

# Pathways to Preaching

a publication of the Lutheran Study Centre at Sabah Theological Seminary

## Topic: Promises

One of the most difficult things about being human is when we expect something and we do not see that thing completed. Having promises gives us hope and vision; but broken promises are one of the most painful things a human can experience. In our faith, there is a gap between when a promise is announced (Good News!) and when it is fulfilled. Sometimes this gap is very short – a prayer is answered the day we ask it. Sometimes this gap is very long – Christians have been awaiting God’s restoration for nearly two thousand years. In this in-between time, God’s promises can lead us to hope, but they can also lead us to judge other people. In the text that follows, see how promises affect a person and his community.

Written by Rev. Wendolyn Trozzo, coordinator for congregational outreach at the Lutheran Study Centre at STS.



## Bible Text: Luke 19:1-10

The story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector in the crowds who climbed a tree to see Jesus, and how promises from Jesus led to promises from Zacchaeus.

Dr. R. Allen Culpepper writes that Luke 19:10 is the “key verse” for the Gospel of Luke:

“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Here are things that were important to Luke:

- Universal appeal of the Gospel v. 2-4 (The good news is for all)
- Ethical problems of wealth v. 2 (People with money want more money)
- The call of a sinner in social disfavor v. 7 (Jesus goes to the outsider, the excluded)
- A sense of God’s present work v 5,9
- Urgency, necessity, and joy v 5 (“today”), 5 “must”, 9
- Restitution, especially distributed to the poor v. 8 (Use of possessions shows spiritual condition)
- Above all, Jesus’ mission of salvation v. 10 (Mission declared in Luke 4:18-21)

For more insight, see Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary, volume 2, New Testament. Page 271.



## **Law:** Zacchaeus is excluded from God's good promises

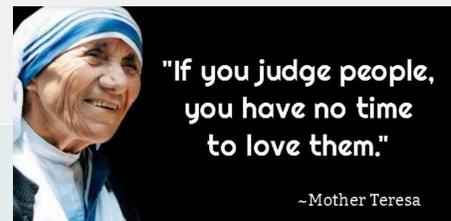
Zacchaeus had done many things that hurt people both financially and in showing his power over them. The consequence was that the Jewish community excluded him and despised him. Zacchaeus could not be friends with the Romans because he was not Roman. He was wealthy but alone. Once a person is disowned, people have an attitude that "some people will never change" or "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," so people give up on someone like Zacchaeus being able to change, or given the opportunity to change and rejoin the community. It seemed that Zacchaeus is outside of the community as well as outside of God's promises. This story shows us how much Zacchaeus yearns for hope – after he is pushed to the back of the crowd, he climbs a tree like a child so that he can see this man that talks about God's promises in a new way.

## **Transformation:** Zacchaeus starts his new life by making new promises

Zacchaeus, who was lost to God's Law, lacked vision, and alone and despised, suddenly sees himself as Jesus sees him: The Son of Man reminds Zacchaeus that he is a son of Abraham, a descendant of God's promise. Zacchaeus suddenly sees that he can make different choices with his work and his wealth. Because of Jesus' promise to seek and save the lost, Zacchaeus can now promise to share his wealth and make amends for his offenses. Zacchaeus bears the "fruits of repentance" that John the Baptist spoke of (Luke 3:8). Repent means to turn around, and Jesus turned around Zacchaeus' desires and actions. This is something new for Zacchaeus and for everyone who sees this transformation happen! This short man is exalted/lifted up. The judgment of the people could not stop the love of God.

## **Gospel:** Jesus promises Zacchaeus, and us, salvation

The hero of this story is Jesus. He notices Zacchaeus, choosing him out of the whole crowd of people. Jesus wants to have time with Zacchaeus, even though the Jewish people said Zacchaeus and his house are dirty and unrighteous. Jesus sees how desperate Zacchaeus is, and loves him, even while Zacchaeus is a sinner. Jesus sees that Zacchaeus is poor, even when he is wealthy; Jesus sees that Zacchaeus is more than his sin. Jesus gives Zacchaeus a chance to re-imagine himself (not as a cheating tax collector, but as a child of God) and renew his whole life. Jesus is the hero – the only good thing that Zacchaeus did was want to see Jesus. Because of Jesus, Zacchaeus had an open heart and a new life.





## Preaching Law + Gospel = Transformation

Through the Law, God tells us God's vision for how life ought to be in this world. Law tells us what God commands us to do. Yet if we take God's command seriously, we will recognize how far short of it our lives fall. Thus the Law shows us our sin. Law tells us what we must do, but actually makes us realize that it is beyond our power to accomplish it.

