

**The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 2, 2025 – Table Copy**

SILENT PREPARATION

The phrase "where there is no vision, the people perish" comes from Proverbs 29:18, and it means that without a clear purpose – or a plan for the future – a society, a church, or an individual will become stagnant, lose vitality, and fail to progress. The original verse in some translations reads, "without vision, the people perish," or "the people are unrestrained" – which emphasizes the loss of focus and direction.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

O God, all around us we see trouble and wrongdoing. Our world is consumed by violence and destruction. Even within your church, O God, we may see strife and contention. The sinfulness of our generation hangs heavy upon us. We cannot worship you apart from the turmoil that lies so close at hand.

Listen to us, great God of all people. Hear our longing for a new day, in which your reign of love is established through – and among – us. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Worship Assistant

Most merciful God, your kindness to us reaches beyond our comprehension; you reach out to save us, and to welcome us into relationship with you, in the household of faith. Inspire us this day – through the reading and hearing of Holy Scripture, that our lives, in turn, may inspire others to put their faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, 3:17-19

Our first Scripture reading comes from the prophet Habakkuk.

The book of Habakkuk differs from the other prophetic books –

in that it does not consist of the prophet's preaching to his compatriots, but of an extended dialogue between the prophet and God.

The historical setting is 609-598 BCE, when Jehoiakim ruled as king in Judah.

Jehoiakim was a tyrant, who subjected his people to forced labor, persecuted the prophets,

and sanctioned widespread immorality in his realm.

Habakkuk has not been a passive observer of such perversions of God's will, but – rather – has repeatedly prayed for God to intervene.

Our reading consists of excerpts from each of Habakkuk's three chapters;

a related Bible Study can be found on the table –

across from where you obtained a worship bulletin....

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.
 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
 Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?
 Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?
 Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
 So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.
 The wicked surround the righteous –
 therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
 I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;
 I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
 and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
 Then the LORD answered me and said:
 Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.
 For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
 it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
 If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.
 Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them,
 but the righteous live by their faith.
 Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;
 though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food;
 though the flock is cut off from the fold,
 and there is no herd in the stalls,
 yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
 I will exult in the God of my salvation.
 GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
 he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
 and makes me tread upon the heights.

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 19:1-10

Our Gospel reading – once again – comes from the Gospel according to Luke.

*Jesus – who “set his face” to go to Jerusalem back in 9:51 –
is now getting much closer to his destination.*

*And – along the way – Jesus has been teaching, healing, and performing miracles,
which help to make clear both who he is,
and the purpose for which he came.*

*In today’s reading, Luke’s account of Jesus entering the house of Zacchaeus
stands – quite fittingly – as the last of Jesus’ encounters with outcasts
before his entry into Jerusalem.*

He [Jesus] entered Jericho, and was passing through it.
 A man was there named Zacchaeus;
 he was a chief tax collector and was rich.

He was trying to see who Jesus was,
 but – on account of the crowd – he could not,
 because he was short in stature.
 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him,
 because he was going to pass that way.
 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him,
 “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down;
 for I must stay at your house today.”
 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.
 All who saw it began to grumble,
 and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”
 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord,
 “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor;
 and if I have defrauded anyone of anything,
 I will pay back four times as much.”
 Then Jesus said to him,
 “Today salvation has come to this house,
 because he too is a son of Abraham.
 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

SERMON “The Power – and Potential – of Presence”

Last **Sunday**, the lectionary passage from **Luke’s Gospel**
 compared the *prayer perspectives* of two men –
 each of whom had gone up to the Temple to pray.

 And – while there – the prayer of one of those individuals demonstrated
 a *humble, personal, perspective* which – in turn –
 resulted in him – and *him alone* –
 receiving the extraordinary gift of **God’s justifying** –
 and *saving* – grace.

 And – most certainly – *it was a shock* to his listeners:
 The parable **Jesus** told featured a hated *tax collector*.

 Well – this **Sunday** – **Luke’s Gospel** story
 is about an incident involving a *chief* tax collector.

 So, let’s look at this week’s story:

Poor **Zacchaeus!**

He wants to see **Jesus**, but he can't.

He is a *small man*, and he can't see through the crowd.

So he climbs a tree.

Poor Zacchaeus — or is he?

Luke tells us that **Zacchaeus** is a *chief* tax collector —
the *superintendent* of taxation.

So — in a *material sense* — he is anything but poor.

Indeed, **Zacchaeus** is possibly the *richest man* in town.

And — more than that — his riches are — most likely — *ill-gotten*.

The fact is that tax collectors — like **Zacchaeus** —
were something like *extortionists* — and *loan sharks* — rolled into one.

The **Roman governor** would levy an **annual tax assessment**
on the **whole district**.

And the *chief tax collector* — then —
is responsible for coming up with the money...*in any way he can*.

Now, most people — living under the **Roman administration** —
have *no idea* what the **tax code** is;
that is, *what* is taxable, and for *how much*.

[*Here — we might add — some things never change.....*]

Those laws were *made far away* — in **Rome**.

And so – if you lived in **first-century Palestine** –
the simple truth is that whatever the **tax collector** *asked for*,
you *gave him*.

And – if you *didn't have* the money –
he *would be happy to lend* it to you:
at a “reasonable” rate of interest, of course.

[*Something like a Pay Day Loan.....*]

Now, should the **tax collector** just happen to collect
more money than his assessment – which *was not unusual* –
he got to *keep the difference*.

It was a very lucrative racket, and –
as the top man in the **City of Jericho Department of Revenue** –
Zacchaeus had *done quite well* for himself.

But – as most **economists** will admit – there is *no such thing* as a free lunch!

