

Seen by Jesus... Speaking with Jesus... Living with Jesus!

Sermon for the Mission Festival in Hermannsburg · 6 September 2026

We hear the sermon text from Luke 19:1–10

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. 7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." 8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. (*Luke 19:1–10, NIV*)

He was a man by the name of Zacchaeus. The name means "the righteous one"! Zacchaeus was probably the great hope of his family. Perhaps his parents had hoped that their son would be a good example to others, someone people could look up to. A son his parents could be proud of. Things turned out differently. Even as a small boy, Zacchaeus had no qualms about stealing. And then he lied as well. The small sins of his youth later became habit. And so it was only a small step for the young Zacchaeus to go and work at the tax office. With the power of the Roman state behind him, he could lie, exploit, cheat, and oppress as much as he liked. And so the little swindler did, in the end, make something of himself: he became rich, very rich, and he became influential — even a chief tax collector. But no one wanted to be near Zacchaeus, and so he was isolated from other people.

In secret, Zacchaeus's heart was like a storm. On the one hand, he was tormented by the terrible things he had done. On the other hand, there was his terrible distance from God, and on top of that the feeling of being abandoned by other people. It seems to me that it does the human heart no good to be alone! Alone, there is only the accusing conscience. Both one's own wickedness and the wickedness of others grow larger and larger in the dark chamber of the heart. And all the wealth of the world can never bring that heart to rest. It seems to me that sin needs the concealment of the heart in order to be able to spread out of control. In hiding, a person can not only conceal evil; the same evil can also grow larger and larger there. That is a very dangerous thing. The well-known Persian poet Rumi writes: "A bad thought begins as an ant and becomes a dragon once it grows." It was already so with Adam and Eve: after their sin

they had to hide themselves with a fig leaf, and their son Cain let envy grow in his heart, which later led to the terrible outcome of murder. All of it began with a thought. And Zacchaeus is just one more example of how a thought can spiral into something terrible.

But evil thoughts are not foreign to us either. I think we all know this in one way or another. Someone says an unkind word to you, and the word lodges itself in your heart. You cannot free yourself from it, and you feel the hurt and the anger, even hatred. That is not a good feeling, and the feeling does not bear good fruit either.

The story of Zacchaeus is a story of how Jesus frees us from all of this. It is a story of how Jesus seeks out lost people and saves them. Jesus does this by

– seeing into the hidden heart, – speaking with us, and – dwelling with us.

Seeing, speaking, dwelling. These are not merely three words for a personal encounter with Jesus. They are the three basic movements of all Christian mission, ever since people set out in the name of Jesus to carry the gospel to the nations — including from Hermannsburg, from where the Lutheran missionaries once set out into all the world. What happened to Zacchaeus in miniature still happens today on a grand scale: God sees people whom others overlook. God speaks to people in their own language. And God dwells with the people to whom he is sent. This is what I want to remind us of today by way of Zacchaeus, before I tell you afterward about the work of the Brücke and about our mission.

The story of Zacchaeus changed in the moment that Jesus saw him. Actually, Jesus was only passing through. A great crowd surrounded him. It is hardly imaginable that Jesus, of all people, could see and recognize little Zacchaeus in his hiding place. No one but Jesus can do that. His eyes fell on the man who could hardly be seen. Jesus saw Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus saw Jesus. Jesus looked deep into Zacchaeus's heart and recognized Zacchaeus as he truly was. There is an entire world contained in this word "see"! When God created the world, it is said: "God saw!" And then God said again: "See, it is good!" Jesus saw this Zacchaeus with the eyes of the Creator! His eyes could penetrate all the walls that Zacchaeus had built around his heart. Jesus did not see Zacchaeus only as the sinner he was, but he saw him as he had always wanted to have him. Jesus could see not only the wickedness, but he could also see the child — a child meant to be as God had wished, a child God wanted to be proud of. A Zacchaeus! A righteous one!

This is the first movement of mission: seeing. Not looking at a crowd of people, not at a statistic or a "target area," but at the one person who nearly disappears behind the crowd. For me personally that means: I do not look first at the fourteen languages spoken in our congregation, but at the one man from Iran, the one woman from Afghanistan, the one child from Leipzig-Volkmarisdorf, whom God had already seen long before even a single missionary was ever on the way. Mission does not begin with us bringing God to the people. Mission begins with God seeing the people. And we, now and then, are sent as instruments — not to look away, but to

look closely. We walk in the footsteps of Jesus and learn to see with his eyes those whom God has already long since seen.

