

Faith Bible Study Guide
For the Week of April 6, 2025 - Fifth Sunday in Lent
“Everything [In] Between: Righteousness & Mercy”



Be still [2 Minutes]: As you hear these Centering Words, let us greet each other, greet the Holy Spirit, and begin with 1 minute of silence, breathing in the breath of God and allow the group to open themselves to the Holy Spirit today:

CENTERING WORDS: *Righteousness & Mercy*

As children we were taught to tell the teacher.
(Justice was dealt when we spoke up.)
As children we were taught to always be kind.
(Friends were made when we spoke love.)
As children we were taught that Zaccheus
climbed a tree.
(But we cut that tree down a long time ago.)
So what are the rules for this day and age?
Can we turn black and white into shades of gray?
Do we call each other out, for righteousness
sake?
Do we call each other in? Do we grab something
to eat?
As always, love is somewhere in between.

OPENING PRAYER: *Prayer for illumination*

Loving God,
Week after week we return to this space,
because we long to see you.
Like Zacchaeus who climbed a tree
to get a peek at you as you walked by,
we come to this sanctuary hoping to get a peek
of your goodness,
of your joy,
of your light.
So speak to us through these ancient words.
Let us get a peek of the love that lingers here.
Gratefully we pray, amen.

Be the Word Scripture Lesson: Luke 19:1-10

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. **2** A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. **3** He was trying to see who Jesus was, but being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. **5** When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." **6** So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. **7** Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." **8** Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." **9** Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. **10** The Human One[a] came to seek and save the lost."

Be present: [Being mindful of others and sharing time]

1. Take a deep breath. *How is it with your soul?*
2. Have you ever made a decision in an instant that completely changed or transformed the way you

thought it would have gone if you had gone with your first decision?

3. What is something you feel righteous indignation about? Is it different from “self-righteous indignation”?

Be rooted: [Bible Study]

The series at a glance

This series is inspired by the Narrative Lectionary and sequentially follows the Gospel of Luke from chapter 9-24.

Lent

ASH WED.	1 ST SUN IN LENT	2 ND SUN IN LENT	3 RD SUN IN LENT	4 TH SUN IN LENT	5 TH SUN IN LENT
intention & action	stranger & neighbor	faith & works	rest & growth	lost & found	righteousness & mercy
Luke 9:51-62 (Jesus sets out for Jerusalem)	Luke 10:25-37 (Parable of the Good Samaritan)	Luke 10:38-42 (Mary & Martha host Jesus)	Luke 13:6-9 (Parable of the fig tree)	Luke 15:1-7 (Parable of the lost sheep)	Luke 19:1-10 (Zacchaeus greets Jesus)

Holy week

PALM / PASSION SUNDAY	MAUNDY THURS	GOOD FRIDAY	EASTER SUNDAY
shouting & silence	power & humility	acceptance & resistance	grief & hope
Luke 19:29-40 (Jesus enters Jerusalem)	Luke 22:1-27 (Last Supper)	Luke 23:32-49 (Jesus dies alongside a penitent thief)	Luke 24:1-12 (The women grieve and Peter runs to the tomb)

Focal Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Theme Connections:

The crowds grumble at Jesus’ self-invitation to stay with Zacchaeus, and their righteous indignation isn’t without cause. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus has extorted money and acted in collusion with the empire, using his position to oppress his own people. It is important to call out oppression, and yet, Jesus offers mercy. That mercy then begets more mercy as Zacchaeus, unprompted, offers to return what he took, and then some.

Commentary on Luke 19:1-10 by Rev. Jeff Chu

A love so attentive—and so offensive—that it healed

“God has a really bad habit of using people we don’t approve of,” Rachel Held Evans²⁴ once said. “What makes the gospel offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in.”

I might tweak Evans’s formulation and put it this way: God has a really bad habit of loving people we don’t approve of. Or maybe this: God has a really bad habit of showing mercy to people we don’t approve of. Or maybe: God has a really bad habit of extending grace to people we don’t approve of.

All are true, as is evident in Jesus’s encounter with Zacchaeus. In those times, tax collectors were loathed. The phrase “tax collectors and sinners” appears multiple times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in one testy exchange with the chief priests and elders, Jesus tosses a rhetorical grenade into their midst, saying, “The tax

collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”²⁵

Tax collectors were stooges of the Roman Empire. They betrayed their own people and enriched themselves in service to the oppressor. And Zacchaeus was no average corrupt bureaucrat. He’d amassed immense wealth, climbing on others’ backs to the rank of chief tax collector. In other words, he was a senior deplorable. So it especially galled the gathered crowds that, of everyone clamoring for Jesus’s attention that day in Jericho, he would choose to stay with that man. Can you believe it?

