

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

News travels fast. Bad news and good news. Significant and not so significant. News makes its way around the town by word of mouth or, these days, by so-called social media. News travels fast, and takes on distortions, exaggerations, and coloring on its way, doesn't it? It was probably no different in ancient Palestine, even without digital help; the news of the day made its way around town at kitchen tables, work places, and in the town market-place. Much of the reputation and many of the claims about Jesus, for example, came to homes and villages, and even to the streets of the metropolis Jerusalem, by word of mouth, where the flavor of gossip might be much more interesting than the facts themselves. But there were those, like St. Luke, who knew that faith in Jesus was so life-changing and so important, that whatever distortions might have accumulated around the stories of Jesus in those later years of the first century, they should be corrected and sorted and the record made straight and reliable. It was a task that fell to anyone trying to write a gospel, and in this calendar year of the lectionary, we have been treated to Luke's re-telling of the stories and the words of the Master. In 2023, we'll be led along the same path primarily by St. Matthew.

So, the Gospel writers of those early years, a generation or two after the great historical Jesus events, took on the task of being not only evangelists, but reporters, too. They contributed not only to the important work of spreading the news of divine salvation, but also to our knowledge of the facts as they have been preserved. I expect that they took both seriously. Now, St. Luke, writing some fifty years after the fact, was a little like a cold-case investigator, like an investigative journalist sorting through the various and random witness statements, traditions, and stories, led on his way, he hoped, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That inspiration is often graphically represented by a halo around his head whether in paintings or stained-glass. But imagine that sticking up out of the brim of that halo there were a 'press card' like in cartoons as he scrambled from one newsworthy location to another, trying to get the facts and quotations right. Little did he know, I wager, that his work would, some centuries later, be added to the Holy Scriptures, standing alongside the prophets, the teaching, and the chronicles of antiquity, that his efforts would be revered as others in our Holy Bible, and that even churches would be named for him.

So, let's see what he has done with the stories he had heard about the incident with Zacchaeus tax collector. In the passage we heard from his gospel this morning, the Holy Gospel according to Luke, we might find evidence of Luke the investigative journalist. For his readers, he begins by establishing the place and the characters, the 'who, what, and when' of the reported incident. He tells us that it happened while Jesus was passing through Jericho, so if we wanted to visualize just where Jesus was at the time in relation to the capital Jerusalem, if that piece of the story were important to us, we could get out a map and look it up. The reference adds some credibility to the story; it is a fact as far as Luke can discern. Next, he reports that there was a man there who was short, who was a rich tax-collector, and even gives us his name. Luke thinks that this information is credible and useful. Then he reports on the man's intentions, which without having the opportunity to interview Zacchaeus is probably a bit presumptuous, but he is telling us something he has figured must be true, that Zacchaeus decides that he wants to see Jesus for himself, and so runs on ahead and figures out a good way to do it. News has traveled fast, and this tax-collector doesn't want to miss

out on the possibility that the opportunity is true, according to Luke. As a reporter, Luke even includes man-on-the-street reactions, telling us that the crowd is grumbling later when Jesus decides to go to the tax-collectors home and bless it.

Jesus does indeed come along that way, and now Luke has painted himself into a bit of a corner: he will need to do his best to tell his readers just what Jesus said. He wasn't there, and he might have heard many versions of the story which were handed-down from the time of the original witnesses. I expect he consulted the Holy Spirit too. Her quotes Jesus as saying: 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' Of course, Jesus was speaking Aramaic and Luke was writing in Biblical Greek. Did you know that neither Biblical Hebrew nor Greek has quotation marks or question marks? And yet, the editors of our modern English versions print them into the text. Some editor, somewhere, hopefully inspired by the Spirit, beginning with the original evangelist and reporter Luke, has decided for us how this incident is to be regarded. This is their best guess as to just what was said, given the context and the evidence. And this estimate has come to be revered as scripture. Whatever translation, whatever language, whatever version, we pray that the teachings of Jesus are accurately reported. But you should know that the original texts included neither paragraphing or verse numbers or much punctuation to speak of, and that we put a lot of trust in the reporters and editors to be faithful evangelists with such profound material.

The current translation of the Bible which is authorized for Sunday morning readings by the Episcopal Church is the New Revised Standard Version, which replaced the Revised Standard a couple dozen years ago. And now there is a new improved version available...we'll have to see if it becomes a replacement. In the NRSV, the editors have taken their editorial place in the chain of reporting by adding a title to describe each Bible incident. Today's event is titled simply 'Jesus and Zacchaeus'. Not much of a provocative headline! What would you suggest? How about 'Tax Collector Goes Out On A Limb For Jesus'? You probably know that reporters themselves seldom write the headline for their stories, but find their work advertised by some random editor, whether in print or digitally. Likewise, the NSRV titles are added to the text by the publishers, and we hope they get it right. If we consider this story from the perspective of Zacchaeus, the important thing is that he is willing to change his life in order to be part of the Jesus Movement. If we think of that drawing I chose for the cover of today's bulletin as something like a photo-journalist might have taken as he saw the situation developing that day in Jericho, we are seeing what the incident might have meant from the perspective of the man out on that limb.

But imagine a different headline from a different perspective: 'Jesus saves man out on a limb along the road'. The reader might then be more directed at the divine grace of the Savior, who is quoted in the story as saying, 'For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.' The headline can serve to guide us into a different perspective, can't it? Instead of emphasizing Zacchaeus' sinfulness, the story under that headline might dwell more on how Jesus can coax anyone down from their desperation. What headline would you write if you were editing this gospel story? Fact is, you should also take your place in the chain of editors of this and any other scripture story, personalizing it for your needs and hopes. Yeah, trust the qualified reporters and evangelists like St. Luke, but take the next step of applying the meaning of the ancient texts to your own life. Hear the guidance of theologians and interpreters, but do the faithful thing and ask the faithful questions for yourself. Go ahead, go out on a limb and take your inspired thoughts with you. Like Zacchaeus, look for the good news, look for saving grace, look for new life courses, look for faith, hope, and love, and then in your own words write them on your heart, and pray that you may share that halo with all the saints. You may find that your own personalized version will be as revered as any. Amen