

“Setting Our Gaze on God’s Horizon”

Fifth Sermon in the Lenten Series: *Learning to Live in the Desert – HORIZON: Hope*

Luke 18:31 – 9:10

New Revised Standard Version

Luke’s gospel turns OUR gaze to JESUS’ gaze as he looks up toward Jerusalem and foretells his death and resurrection – for a third time.

The first time he does this, in chapter nine, Jesus stresses that his suffering, rejection, and death will be at the hands of the *religious* elite – the elders, chief priests, and scribes (Luke 9:21-22). The second time, twenty verses later, Jesus is blunt; he simply says he’ll be betrayed into *human hands* (Luke 9:43b-45). And in this third and final foretelling nine chapters later, Jesus says he’ll be handed over to the *Gentiles*, will be mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged, and killed. These three predictions paint a clear picture: Jesus is rejected by his own religious leadership, by the public (everyday people), and by the political powers that be in Rome.¹

You see when Jesus sets his gaze to Jerusalem, he is not just saying to his disciples there are a few bad apples out there who might hurt me so we need to be careful. No, he is saying there is a whole system at work here that is causing harm – a system of power in the religious structure, a system of power in the political structure, and yes, my beloveds, even a system of power in your own hearts.

For 18 chapters in Luke’s gospel Jesus has been trying to show this to his disciples, but they cannot see what he sees. And because they cannot see it, they cannot understand it. In fact, Luke says, “*it was hidden from them because they could not grasp what he was saying,*” (18:34).

What we cannot see, we cannot even begin to understand. This begs the question: Where are we casting our gaze? Because there are things happening all

¹ Karl Jacobson, “Commentary on Luke 18:31—19:10,” *The Working Preacher* (17 March 2013), accessed on March 19, 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/zacchaeus/commentary-on-luke-1831-43191-10>.

around us demanding to be seen and if we choose not to see, we choose not to understand. Ignorance is not bliss; ignorance is blinding.

Where we set our gaze matters. Because what we see leads us to what we come to understand. And when we understand something new, it changes us; we can never go back to a place of unknowing or unseeing. This may sound overwhelming, because new information often shakes up our foundational beliefs and assumptions, but once we get over that initial shock of realizing that what we were seeing before wasn't the full picture, we can then begin to feel a sense of hope because we cannot change what we do not see or know, but when come to see or know differently, we can change – ourselves and our society.

This week we saw yet another violent and deadly set of shootings. This time the city was metro-Atlanta. This time the location was businesses, spas. This time the victims were mostly women, mostly

women of Asian-decent. This time the shooter was, yet again, a young white male Christian. This time, at the time of my filming this sermon, the rationale given for the shooter's intent was that he had a sex addiction and he was dealing with a lot and was having a bad day. If we wanted to, we could stop our gaze right there and say, well, okay – this was a disturbed man who did a horrifically violent thing. But to do so is to stop short. Way too short. Our gaze must linger, and it must go further back.

To see this week's murder spree as an isolated tragic incident is to NOT see all the pain and fear and grief that the Asian American Pacific Islander community is feeling and has been feeling for months and for years. To see this as an isolated incident is not to see the history of harm and discrimination against people of Asian descent throughout our country's history by people in power, largely white people. It is in the facts of history, but if we do not read or learn the history of the past or listen to

the voices and experiences that are speaking in the present, we do not see it, we will not see it. And in not seeing it we are saying to our siblings of color – we don't care to understand.

