

Sunday, April 2, 2006

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Paul T. Rock



Destinations and Current Locations

Luke 19:1-10

Would you join me in prayer? *God, we thank You for this place where we can gather on a beautiful day and for a season like Lent. We thank You that You are the God of Lent and the God of Easter. We thank You for the way You pull us forward and help us to be focused and remind us what our life is about and where it is that we're going. God, as we meditate on Your word this morning, we pray that it would transform us. God, as we join at Your table this morning, we pray that it would renew us and we would go forth from this place emboldened and strengthened to transform this world in preposterous ways that redemption calls us to. And now, Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to You. Amen.*

If you're anything like me it's very helpful to actually know where you're going. I find it helpful to have a place, and a thing that I know I'm looking forward to. Where I'm going keeps me in line and keeps me from being distracted and waywardly wandering. If I know where I'm going, I feel good about it. I know it's the right thing and basically, it keeps me out of trouble.

In January, my wife, Stacey, our three kids and I were able to fly to Southern California. We lived in the Los Angeles area for about 10 years before coming here and I was asked to help officiate at a wedding there. So we stretched it out and made it into a five-day trip and made plans to see different family, friends and loved ones each day. We were definitely anticipating this trip, and were excited about it. On the calendar, our kids had marked off the days until they could go back to visit Southern California. We knew where we were going and we were all looking forward to it.

We bought our tickets and flew out of JFK and into Burbank, a six- to seven-hour flight. But, when you're traveling with children there's actually a different arithmetic that's employed in determining the length of the flight. For every child under 10 you double the hours, and then add them all together. So, a seven-hour flight from JFK to Burbank, could end up being about 42

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hours. And I would have to say that our three children, who are two, five and nine years old, did a very good job on this flight. Of course, we were sticking lollipops in their mouths and throwing toys at them every few minutes, but for the most part were very well-behaved. We were very proud of our kids.

We touched down into Burbank and were on the tarmac, and finally heard that sound that means that everyone can stand up and grab their things and do whatever they need to do. This woman in her early 20s who was sitting right behind my wife and son, popped up and whipped out her cell phone. She flipped it open and called a friend of hers. "Oh yes, I'm finally on the ground," she said. "Oh my God, it was like the longest flight I've ever been on. Can you just please come and pick me up." And then she turned away from us and lowered her voice but not so low that we couldn't hear her. "You would not believe these kids. They were bouncing all over the place the entire flight, please get me as soon as possible; I'll tell you more later."

So, of course, I looked all around to see what kids she could be talking about – there must have been some rowdy kids on that flight that I completely missed. Then it dawned on me that she was actually talking about my angels. At that point Stacey, who had also heard her words, and I had a decision to make. As we have been known to do, Stacey and I could have gotten into the face of this angry young woman and told her point-blank how nasty she was being, and how well-behaved our children were. I could have also reached over her head for our luggage in the bin above her and accidentally struck her on the shoulder with my carry-

on in the process. That might have worked. And Stacey's really good at slipping a dirty diaper into such a person's coat pocket as they are walking by.

We could have gone with any of those. But because we knew where we were going and we were excited about it, and we knew that in just about 45 minutes we were going to see the faces of our loved ones and be engaged in some activities that would be very fulfilling, Stacey and I were able to keep our eyes focused on our destination. We gave each other a wink and were actually able to manage to smile at that young 20-something as she walked by us and our beautiful children on her way to whatever her destination was.

It really helps to know where you're going and why you're going there and to be excited about it. It keeps you from getting sidetracked. It keeps you from making enemies when you don't necessarily need to make them. It keeps you out of trouble.

I think that is why Jesus took the time in Jericho to intentionally call out by name and invite himself into the home of Zaccheus, a known sinner, a crooked liar and a cheat. The scripture makes it clear that Jesus was just passing through Jericho en route to where he was going, Jerusalem. Jesus knew what was waiting for him there. He knew what was in store. There would be the triumphal entry, of course, and there would be the last night with the disciples and the washing of the feet – but then there would also be the betrayal and the night of tears and of grieving. There would be the whipping and the torture. There would be the cross and death and three days later there would be the resurrection. Jesus knew where he was going and his eyes were focused on redemption. When your eyes are focused on redemption it radically affects the way that you view people and institutions within your environment and in your current location. When our destination is firm, when we know where we're going, and when our destination is redemption – it transforms the way that we respond and the way we interact in our current location.

This is the fifth Sunday of Lent – a season, as most of us know, when we liturgically set aside some weeks to think very seriously, to consider and be introspective about our own simple-ness, fallen-ness and brokenness – in comparison to God's perfect love. We take a while and think about, pray about, meditate on the discrepancy between ourselves, our rebellion and God's perfection and God's grace.

There are a couple of times during the year when I like to read John Calvin, one of the fathers of our faith, the reformed tradition. John was not your "power of positive thinking" kind of guy. He wasn't necessarily the life of the party, but he's good to read in the middle of Lent. Calvin understood very clearly the separation between humanity and God and wrote about it

graphically in places like the Geneva Confession where he says, "Being in our own nature enemies of God and subject of God's judgment, we are yet reconciled with God and received again in Grace through the intercession of Jesus Christ." He actually says, "Being in our own nature enemies of God." That's what we are, and in the season of Lent we recognize that.