The good teacher would want to be in the home of that despicable, unrepentant sinner? I say “unrepentant” because, before Jesus invites himself over, the vertically challenged Zacchaeus has done nothing except climb a tree to get a better view, again setting himself apart from his people. He hasn’t admitted wrongdoing, resigned his position, or confessed his sin. Still, Jesus says, I will abide with you.

It’s striking that Jesus never called Zacchaeus out—no loud shaming, no public humiliation. Rather, this seems like the gentlest calling-in. Faced with Jesus’ tender warmth, Zacchaeus descends from the tree, rejoins the people, and immediately pledges restitution—a two-pronged act of reconciliation with both God and neighbor. Confirmation of this remarkable turnabout comes in Jesus’s declaration: “Today salvation has come to this house.”²⁶ Our ears might be tempted to hear an absolution of individual sin. But Jesus says “to this house,” not “to this man,” which hints at something broader. The Greek word σωτηρία (soteria), translated here as “salvation,” also means “deliverance.” Woven into σωτηρία is a suggestion not just of cleansing but also of wholeness. In the communal culture of Jesus’ day, salvation meant the wholeness derived from belonging. By repenting, Zacchaeus had been delivered from broken relationship with his people back into the wholeness of community.

We can’t know how Zacchaeus would have responded if Jesus had instead tried loud condemnation. We do know that what worked was winsome grace, gentle mercy, and a love so attentive—and so offensive—that it healed.

1. In their commentary on Luke, Amy Levine and Ben Witherington III point out that Zacchaeus’s name derives from the Hebrew word for “fidelity” or “righteousness,” however, they they note: “this fellow has all the marks of someone who is neither: he was both a chief tax collector and rich. . . .²⁷ the people presume Zacchaeus to be a sinner because he takes goods from the Jewish people and gives them to Rome.”²⁸
 - As the story introduces Zacchaeus, do you label him a certain way?
 - Do you make assumptions about who he is? Is he a walking oxymoron, or a deeply complicated human?
2. The crowds that witness Jesus inviting himself to dine with Zacchaeus express their discontent with loud grumbling, which is the same word used to describe the Pharisees and scribes in Luke 15:2 who say, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” According to Strong’s Lexicon, “In the Greco-Roman world, public discourse and expression of dissatisfaction were common, especially in political and social contexts. The act of murmuring or grumbling was often seen as a form of passive resistance or dissent. In the Jewish context, murmuring against God or His appointed leaders was considered a serious offense, reflecting a lack of faith and trust in divine providence.”³¹
 - Do you feel as if the crowd’s grumbling is justified, or misguided?
 - Do you think you would join the grumblers if Jesus dined with someone you considered to be an egregious sinner?
3. Zacchaeus comes down from the tree to welcome Jesus gladly (Luke 19:6). The same Greek word, *hupodechomai*, is used to describe Martha welcoming Jesus into her home (Luke 10:38).
 - Consider what occurs in each of these stories where Jesus is welcomed into someone’s home. Is hospitality (hosting and receiving) a space for spiritual and personal transformation?

4. The verbs in Zacchaeus's statements in Luke 19:8 are often translated as "I will," in future tense, but some scholars argue that these verbs would be more accurately translated in present tense, which changes how we might understand Zacchaeus's actions.³²
 - Is he repenting and promising to do better?
 - Or is he wildly misjudged and misunderstood by the crowds, and this is his testimony to his current and ongoing efforts to give to the poor and not defraud anyone? What do you think?
 - How does your interpretation impact who deserves mercy and who is righteous in this story?

5. Regardless of how you interpret Zacchaeus's character and his current practices (or future promises) for handling his money fairly and generously, one thing is true: Zacchaeus is estranged from the community, but by the end of the story, reconciliation seems to occur, or at least become possible.
 - What allows true reconciliation to take place when a community is divided?