From the 1854 California Supreme Court Case which ruled that an Asian person couldn't testify against a white person in a criminal proceeding, to the 1871 Chinese massacre when rioters killed 10% of the Chinese population in Los Angeles, to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act which legalized a 10-year ban on Chinese labor immigration, to the 1942 executive order that led to tens of thousands of Japanese people being forced to leave their homes and live in internment camps, regardless of their citizenship,² to 2020, when racial epithets were being used by our country's top leadership to describe the Coronavirus – it is clear that what happened this week in

Atlanta cannot be interpreted apart from this chain of history. Perhaps you read the report this week from *Stop AAPI Hate* that documents and details the almost 3,800 incidents over the last year against people of Asian descent – verbal harassment, physical assault, shunning, avoidance, being coughed or spat upon, refusal of service, being barred from establishment.³ What struck me in reading this report is that these are the same types of behaviors that we see inflicted upon Jesus in Jerusalem – he is verbally harassed, he is physically assaulted, he is shunned, betrayed, avoided, and denied, he is spat upon, mocked, and insulted, he is refused and barred from the establishment and he is put upon a cross; murdered.

You see, if we stop our gaze short and view each act of hate and misogyny and xenophobia and racism in isolation then we will miss what we most

² Maura Hohman, "Anti-Asian violence has surged in the US since COVID-19. But it didn't start there," *Today* (6 March 2021), accessed on March 19, 2021 at <https://www.today.com/news/anti-asian-violence-history-anti-asian-racism-us-t210645>.

³ Report accessed on March 19, 2021 on stopAAPIhate.org at <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>.

desperately need to see. That from before Jesus' day and in Jesus' day and still in our day, abuse of power dehumanizes people who are different in any way from those in power, and this dehumanization has led us, gradually and blindingly, to think that this is just the way things have always been and must be. People in power abuse power. People on the margins suffer and die. It's in the pages of our Bible, it's in the pages of our news – what can we do about it? But this attitude of resignation, and this posture of turning away or pushing back is painfully self-protecting of power and of privilege.

Because of my socio-economic status, and education, and skin color, and religion, I walk around in our society pretty blind. I certainly have been blind to the depths of discrimination against the AAPI community. This does not mean I am bad; it means I am blind; it means that I must open my eyes and see. I must not wait for my eyes to be opened by the news of the latest violent act against a person of

color in our country but rather intentionally do the work to see and proactively educate myself each and every day. Jesus has been trying to show his disciples this from the beginning. He's been trying to teach them to see what they do not see on their own. He wants them to see with the gaze of God and knows that they can – if they so choose.

While the subject is complex and nuanced and emotionally wrenching and perhaps uncomfortable, it is not difficult to choose to learn about the history of racism and white supremacy culture in our country and in our Christianity. There's never been more information so readily available to us that can help us learn what we do not even know we need to know or have been kept from knowing. This information will not come across our T.V. screens in the mainstream media though, so we have to choose to care enough and connect enough with the pain of others, to want to learn what we do not know and to UNlearn some things we

thought we knew. When we do so, we choose to listen to the stories of people who are hurting, without questioning their experience, or trying to compare it to ours. Our own lens is inherently limited because we are each only one person. Seeing and understanding the experiences of others will not come naturally to us; it takes intentionality and time, lots of time. It did in Jesus' day and it does in our day too. Why do you think Jesus was sitting down to have so many meals with people? Cause these aren't quick hallway conversations, these are dive in and keep talking through a second cup of coffee and a third piece of pie kind of conversations! When we choose to listen and learn, we begin to see. Even if we do not understand yet – we begin to see.

I wonder about the disciples at the beginning of today's passage. They hear the words coming out of Jesus' mouth, words predicting his own suffering and death, and yet they do not understand. Is it

because it's too painful for them to think about? If so, perhaps they need to allow themselves to feel that pain because if Jesus did not think it was important for them to know he would be mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged, and crucified he would not have told them those violent details. Or maybe they do not understand because they simply don't think that kind of stuff happens; but crucifixions had been going on a long time, have they not been paying attention? Rome, as the occupying power, had been abusing and exploiting their people for a while. Even their own religious authorities had been exploiting the temple of God for wealth and power. Jesus was simply showing his disciples what was already all around them. He was trying to help them have the eyes to see what God was seeing and how what God was seeing was breaking God's heart so much so that God sent Jesus to earth to show them all the pain and violence of their ways and to show them that there was a different way.

