010 at San José, Costa Rica

On the back roads of the United States, there are towns you drive through that are so small that they define the saying, “Don’t sneeze, or you’ll miss it.” Often just a post office, a small grocery, a coffee shop where old men trade stories, and perhaps a church on a slightly wider stretch of highway, the only indication something is coming is a “Reduced Speed Ahead” sign a few hundred yards before you get to it. To their inhabitants, there is surely much to behold in such towns, and perhaps for us too if we took the time to stop and meet and greet; stories, history, natural wonders not found listed in even the best guidebook, amazing opportunities missed during the length of a sneeze, or maybe just simple indifference. I wonder what else we miss when we sneeze, or when we just don’t care. Life, I suppose. Or a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Or at least the answers to the questions that torture our souls.

The question “Then who can be saved?” is one of those soul-twisting questions. “Then who can be saved?” was the question asked by those who had witnessed the encounter between Jesus and an unnamed man whom we have taken to calling the rich young ruler. You will remember that this man approached Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, and when he went away sad because Jesus told him he would need to part with all of his worldly possessions,

Jesus responded by saying, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” to which Jesus replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God,” a true answer if not a very satisfying one at the moment. Those with that troubling question on their lips probably still had the image of a camel and a needle in their mind’s eye, thinking that if the rich, with all their benefits and advantages, all their education and better health, all their art and culture, all their well-built homes with servants to take care of them, if they would have a hard time squeezing through, how much harder would it be for those who were disadvantaged, who brought nothing to the equation except their misery? Why would they be wanted in the kingdom of heaven if they weren’t even wanted on earth?

I didn’t hear any sneezes while I was reading the Gospel so I am assuming you saw the camel pass through the eye of the needle. It did, you know. If you didn’t see it, it could be that you weren’t paying attention. The camel that passed through the eye of a needle was named Zacchaeus, a son of Abraham, a rich man who found salvation, a man who went away joyful rather than sad following his encounter with Jesus. “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” Yes, the story of Zacchaeus is the bookend to the story of the rich young ruler, bookends in the Gospel of Luke that enclose a pair of stories that are like a couple

of small towns on a back country road, easy to miss if you sneeze, or just don't care to pay attention. You see, in between the stories of the rich young ruler, and his more celebrated counterpart, the short, rich tax collector, is Jesus' third and final revelation to the disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection, as well as the story of Jesus healing a blind beggar who called out to him from the side of the road, both stories which should be as important to us as to their characters, since they proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ that makes possible the camel's passing through the eye of the needle. The first of these stories sheds light on Jesus' wisdom that "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God," for what else demonstrates God's power like resurrection. The second gives hope to the poor who asked the question. If they were wondering how the poor would fare on the entrance exam for the kingdom, they found their answer as one of their own, a blind beggar, makes the grade in God's eyes. The only ones left are the rich, and Luke wraps it all up with the story of Zacchaeus, to show that God's mercy doesn't stop with the middle class, thanks be to God.

The sad fact of the matter is that for many people, their lives are journeys they've spent speeding through the countryside, never pausing to stop, let alone slow down to see what a new place has to offer. And then they get to the end of that journey and realize that reaching the destination wasn't really the point, and that it's too late to retrace their route to revisit all they missed. We can imagine the rich young ruler as a rich old ruler, sitting on his throne ruing the fact that he

wasted the opportunity to take Jesus up on his offer. How many similar stories have we heard? How many similar people have we known? How often have we wondered if that will be our fate too? Have we simply sneezed our lives away?

It doesn't seem like much of a stretch to imagine Zacchaeus asking himself that question, and deciding that indeed he has missed what life really has to offer. And so he runs ahead and climbs that tree, and places his hopes in a man he has never met, and may never even get to see, given the disadvantage of his stature. Perhaps he realized the truth in what Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel has said, that "because of indifference, one dies before one actually dies." But this will be his one chance, Jesus' last visit to Jericho, and so he makes a decision that changes his life, and hears the surprising yet welcome words, "Today, salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." "Today, salvation has come to this house." Today. Not yesterday, and not tomorrow, but today. The same day Zacchaeus made his decision to seek Jesus is the day Jesus made known his decision to receive Zacchaeus, and every day after that would be different than those that came before. There will be no more sneezing and missing, no more indifferent days. There will now be the real faces of those he has defrauded whom he will pay back fourfold, and the real faces of the poor whose lives he will bless with the wealth he will give. He will reenter the life of his community, and his heritage, and his faith. Those who grumbled when Jesus decided to eat in his home will be transformed into friends, and the Romans with whom he was in business

will become enemies. And it all begins today.

A few weeks ago, I played a song to conclude the sermon time, a song called “One More Day,” written by David M. Bailey. In that song, he celebrates what he can embrace each morning given one more day, “today,” in the language of tonight’s Gospel lesson. If you listen to more of David Bailey’s songs, you can hear just how precious he considered “today,” since almost every “today” could be his last. David Bailey, you see, had brain cancer, and although he survived far longer than the doctors expected, he knew he would not survive forever. And so he went about observing and chronicling in song all that he had learned from God was precious, not only his family and those who loved him, but also the sights and sounds of everyday life around him, and he was the richer for it, and so we continue to be, if we are not indifferent to today.

A hundred and fifty years earlier, there was another artist whose devotion to God and whose attention to detail led him to write some of the most famous and beloved poems of the nineteenth century. Gerard Manley Hopkins never let his attention wander, and he was rewarded by seeing beauty where others might have seen nothing. As an example, from his journal on June 5, 1873 he writes simply, “The turkey and hens will let a little chick mount their backs and sit between the wings.” It is not that Hopkins was a scientist trapped in the body of a poet that led him to detail in his journal the mundane and the magnificent, and then share it with us, but rather that in the details he saw God’s grace in his life, and in the life of the

world. Hopkins was a Jesuit priest, but by all accounts not a very good one, a fact which led him to no small amount of despair. In his own lifetime he was not even recognized as much of a poet, rarely published and never celebrated. But he never stopped reflecting on his todays, in all their glory, and so it is that since 1918, when his works were first published some thirty years after his death, the world has been blessed with a way of seeing which gives witness to both mortal beauty and God's grace in words such as these he wrote in 1877:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is smeared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod

And, for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs –  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

One biographer of Hopkins has said, "Of the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins it might be said that he's difficult only if you try to understand him." I prefer to simply delight in his combinations of words that I could never put together myself, and which reveal a God you and I both desperately need to see. Perhaps the same should be said of Jesus' curious statement about that camel passing through the eye of a needle. It is only difficult if you try to understand it.

But if you simply celebrate the fact that it really happened, and happens still today, you can live in the today that Zacchaeus was given, and that we are given, and rejoice in the grace of a God who didn't sneeze when passing by that tree in Jericho, but stopped to meet and greet, and remind us all of the salvation offered to us today. Amen.