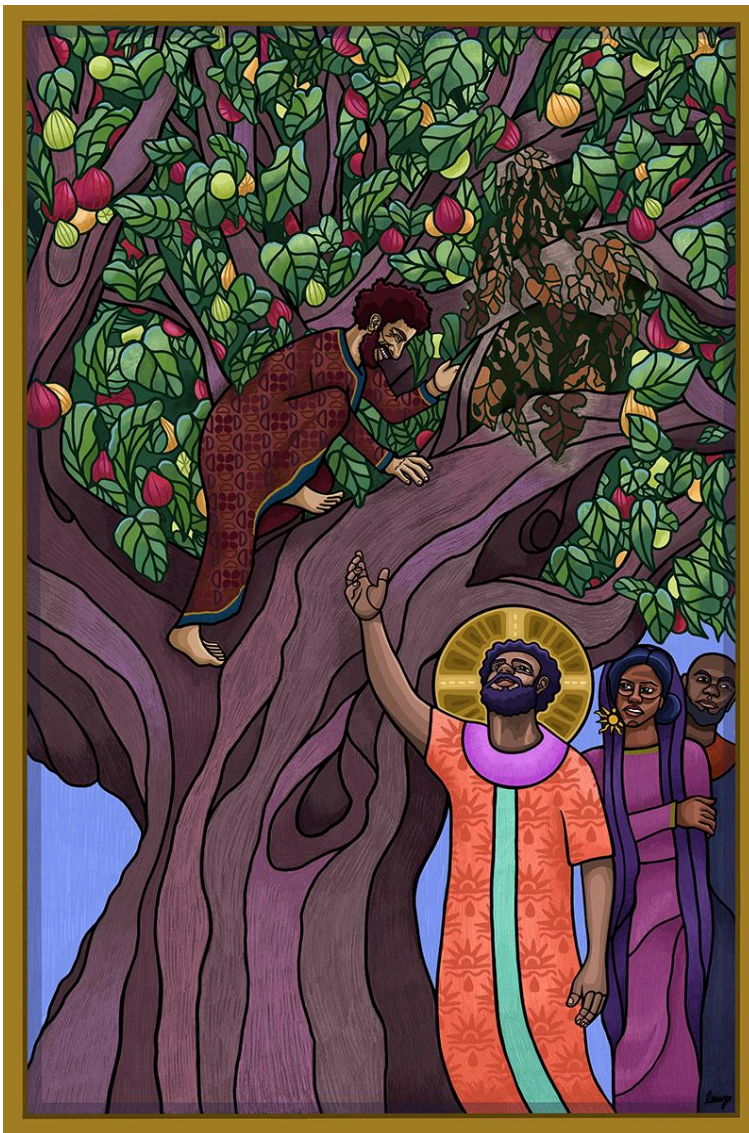
27 The Gospel of Luke, 510.

28 Ibid, 511.

29 The art and artist statement are included in the Everything In Between Visual Art Collection.

30 Fauna and Flora of the Bible, by United Bible Societies. (United Bible Societies, 1980). 179-181.

Be transformed: [Faith in Action]



Artist statement | Lauren Wright Pittman
Read Luke 19:1-10

Read Lauren Wright Pittman's artist statement for her image, Zacchaeus.

I had a lot of fun discovering new layers to this familiar story. I learned that Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore fig tree, which was a food source for poor people because the fruit was bitter and generally undesirable.¹⁸ I had always imagined a fruitless tree, but the presence of fruit opened up interesting avenues to explore. The root word for sycamore tree is σΥΚΟΝ, meaning "fig," and as I did a study of other key words in the text, I noticed this same root word in σΥΚΟΦΑΝΤΕΩ, or "defrauded," which was used to describe what Zacchaeus did to his community. It was curious to me that the root word for "defrauded" was "fig," so I dug deeper to find that the Greek word was from the phrase "fig-informer" or a person who would notify authorities if one was exporting figs from Greece without paying a tax. It seemed that these "fig-informers" would use the threat of exposure to extort money from fig farmers. This is where the word "sycophant" comes from, which evolved to more generally describe a "malignant accuser from love of gain," which perfectly describes Zacchaeus.¹⁹

Jesus calls Zacchaeus out of his identity as "sycophant" into his new identity as "repentant host" who invites Jesus into his home and redistributes his ill-gotten wealth. Zacchaeus's clothing holds a repeated pattern of four figs and halves of coins, referencing the fruits of his transformation.

The area where Zacchaeus sat in the tree is fruitless and dying. His actions were destructive and oppressive to his own community. The crowd is correct in grumbling about him; their anger is righteous, but Jesus offers mercy. In this visual metaphor, Jesus removes him from the tree so it has a chance to heal and nourish the whole community. Jesus' clothing is patterned with suns, representing righteousness, and water, representing mercy, because it is through his merciful actions that righteousness for the community is achieved.

¹⁸ Fauna and Flora of the Bible, by United Bible Societies. (United Bible Societies, 1980). 179-181.

¹⁹ For discussion of the word "sycophant" (Strong's G4811), please see: blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4811/

In it, she describes what she discovered about the historical context of the tree that Zacchaeus climbs. She notes: "I learned that Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore fig tree, which was a food source for poor people because the fruit was bitter and generally undesirable."