Gospel, on the other hand, tells us what God does. Despite our failings, God acts with grace. When God's grace comes to us, not only are we forgiven of our sin, but the Holy Spirit empowers us to serve God out of love. In hearing the gospel, our hearts are transformed.

In a sermon, we hear the Law that tells us of human actions and reveals to us our sin, and we then hear the Gospel of God's unfailing love and mercy. Together they bring forth transformed hearts. In *Pathways to Preaching*, for each biblical text we will consider how the Law speaks through it, how Gospel speaks through it, and the transformation that occurs through the Word of God.

### Songs and Hymns:

Blessed Assurance

Precious Lord, Take My Hand

Read more at...

**God's promises for different situations you may face:** <http://www.amazingfacts.org/bible-study/gods-promises>

**10 Bible promises that will encourage you!** <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2014/04/12/10-encouraging-bible-verses-about-gods-promises/>

## Theological Reflection on Doctrine

What are God's promises? They center around Jesus. God promises that God's kingdom will come, and that it will be eternal and unshakeable. God promises rest and Sabbath for God's people, as well as hope for the nation of Israel. God promises to send a Saviour... and God does! Jesus is God's promise, God's Word, in flesh. Jesus promises that the Kingdom is coming, and that even after Jesus goes to his glory, he will send the Spirit so that we can have guidance, community, and faith.

Scripture is full of promises, such as those given to Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, and Mary. We celebrate when promises are fulfilled, but we must be careful not to lose heart ...

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## Theological Reflection on Doctrine (continued from page 3)

...when promises seem to have been forgotten by God. We can easily lose faith and stop looking for God's actions in the world. Yet we can be gentle with those who doubt God's promises; after all, even Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Anytime promises are broken, whether they are the promise of God, or the promise of a human parent, spouse, or friend, we will struggle to understand. Zacchaeus was a Jewish man, and had heard of God's promises; yet the only promises he was experiencing were those of punishment and exclusion. Jesus returned Zacchaeus to his place within God's promises (he went from Z to A – Zacchaeus to son of Abraham). It is a reminder for us that we can never put ourselves outside of God's love. Neither our actions nor our lack of faith can separate us from our identity, given when we were created and celebrated through our baptism. (See Romans 8:34-38)

### What do theologians say?

Martin Luther writes, "For where there is the word of God Who makes the promise, there must be the faith of man who takes it. It is plain, therefore, that the first step in our salvation is faith, which clings to the word of the promise made by God, Who without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy makes a beginning and offers us the word of His promise. For He sent His Word, and by it healed them. He did not accept our work and thus heal us. God's Word is the beginning of all. Faith follows it, and love follows faith. Then love works every good work, for it does cause harm, no, it is the fulfilling of the law. In no other way can man come to God and deal with Him than through faith. That is, not man, by any work of his, but God, by His promise, is the author of salvation, so that all things depend on the word of His power, and are upheld and preserved by it, with which word He conceived us, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures."...For any one can easily see that these two – the promise and faith – must go together. For without the promise there is nothing to believe, while without faith the promise remains without effect, for it is established and fulfilled through faith. (From "The Babylonian Captivity" available in print and online, 2.46 and 2.55.)

**Prayer:** Our heavenly Father, we thank you for your promises and for eyes to see them fulfilled. Give us strength to follow our ancestors in the faith: Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Zacchaeus and Mary. Jesus our Good Shepherd, thank you for seeking us when we are lost and for giving us the promise of your eternal love. Holy Spirit, you bring us back into community and give the grace to forgive and receive forgiveness. Open our eyes to see and our mouths to share the stories of how your love has transformed our moments and our days. Holy Trinity, abide with us, just as you have promised. Amen.



## Topic: The Cross

As Paul notes in his letters, the crucifixion of Jesus is central to the Christian faith. He writes in 1 Corinthians 1:23, “but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness.” To insist on preaching something that is a stumbling block or foolishness to all who might hear the preaching, it must be essential. Otherwise he would not preach about it. Preaching foolishness and a stumbling block is not a good strategy for attracting new converts. It would more likely chase them away. Yet Paul insists on the crucifixion’s centrality to the message of the Gospel. Therefore it should also be central to our preaching. Yet too often we fail to preach about the crucifixion, not taking the details of Jesus’ death with enough seriousness. We skim over the passages of scripture that focus on the nature of Jesus’ death so that we can move on to sections that are more comfortable to read.