I can really relate to the disciples here because I too have the privilege of listening and learning when I want to, and tuning out when it gets to be too much. Because my life has never been on the line. But the more my eyes are opened, the more I see what Jesus is trying to show me, I see just how much my life IS on the line. My *soteria* (which is the Greek word in this text translated as salvation), my *soteria*, my salvation, is directly related to the *soteria* of every single person that God created – as Morgan so beautifully preached last week.

And this is what we see in the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a Jewish man who worked for Rome to collect taxes in a profession that was highly unregulated; tax collectors could choose to charge whatever percentage of commission they wanted to over and above the tax owed to Rome. We don't know what Zacchaeus charged, but it was enough to make him rich. This matters because Zacchaeus receives the proclamation from

Jesus about 'soteria or *salvation coming to his house*' at the very moment he declares that he will CHANGE his ways and "*give to the poor and for the people he has defrauded he'll pay them back four times as much*" (vs 8).

This Greek word for salvation literally means: "*the act of being preserved from harm or delivered from harm.*" Salvation, deliverance from harm, has come to Zacchaeus' house not just because HIS life is now better but because of ALL the lives he is making better by his changed behavior. He is stopping a future cycle of harm and exploitation in its tracks and is repaying those who he has harmed in the past. This word salvation does not mean life in heaven with God, it means the state of being preserved from harm or delivered from harm here on earth. And Zacchaeus, in stopping his greed and fraud, is delivering people from harm, including himself.

THIS is *soteria*; this is salvation! It is the very

transformation that Jesus wanted for the rich man in last week's text and here it is with Zacchaeus today. It's a great example of how Jesus effects change in us and how our change has an immediate impact on the world. Zacchaeus shows us that ONE PERSON's change DOES make a difference. It's such an amazingly hopeful story. That we can and do change when our eyes are opened, when a conversation is shared over a meal and a new perspective is gained.

And here's the kicker: Jesus didn't just pop into Zacchaeus' house randomly. Zacchaeus had to climb a tree to see Jesus; he had to do a little work on his own to see this man he had heard about. He went out on a limb (pun intended) for Jesus, and Jesus sees him and doesn't ridicule or dehumanize him for his sin, but he humanizes him by going into his home – and Zacchaeus is changed. And salvation comes. Not just to Zacchaeus. But to his whole house. Salvation here and now. *Soteria*.

In so many ways, Zacchaeus models for the disciples, and for us, what it means to set our gaze on Christ. It begins with an intentional action on our part, climbing that tree to see more clearly, to see what we cannot yet see, but Jesus will not leave us hanging out on a limb on our own. Jesus pulls us into a community of fellow seekers and seek-ers so that all of us together, can set our gaze on God's horizon.

And God's horizon is not just a stunning sunset or sunrise that makes us feel warm and fuzzy. There are some really painful experiences on the horizon for Jesus coming up, but through all of that there is hope on the horizon because after the mocking, after the insulting, after the spitting and the flogging, after the killing, Jesus says to his disciples, "*on the third day I will rise.*"

The resurrection of Christ is the ultimate horizon of hope that God invites us to set our gaze on. But we don't get to the resurrection without the

crucifixion. Some things have to die in us, in our society, in our culture, in our religion, in order for us to rise with Christ.

The rising comes when we understand what we need to let die and be buried. And we can't get to the understanding of what needs to die until we have the eyes to see the pain and suffering and injustice that is right before us and all around us. Jesus foretells his SUFFERING, DEATH, and resurrection (not just the happy part, the resurrection). He does not allow us to overlook what is painful to see in order to get to what is beautiful. In fact, it's almost as if he's showing us when he sets his gaze toward Jerusalem that unless we see the pain that must be journeyed through and acknowledged, and the change that must happen, we may never truly see the full beauty and miracle of God's horizon of hope. It will be obscured and clouded by our limited vision until we allow our gaze to be more expansive.

⁴ Definition from March 19, 2021 at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/horizo>.