How does knowing more about the tree add complexity and nuance to this familiar story? (I LOVE THIS QUESTION!)

Prayers & Concerns / Announcements:

- **Using the Lenten Devotional and Prayer Cards** ~ includes songs, poems, prayers, and deeper understanding of the weekly messages
- **PALM SUNDAY:** bring palms from your yard
- **Maundy Thursday - potluck dinner at 5pm, Service at 7pm**
- **Good Friday - El Tordondo Joint Service at 7pm at Redondo Beach First UMC**
- **Easter Egg donations: filled Easter eggs**
 - **April 19 - Taco Picnic & Egg Hunt, 12-2pm**
- **EASTER SUNDAY:** bring flowers to flower the Cross at Sunrise Service (7am); 9am Joint Service, 10:30am, Easter Celebration Service

Joys & Celebrations:

For Healing and Wholeness:

- Diane Ueda-Banda
- Audrey Goto
- Sayaka Shigeta's MOM
- Fred Oshiro
- Masako Akiyama
- Florence Uchida
- Alvena Fukuhara*
- Victoria DelaTorre*
- Austin Maeda
- Nancy Matsushima
- Mary Tamura
- Harriet Tateyama*
- Brian Okumura (Sandy Ueyuenten's brother)

- Glenn & Millie Shimizu
- Larry Takumi
- Yoshi Yamasaki
- Pastor Sid Wilson (Walteria UMC)
- Claretta Foster
- Rev. Mike Hiranuma
- Jack Honda

Life Transitions/Moved to Transitional

Care:

- Chic Miyake
- Ruth Hirata
- Bess Kawamura
- Sumi Horii
- Jack Hamada
- Ryonos
- Emma Horiuchi
- Doris Kato
- Rev Harry Fujimoto

- Florence Uchida
- Faith Tanaka
- Sue Hasegawa

Absent from the Body, Present with the Lord:

- Baby Joel and Mom Cameron - prayers for their grieving family (God-family of Susan Slade)
- Hannah Yamamoto (February 12, 2025) - Charter Member - RSVP - April 12, 11am

Prayers for the World

- Our government
- Earthquakes (Myanmar/Burma, Tonga)
- Fire recovery victims

And Know that He is God: Affirmation of faith

In a world that loves to cast blame
and point fingers,
Jesus loved by different rules.
He offered mercy.
He invited people to dinner.
He told stories of love.
He chose to see the best in others.
We believe that small acts of mercy
and compassion have ripple effects in our lives.
We believe that small acts of righteousness
and justice are integral to a life of faith.
So like Christ, we believe in
offering mercy,
inviting people to dinner,
telling stories of love,
and choosing to see the best in others.
With God's help, may it be so. Amen.

Further reading & research:

Read Pgs 510-513 in *The Gospel of Luke*, by Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). *(Note: This section unpacks the story of Zacchaeus hosting Jesus for dinner. The authors conclude: "Although identified as a 'rich man,' Zacchaeus is not condemned. Because he uses his funds not only to host Jesus but also to help the poor, he shows that the rich, through divine grace and appropriate income distribution, can enter the Kingdom" (513).)*

Read "The Case For Revival (an announcement)," by Nadia Bolz-Weber. *The Corners* by Nadia Bolz-Weber. December 11, 2024.

thecorners.substack.com/p/the-case-for-revival-an-announcement (Note: In this Substack post, Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber briefly summarizes and quotes the book, "Faith, Hope and Carnage" by Nick Cave. She discusses the need for humility and mercy in communities deeply polarized by politics and society's "nearly fatal dose of self-righteousness and hostility." She announces her plans to gather, pray, and sing songs in states where the predominant voting patterns are different from her own. She admits: "I want to be revived from despair and self-righteousness." What practices or actions would invite you to similarly move away from self-righteousness and hostility toward mercy and humility?)

Listen "Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg—On Repentance and Repair," The Bible for Normal People (podcast). Episode 214. August 15, 2022.

thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-214-rabbi-danya-ruttenberg-on-repentance-and-repair/(Note: In this podcast episode, hosts Jared Byas and Pete Enns discuss the practice of repentance and repair in Judaism with Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg. In the conversation, Rabbi Ruttenberg declares: "There are some intuitive truths about how to heal, and they involve telling the truth, they involve making amends, they involve knowing that part of the work after you have caused harm is figuring out how you become the kind of person who doesn't do that harm again.")

31 Strong's G1234: biblehub.com/greek/1234.htm

32 This article provides further explanation of the translation of these verbs and how this can change our interpretation of the story:

hackingchristianity.net/2010/10/was-zacchaeus-really-that-bad.html