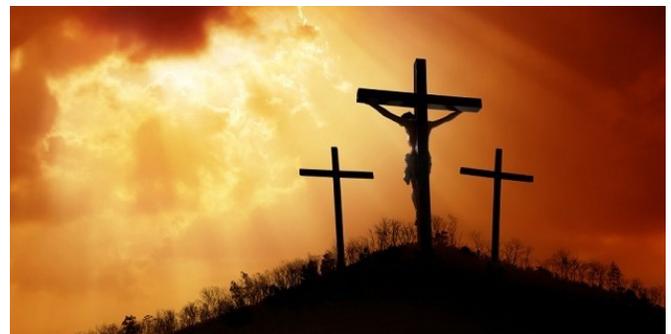
Written by:

Rev. Dr. Eric Trozzo,  
Director of the Lutheran Study Centre



## Bible Text: Matthew 27:32-44

Summary: Matthew portrays Jesus’ crucifixion as a test. Jesus is tempted to act out of concern for himself rather than trusting in God’s appointed plan. This new temptation costs Jesus everything he possesses. Just as obedience to God left him hungry at his first temptation in the desert (Matthew 4:3-4), now on the cross he suffers thirst (27:34) and is stripped of his clothing (35). The people who see him on the cross likewise tempt him to serve himself rather than trust God. Those who passed by him mocked him by saying, “Save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Likewise, the chief priests and scribes and elders say that if he is God’s Son he should come down from the cross. Verse 44 tells us that even the bandits crucified with him mocked him in the same manner. Matthew does not have one of the bandits defend Jesus, as Luke does. Rather, in Matthew nobody is supportive of Jesus; even Simon of Cyrene is said to have carried Jesus’ cross under compulsion rather than out of compassion. In Matthew, everyone has turned against Jesus during the crucifixion.

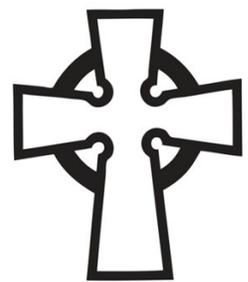




## Law + Gospel = Transformation

**Law:** The people in this passage act out of assumptions that humanity shares about power. If you have the power to help yourself you should do it. They assume that to be the Son of God means to have miraculous powers to glorify oneself, to escape from all harm and suffering, and to overcome all obstacles that may stand in one's way. In short, they assume that the Son of Man is one who can control God in order to gain worldly power. This is in fact a way that many of us are tempted to try to use God. We want God to help us out of our troubles and give us the blessings we try to earn. We want to use God to control our life. We want God to use power to overwhelm the powers of this world and bring us down from all of the crosses that this world erects. The people mocking Jesus assume that a close connection with God means to use God to benefit yourself, but this only shows how deeply they misunderstand God's ways and Jesus' faithfulness. The Law tells us that God demands our complete loyalty and obedience, yet we see in this passage that all of the people can only understand acting out of concern for themselves. We can see our own sinful self-centeredness in the self-centered mocking of the people around Jesus on the cross. We are convicted that we too fail to put God first and be obedient but instead seek our own gain.

**Gospel:** Despite the temptation to make himself the center of the action and act to benefit himself, Jesus remains obedient to God's plan. Jesus trusts God completely. While the chief priests and scribes and elders thought that trusting God completely would mean Jesus being delivered from dying on the cross, Jesus showed that there was an even deeper level of trust. Jesus trusted God enough to die trusting God's plan rather than acting to save himself. Jesus had told his disciples earlier that anyone who wanted to save their life must lose it (16:25). Biblical scholar Jack Dean Kingsbury notes that in resisting the temptations those around him at the cross pose to him, Jesus is living out this advice. Jesus trusts God even when that obedience brings him to the cross and to death. Thus the Good News of the Gospel is that even though the people around Jesus are self-centered, Jesus keeps his trust in God's will. Jesus endures the suffering inflicted upon him in the cross, withstanding the temptation to put his comfort ahead of God's will. The Law shows us that we are unfaithful, but the Gospel is Jesus is faithful. Thus we can stand before God not on the basis of the failure of our obedience, but rather based on grace because of Christ's obedience.



**Transformation:** We know, of course, that the cross is not the end of the story: Jesus' trust is transformed and vindicated in the resurrection. In placing his trust in God completely, Jesus' death becomes the pathway to new life. In our sin, we are unable to fathom the idea of not saving ourselves when we have the chance, but in Jesus on the cross we see the fullness of God's faithfulness. We are continually pulled to act out of self-interest, but Jesus on the cross did what we cannot...  
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# The Cross

## **Transformation:** (continued from page 6)

...In living in complete obedience to God's plan, we see that God's glory is manifested not in thinking of ourselves but in giving of ourselves for the sake of others. Indeed the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to give us faith to trust in Christ, just as we see Jesus' complete trust on the cross. When we trust God through faith, our focus is no longer on saving ourselves or using God to gain things for ourselves. Worldly forms of power lose their hold on us; we are transformed from being bound to the powers of this world to being empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow God's will. Instead of trying to use God we are able to trust God to lead us, even into times of trouble or suffering. This is not to say that we seek such troubles out, but rather that when they come to us we are able to trust that God is there with us even in the midst of them. Further, even when these difficult times come to us, in trusting God we can remain open to the needs of others rather than a narrow focus on ourselves.