Do you want to be seen by God? Do you feel lost in the great sweep of world history? Or do you feel weighed down and crushed by many evil thoughts and experiences? Have people done evil to you, and you cannot free yourself from that evil? Perhaps you, too, have allowed the little ant called "hatred" to build a nest in your heart... and now the ant has become a dragon.

If that is so, you may know that God sees you. With Psalm 139 you may pray: "LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar." God is entirely with you, and he does not only see you as you are — he also sees you as he wants to have you.

When Jesus came to the sycamore tree where Zacchaeus was sitting, he did not merely see him — he left everything else standing and gave Zacchaeus his full attention. And he said:

"Zacchaeus, come down immediately..."

This is the second movement: Jesus does not address Zacchaeus over the heads of the crowd, but entirely personally, by his own name. He speaks his language... not only the language of words, but the language of the heart. This too is mission: not merely preaching, but speaking... in the language the other person truly understands. Anyone who has ever tried to translate a creed, the Lord's Prayer, or a catechism into a foreign language knows how much effort, love, and patience alone go into it, so that a person can hear God's word in their own language. This is not a peripheral matter of mission — it is its very heart: God himself, in Jesus, took on our human language, so that we could understand him. That is why we, too, speak — in German, in Persian, in however many languages — not about people, but with them.

And then everything happened very quickly. Zacchaeus, who had had to hide in the tree just moments before, suddenly came into view and stood exactly where Jesus was. What a picture! On the one side stood Jesus, who had never once committed a sin; on the other side stood Zacchaeus, the notorious criminal! It is a picture that many could not bear, one before which they had to recoil in shock. "Look at that! He has gone in to eat with sinners and tax collectors!" the Pharisees said. Later they would mock the fact that Jesus hung on the cross beside murderers. Yes, exactly! Jesus never avoided sinners; instead he sought them out and stayed close to them. He sought them because he wanted to save them. That is why he came to us human beings. When Jesus still speaks with us today, he always wants only this one thing: he wants to restore the fellowship between God and us lost human beings. That is why we never need to be ashamed to be near Jesus. Nor do we ever need to hide from Jesus. On the contrary! Precisely when we stand before him in all our weakness and with all our sins, he embraces us and takes us in. Anyone who still wants to go on hiding in their tree, or behind whatever else, can certainly do so. But then that person remains with themselves, and remains with their sin as well. That is why Jesus calls out to Zacchaeus: Hurry! Come down at once from the tree where you have been hiding! You do not merely have to — you are also allowed to be

with this Jesus, who understands you so well and who can heal you! Jesus wants all of us to come down from whatever trees we have been hiding in. And Jesus seeks us out! No road is too far for that!

On the day that Zacchaeus came down from his tree, his life changed radically. Jesus not only spoke with Zacchaeus, he went with him into his house and stayed with him there. Because of Jesus, Zacchaeus suddenly had the trust to open his heart. He could speak openly and freely about all his problems. He could speak of the evil he had done to other people.

This is the third and perhaps the most difficult movement of mission: Jesus does not stop at a friendly glance and a kind word. He goes into the house with him. He dwells with Zacchaeus. This is exactly what missionaries have done for generations when they set out: not merely coming for a visit, but staying; not merely bringing a program, but sharing life. We experience this too, every week, in a small way, in the Brücke: people from fourteen nations who do not merely live alongside one another but live, pray, and worship together. Where Jesus dwells, strangers become family.

Not only that: Zacchaeus also made right everything he had done wrong. He settled his debts and paid people back even more than he owed. But best of all were the words of our Lord: "Today salvation has come to this house." That means peace has come in! It means the heart has become free! It means God has moved into the house. From the story of Zacchaeus we can catch a little of this joy.

Seeing. Speaking. Dwelling. This is what Jesus did for Zacchaeus — and this is what mission still does today, in Hermannsburg, in Leipzig, and wherever it sends us. I would love to tell you more afterward about this mission, about the work of the Brücke, and about what God has done along the way that brought us here. I am glad when we can strengthen one another in the footsteps of Jesus. Oh, how urgently we need this freedom in him — to be seen, to be spoken to, and to live with him! We need this encounter not just once, but again and again. That is why we are here. Because Jesus has seen us and called us. That is why we place ourselves under his word, and that is why we enter into the most intimate fellowship with him by receiving his body and blood. Then we go out into the world healed and full of trust. Today salvation has come to this house! Amen.