

I remember when I was a kid, my grandmother had this massive tree in her front yard. It was a twisted and curled Dogwood tree that honestly looked as though it was plucked straight out of a horror movie. The randomness of the branches, though creepy in the right lighting, made it an exceptionally easy tree to climb up into.

I wish I could say that I spent hours upon hours climbing up into that tree, but sadly I wasn't always the bravest kid and with a strong fear of heights I typically stayed closer to the ground. It wasn't all bad news though, because there was this one branch that was just low enough that I could reach it if I stretched out as far as I could, and high enough that when I grabbed it was I forced to hang because I could no longer touch the ground. I can recount a lot of afternoons of just swinging on that branch, making monkey noises, because clearly a monkey is the only animal that lives in trees and if you say birds, I will say no just monkeys.

It was so simple being in that tree and even better during those times when I did find the courage inside me to ascend higher into the tree. There was always a great reward with each branch. A reward of air that seemed crisper, a breeze that seemed softer, and a view that seemed like it went on for miles even though in reality her house was at the bottom of a hill so I got a nice view of the house at the top of the hill.

Regardless, the truth of my experience or your experience, there is some level of mystique that surrounds trees, and maybe I just feel that way because I have a healthy level of nostalgia for a time when I was a child.

Even looking into scripture there are numerous different mentions of trees playing important roles in texts either it be symbolically or otherwise like the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil or the fig tree which Jesus cursed. Trees are constantly popping up in scripture, even Jesus utilizes imagery that though not specifically tree imagery still I feel falls into a similar category by saying "*I am the vine and you are the branches*"

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This is certainly a lot of tree talk for a story that doesn't even revolve around a tree. The sycamore tree in the story of Zacchaeus doesn't really play a pivotal role. Well maybe it isn't about the tree, but rather it is the role that the tree plays in the story. I mean it can be assumed that this sycamore tree plays a role. If nothing else, it is vantage point for Zacchaeus to see Jesus, because otherwise the crowds would have prevented him from seeing this man of mystery who everyone was talking about.

I think that the tree also plays the role of a safe space. I want you all to think about the crowd for a minute in the story and how they are depicted in the story. In verse 3 the crowd is described as large. That's it, but now consider the crowd from the perspective of Zacchaeus, because when you do that verse 2 takes on a new meaning. The crowd is still large, but they are also

preventative and exclusive for it is their unwillingness to budge that forces Zacchaeus to run to the tree. I know that it can be easily assumed that this was a crowd of people who all wanted to see Jesus so why in the world would they just let any person in before them. I get that theory, but I feel as though the attitude prevented toward Zacchaeus was more than just “Hey we want to see Jesus and if we let you in then you will be before me”

Look at verse 7, the crowd that barred Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus has now voiced their true opinions calling Zacchaeus a sinner, grumbling about how Jesus was going to eat with him.

It can be assumed just from historical context that some of these people were Zacchaeus neighbors and maybe even his friends, because as a tax collector he was more than likely an Israelite who just so happen to work for the Roman government.

I want to make sure that I am clear about this and will probably repeat it again, but I am by no means defending the actions of the Roman empire and the fact that his neighbors probably had good reason to not trust tax collectors, because they were a group that wasn't known for their honesty. The thing is though the text doesn't say for certain that Zacchaeus was a dishonest man, it says that he is rich which with his position and his later plead to Jesus it can be assumed he defrauded a few people, but that takes at least one leap. The text as is could have Zacchaeus as an honest and good man simply kept out by his neighbors because of his job.

I say all that to say, I don't think that Zacchaeus simply climbed a tree just to be able to see Jesus like he could have just as easily run ahead to Jericho to await Jesus or maybe find a nice hill to climb up to get a better vantage point or maybe he could have just forced his way into the crowd, but no he climbed a tree.

He climbed a tree, because it was A) practical, but also it was the safest of those options. Had Zacchaeus run ahead to Jericho then he would have been left vulnerable to whoever happened to be along the road ahead and had he just climbed a hill then when Jesus did arrive what would prevent someone from just rushing up the hill in anger.

No, he climbed a tree. He sought safety and a vantage point in the branches of a sycamore tree. And then here comes Jesus saying,

*“Hurry and come down...”* Jesus approaches Zacchaeus and asks him to step down from the tree to the ground where presumably the now grumbling mob of people awaits him.

I can imagine that when Jesus said this to Zacchaeus before he rushed down, he looked out at the crowd and said, “I will come down if you tell all your new friends to go home.” The text doesn't lend itself to the idea that the crowd was particularly violent, but it really can be assumed that there was at least one or two within this large crowd who if provoked would have wanted to do a tax collector harm.

So, what's your tree?

And whose in your crowd?

Maybe the place you run for safety is the safety of a relationship that isn't right for you, and the crowd that grumbles at you are your own personal demons saying without them you are nothing.

Or maybe the tree you have climbed up into is sense of financial security, and the crowd is fears around not being able to provide for yourself or your family.

All of our trees will look different with each of them varying in degrees of safety and also degrees of problematic, because like I opened I think there is a mystique of climbing trees like for example I escape into nature when I need to avoid the grumbling crowds of my life. A tree isn't necessarily a bad thing, but there are certainly times that it is and there are also times that even though it is a good thing, Jesus is still calling us down.

Maybe, Jesus is calling you down today. Maybe today Jesus is calling despite the grumbles of inner doubts and fears to have a hard conversation with a loved one or maybe Jesus is calling you down to take a look at how you can share your abundance.

However, it is, we can find comfort in something from the story that isn't stated and maybe isn't quite as obvious. Think about the physical locations of the characters in this story more specifically the end of the story. Jesus is right there with Zacchaeus. Jesus doesn't call him down just to say "I will meet you there", but no Jesus remains with Zacchaeus even as the crowds bear in on the two of them.

And the same can be said for each of us when Jesus sees us and calls for us out of the metaphorical trees we find ourselves in we can find confidence in the fact that the one that call Immanuel or God WITH us is still standing there right next to us, never abandoning us to the crowds.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost... Amen.