

Sunday, October 31, 2010: Luke 19:1-10

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

The people of God were slaves in Egypt when God heard their cries and sent Moses to lead them. But their hardships were not over. For 40 years they wandered in the wilderness. Moses died; Joshua took his place (Joshua means "God saves") and led the people over the Jordan and into the Promised Land. But their hardships were still not over.

The Bible says all the kings of the Amorites and of the Canaanites opposed the deployment of the people of Israel into the land God promised. There is always something or somebody to stand in the way. When Jericho stood in the way, God told the people to march around the city. Once a day for six days they marched around Jericho with trumpets blaring and banners flying. On the seventh day they marched around the city seven times and the walls fell down. The people of God passed through to the land God had promised. Such is the miracle of God's mercy for God's people. But hardships were not yet over for them. Fortunately God's mercy had not ended either.

The prophet Isaiah says God's mercy comes as one "sent to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In the midst of hardship is the hope for God's mercy, and for a time—not for the people to be deployed, but for God's land, God's merciful kingdom, to be deployed among us.

To that end another Joshua passed through Jericho. We know him better as Jesus, but Joshua is his Hebrew name ("God saves"). He wanted to pass through Jericho, but his way was blocked—not by walls of stone but by a blind man. Perhaps the blind man was sitting on one of the stones that came tumbling down when the first Joshua passed through. When the blind man shouted, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me," people told him to be quiet. He shouted louder, and Jesus said, "Receive your sight." He did. Such is the miracle of God's mercy for God's people.

Jesus deployed the kingdom of God with one more step. A chief tax collector was in the business of shaking down his neighbors, sending Rome the percentage they

asked for and keeping the rest for himself. He was short—only 4'11"—but what mattered was not his height but that he was also short on compassion and justice. He caused hardship for his people. Zacchaeus blocked the deployment of God's kingdom.

As Jesus passed through, Zacchaeus wanted to see, but no one would let him move to the front. They formed a human wall against him. So he ran ahead and climbed a tree, probably knocking a couple of children off the branch he wanted. Jesus spotted him, and when he recognized Zacchaeus as a wall set against God's kingdom, Jesus came to the foot of the tree and walked around it once, twice, three times, maybe just for symbolic effect. Zacchaeus started to squirm. Everyone thought Jesus was going to knock the little weasel out of the tree and "let him have it." Instead Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, I must stay at your house today." *Must* is the key word here. Jesus deploys the kingdom of God; he leaves no barrier in the way.

We witness the miracle of God's mercy knocking down the walls of a hard heart when halfway through dinner, Zacchaeus stood up, picked up his wine goblet and raised a toast to Jesus: "From now on I give half of my income to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone, I will repay it fourfold." The man's conversion appeared complete. Not only did he say the right things, he was intending to bear the fruit befitting repentance.

Pardon me for being cynical, but I've been down this road before. I predict that if all this talk had ended up with a pat on the back from Jesus, little Zacchaeus would have concluded, "I'm not such a bad sort after all," and would have repaid those people who could show him some receipts proving he had defrauded them.

Jesus did not pat him on the back. Mercy's miracle is not always a warm fuzzy. Instead Jesus interrupted Zacchaeus with, "Knock it off, Zacchaeus. Salvation has come to this house. Me. Salvation. I have come to seek and save the lost. That's you—lost." Jesus knocked Zacchaeus from his perch to the only ground on which he could stand before God, that of Jesus' mercy. Then Jesus went on to Jerusalem to deploy the rule of God all the way to the grave and to Satan's bastion. Even Satan's walls fell before this miracle of mercy.

May our walls, day by day, fall before his merciful onslaught. The astonishing thing is that Jesus wants to be with us and is with us, through the word preached and the meal shared.