A horizon is “*the line at which the earth's surface and the sky appear to meet*”⁴ – and theologically we'd say the horizon is “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” But the second definition of horizon according to Miriam-Webster is: “*the limit of a person's mental perception, experience, or interest.*”⁵

You see, our background and upbringing, our experiences, our proud moments and our painful ones – those things make up our story. And our story is important. But our story is only one story. To set our gaze on God's horizon is to continually be EXPANDING our own horizon by asking – whose story is not being told? What faces and voices are not regularly represented in my circle of friends, in my workplace, in my church, in my family?

Liz Kleinrock is an Asian American teacher in Washington, D.C. And when

⁵ Ibid.

she asked her diverse classroom of 50 students on Thursday how many of them could name just three Asian Americans (friends, famous people, anyone) – only 4 students raised their hands.⁶ She recognizes that the problem is not just that the histories of minority and marginalized communities are not being taught in schools, it is also that we literally do not know the stories or experiences of people different than us because we are not seeing people different than us. Her classroom of 50 students is not unique. We could all ask ourselves, how many of us can name three people of Asian descent, or three people who are indigenous or three people who are transgender or Muslim or disabled or first generation English-speaking or who are formerly or currently incarcerated or who live in a rural or impoverished area?

It all begins with seeing, and we cannot see the people and stories that we do not surround

ourselves with. So – how do we begin seeing what we do not have around us to see?

Well, our middle story today gives us a clue. The blind man who was on the road begging, when someone else told him Jesus was passing by (side note: sometimes we need others to point out what we cannot see on our own and when they do, we need to believe what they're saying!), so when the man believed the crowds who told him that it was Jesus passing by, the blind man cried out, *“have mercy on me!...Lord, let me see again.”* And Jesus said, *“Receive your sight, your faith has saved you”* (18:38-43).

“Lord, have mercy on me, let me see again.” It is true that in that day this man's physical blindness was most likely interpreted as a fault because of some sin he committed. We may not hold that theology today, but the metaphor of one who knows they have sinned asking for mercy and for sight – is a powerful act that does still

⁶ Interview between Austin Channing Brown and Liz Kleinrock on Instagram TV (@austinchanning) on March 19, 2021.

hold true today. Perhaps, you like me, recognize at times just the kind of blindness that you've been walking around with. Can we courageously cry out, "*Lord, have mercy,*" and "*let me see!*"

Because God wants us to see and the minute we ask for sight and start seeing, we can't stop! Once we become aware of an injustice from another person's experience, we will start seeing their story echoed in other stories. The more we see the more we understand. And THIS is good news, Calvary, because as this man who was once blind, regains his sight – he starts glorifying God, and "*all the people, when THEY SAW him, they started praising God too!*" (18:43).

It starts with our changed vision, but it doesn't stop there. We must proclaim it out loud, as the man whose sight was restored did so that OTHERS too can see what we are seeing, AND we must change our behavior – as Zacchaeus did. And look at the ripple effect – the *soteria* – the salvation – the

healing – the deliverance from harm that followed!

You see, setting our gaze on God's horizon is inherently hopeful and hope-filled – because it means that when we see as God sees, it's not just our vision that is changed, our world is too. And just as it was in Jesus' day, it's not just the vision of one or two of us that needs to be changed, the horizon of our whole country must shift and expand until it includes every single person in God's gaze.

This is what Jesus was showing his disciples as he gazed toward Jerusalem; he was showing them the systemic injustices that would lead to his death, while also showing them the true change that individual actions can make within the system. Because on their way into the city that represented the hub of all that power, Jerusalem, as they passed through a despised city called Jericho, there were two individuals that gained sight and were changed. The way we get to God's gaze is both

collective and individual; it is both systemic and personal.

As Jesus set his gaze to Jerusalem can we too set our gaze on God's horizon instead of on our own limited individual horizons? Because resurrection will come when the horizon is changed for ALL of us, and the hope that will change that horizon for ALL of us begins with EACH one of us.

Amen.