## **Theological Reflection on Doctrine:**

Nobody wants to suffer. Generally we try to avoid suffering at all costs. We turn our eyes away and pretend that suffering does not happen in this world. We might even be able to fool ourselves for a time into thinking that we can avoid painful experiences. Sooner or later, however, difficult times will enter our lives. Part of the reality of this world is that it is full of hardship and troubles. Theologically we must ask how God can allow such suffering in this world. If God truly loves this world and loves us, how can God allow us to suffer? Is suffering a punishment from God?

Jesus' crucifixion forces us to confront suffering. Too often we skip over it, quickly going from "Jesus died" to "Jesus rose" without spending time considering the crucifixion itself. Yet in Matthew 16:24, Jesus tells his disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Does this mean God wants us to suffer? Here it is helpful to think of two types of suffering. One is suffering that inflicted upon us, and the other is suffering we choose to endure for the sake of others. What we see in the crucifixion is that while God is against all suffering in this world, in Christ on the cross God embraced suffering for our sake. Rather than thinking of himself, Matthew shows Jesus as enduring suffering in obedience to God's will. Jesus endured suffering inflicted on him so that the suffering of this world could be defeated.

There are two implications of Jesus' suffering on the cross. One is that when difficult times enter our lives and we endure suffering inflicted upon us, we can know that we are not alone. In Christ God is with us in our difficulties. Secondly, however, is that while Jesus did not seek to suffer he was willing to endure it so that others might not suffer. Jesus calls us, when we are able, to follow him in challenging the worldly powers that put self-interest first, and instead to trust in God's will. To trust God means to reject the thinking of this world and instead to focus on the needs of others. Sometimes this will lead us to situations that bring hardship upon us. Yet Christ calls on us to do this so that those who are in difficulty may be preserved from suffering. Indeed when we embrace the needs of others rather than ourselves, we may face suffering but we will also find a deep joy. This is the joy of new life in Christ. We come to know such joy not through pretending that suffering does not exist, but rather by following Christ's obedience even when it causes those who follow the ways of this world to turn against us.



## What theologians say:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian from Germany writing in the 1930's, writes,

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise godfearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ.”

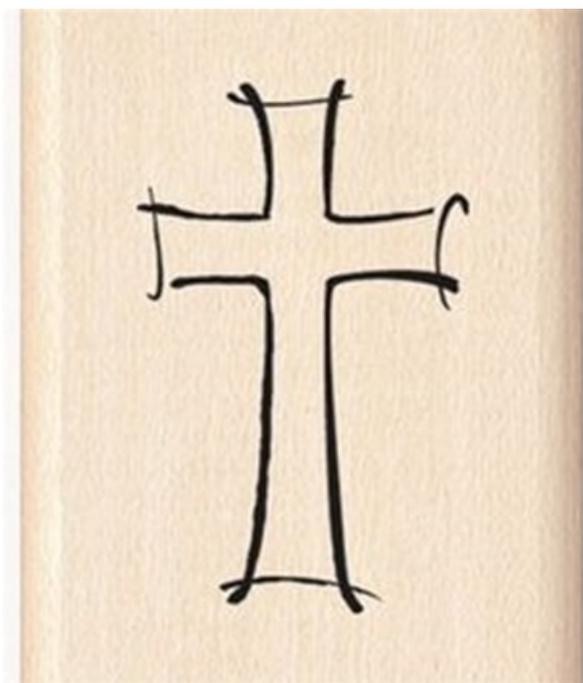
*From The Cost of Discipleship, (Touchstone Books/Simon and Schuster 1995 edition), page 89*

## Songs and Hymns:

O Sacred Head Once Wounded

Story of the Cross

Were You There



## Prayer:

Blessed are you, O God of heaven and earth, for in your mercy you sent us your Son. We give you thanks for Christ's obedience to your will, that through it we may turn to you in faith. Help us to trust that you are with us in even the most difficult of times. Yet also strengthen us so that we may follow your call to serve the needs of others, even when following that call is difficult. May your name be glorified in human and on earth. Amen.