We Need to Do Our Lenten Work

Lent is not necessarily the most fun season to go through. It's a time for us to dwell on our sinfulness and maybe some of us feel that we may do that too much already. But unless we go through the season of Lent, unless we take the time to examine ourselves and recognize our brokenness and neediness – even come to touch on that sense of hopelessness in our lives without Jesus Christ; unless we do that hard winter Lenten work, then Easter can be just a fun Spring holiday instead of the radical world-changing, world-turning-upside-down event that it actually is.

When you've done the hard work of Lent then you come to understand that you are not worthy to attend the Easter banquet table of God's love. But you are still invited with open arms and without hesitation. You come to really understand that you aren't capable of being holy in this life, and yet you are given the identity and the wardrobe of the beloved child of God. You really understand that God's steadfast love trumps the requirements of the law. And when you know that the journey ends in redemption then the reality of your destination starts to slowly affect and transform the way you respond to and view the fellow travelers in your life today.

Earlier in the gospel of Luke, John tells the story of a man who is severely beaten, mugged, robbed and left by the side of the road as dead. Jesus tells about different people who pass by him on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem, one of them is a priest. As we understand it, this priest is on his way to do his priestly duties in Jerusalem. But because he is heading to do priestly duties he does not want to risk defiling himself by coming into contact with a dead body. So he passes by him on the other side of the road and continues on to Jerusalem.

Ten chapters later we find Jesus in the same situation on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem to fulfill the most important priestly duty of all time – to lay down his life as a sacrifice, as an atonement for our sins and to rise again for the redemption. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to do these priestly duties, and he stops. He is distracted by and notices a short man in a tree off behind the crowd, a man who he knows to be despised and rejected and hated because he is an enemy of the

people. He calls out to him by name and invites himself to his house for fellowship.

At this point, Jesus completely broke every cultural, religious, societal rule there was. This man was a known traitor and a cheat. Zaccheus was... and these words are only used here in Luke... the chief tax collector. That means that he was probably very rich and had a lot of power. As many of you know, tax collectors were Jews who had in a way forsaken their Jewish identity. They had gotten in bed with the Roman military occupiers and were basically doing the dirty work of collecting the taxes of the people to support Rome – to support the very people who were oppressing the Jews. Tax collectors would become even more wealthy by charging more tax than they were supposed to, and keeping the extra money for themselves. But they had the strong arm of Rome right behind them, to follow them up and protect them in their wrongdoing. Zaccheus was corrupt, he was a jerk, he was an enemy of the people – and all of Jericho knew it. So when Jesus invited him down from the tree to have fellowship with him the people were completely aghast.

When Our Goal Becomes Our Own Comfort

The problem is, when we get sidetracked (as happens to me often) and our destination becomes not Jerusalem, the Cross, Easter, redemption, but instead becomes our own comfort. When our end goal becomes our advancement or even our personal success, we start to see people who challenge this action of ours, this understanding of the world, those people who get in the way of the societal norm, as the enemy and rightfully so. And we respond, don't we, with castigation, with defensiveness, with lines in the sand? That's what we do with enemies. We put them there and we stay here, we make sure that they don't get any further into our business. That's how we treat enemies.

But Jesus illustrates here that when you're on your way to Jerusalem, when your eyes are on redemption, then it radically challenges the social, the religious, the political norms of the day and those who have been castigated and treated as enemies instead become houseguests. It's absolutely preposterous. It doesn't make any sense at all and if we had been there in Jericho on that day, I'm sure that many of us, including me, would have also been mumbling under our breath wondering what this rabbi is doing, what he's thinking. This isn't the way we treat enemies. This man is dirty.

But when he entered the city of Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus didn't see people by their vocations. He

didn't view people in light of what they were or how they fit into the social ladder. Jesus sees children scattered and broken. He sees travelers who have maybe gone wayward and he invites them back onto the journey to Jerusalem. And you see how that one invitation to an enemy, one invitation to fellowship can transform this man's entire life. Fred Craddock says that "his salvation was the kind of salvation that all of us should model because it transformed him socially, it transformed him economically, it transformed him thoroughly. It was a holistic salvation that Zaccheus underwent that day and Jesus, with one invitation, was able to do what a whole village, a whole city couldn't do through years of castigation and line drawing."

Do you see how radical this Easter thing is? When we get it, when we understand the level of our depravity, of our brokenness and our hopelessness, then we understand even more fully the beauty of God's love that is poured out on us. The fact is that we are invited to this table, that we are broken and yet we are brought in. When we understand the depth of that love and know that we're headed to redemption, though we don't deserve it, then we can't help but transform the world around us with similar acts of redemption. When our focus is on our destination Jerusalem, it changes slowly how we interact with people in our current location.

If our destination is Jerusalem, the Cross, and the Easter feast where enemies of God become children of God and we all become brothers and sisters of each other, then it will start to affect how we treat the people in Jericho, along the way. The annoying office mates (you know who I'm talking about); that frustrating family member; that man, that woman who broke your heart; and even that person who has become your worst enemy. The table spread before us today is a reminder of where we are all going. And we're not going, or called to go, individually. We are called as a family, as a community, to walk on this path. This table is a reminder to us of the love of God and the grace of God that is poured out on his enemies. As we dine corporately we receive from each other and from the spirit of God the encouragement, the strength that we need to continue on this radical Christian practice of treating enemies as houseguests.

Friends, today I would encourage us all to recommit ourselves around this table to go to Jerusalem, to make our destination Jerusalem, and on the way there, even today, may we transform this world of ours with upside-down preposterous acts of redemption, one enemy at a time. **Amen.**

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