And so, **Zacchaeus** has had to pay a certain price socially:
People say things behind his back...
He's not welcome in the synagogue...
The **Pharisees** won't associate with him in any way –
that was the case in last **Sunday's Gospel reading**...

And, his neighbors view him
as being in cahoots with the occupying powers.

Zacchaeus – then – is certainly *rich*,
but – even more certainly – he is *lonely*.

He certainly has the scratch to put on a mighty impressive **banquet** –
in the then-contemporary, **Greek and Roman** fashion.

But – on the other hand – very few **Jews** –
other than his fellow tax collectors –
would accept his invitation.

Now – all of this having been said –
Zacchaeus hears that **Jesus of Nazareth** is coming to **Jericho**.

And **Jesus** – rumor has it – is a **religious teacher**
who actually talks to tax **collectors** and **sinners**!

Zacchaeus – then – feels an *unexpected longing* well up inside him;
what we might call “*a teachable moment*”!

[Or – remembering last **Sunday’s Time for Young Disciples** –
a moment of *Kairos Time*....]

Well – usually – he would *not give in* to such a feeling.

After all, he’s a loner –
tough, and *calloused*, when it comes to feelings.

But – nevertheless –
there’s something about this **Jesus** that draws **Zacchaeus** out.

[Here, we will add a little midrash to the story....]

So, **Zacchaeus** slips out of his house,
and goes down to **Main Street** –
where *everyone else* is waiting.

But there are *just too many people* there –
an **unruly mob**, *pushing* and *shoving*.

And, wouldn’t *they just love* to push and shove the **superintendent of taxes**!

Just how **Zacchaeus** ends up in the **sycamore tree** is *none too clear*.

Maybe he just wants to see better.

So, he goes down the road a bit and climbs up for a better view.

More ominously, it's possible that the mob –
intoxicated with excitement at meeting **Jesus** –
has *chased him* up there.

And – as **Jesus** rounds the bend –
he sees the people *laughing* and *jeering*.

And – perhaps – even the *children throwing stones* at this hated figure.

Zacchaeus – then – climbs to the next limb up.

But, the **branch** starts to *bend* – and the **people laugh harder**.

The **superintendent of taxes**, up a tree!

What a *rare* – and *delightful* – sight!

But then – quite abruptly – they all turn away:

Jesus has arrived.

And **Jesus** – then – *looks up* at the **superintendent of taxes** –
perched in his *undignified roost* –
and says something completely – and totally – *unexpected*:

*“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down,
for I must stay at your house today.”*

Now – when **Jesus** says, *“Zacchaeus, come down”* –
he's *also inviting him* to come down from his *political perch*,
his *high level of standing* in the **Roman patronage system**.

And – when **Jesus** says, *“I must stay at your house”* –

he's also *trafficking in the currency* of the **patronage system**.

But – the fact is – **Jesus** is doing it in a *very subversive* way.

That is to say – *much more typically* –
patrons invited *their clients* to dinner.

And, their positions – in the **banqueting hall** – were *all about status*.

Ordinarily, a *man of importance* – like **Zacchaeus** –
would have served as a **patron** to a humble *teknon* – or *laborer* –
like **Jesus**.

That is to say, it *would have been* the **tax collector's prerogative**
to invite **Jesus** to dinner.

And so – when **Jesus invites himself** to **Zacchaeus' house** –
he is *busting up* the **whole patronage system**.

He is *rearranging the furniture*;
tearing down the **rigid hierarchy** of the **couches** –
the **couches** that line the **Greco-Roman banquet hall** –
and *replacing that hierarchy* with the **Lord's table**,
where *all are equal*.

Remember how – earlier in **Luke's gospel** – (14:7-14)
Jesus gives *detailed instructions*
about how his disciples *are to comport themselves* at a **banquet**.

Do not – he said – aspire to the **place of honor** –
the **couch** where the **patron** would ordinarily invite
the *most distinguished guest* to recline.

Instead – he tells them – *seek the lowest* position.

And – when you are in the position of *inviting others* –
do not invite those who can return the favor.

Invite – instead – the **beggars** from the street outside,

those *who cannot* reciprocate.

And – in providing a **model prayer** –
Jesus instructs his disciples to say,
“*forgive us our debts,*
as we also have forgiven our debtors....”

The **Lord’s Prayer** – then – is also an *explicit repudiation*
of the **patronage system**:

Jesus envisions – and calls for – a patronage-free – and a *debt-free* – world!

So, we can *only imagine* what they were talking about –
in the **taverns** and **inns** of **Jericho** – that night.

Jesus had made a *big impact* on that town –
and it *had nothing* to do with **teaching**, or **preaching**, or **healing**.

Rather, it *had everything* to do with *where* **Jesus** chose to *spend his time*.

The fact is that **Jesus** communicated more **love**,
more **forgiveness**, and more **caring**
by staying in the **house of Zacchaeus**
than by any teaching – or sermon –
we could ever envision.

Just the **fact** that *he was there* – in **Zacchaeus’ house** – said it all.

Unfortunately, the **gift of presence** is a *rare thing* –
it’s almost a *forgotten virtue*.

We *so value* our **individualism** – and our **self-sufficiency** –
that we too often *fail to reach out* to those around us,
neglecting to offer *even the most basic* **human courtesies**.

But – happily – *there are exceptions.....*

A **nurse** took a *tired, anxious, serviceman* to a bedside.
“*Your son is here,*” she said to the old man.

And, she had to *repeat the words* several times –
before the *patient’s eyes* opened.

Heavily sedated – *because of the pain* of his **heart attack** –
he only *dimly saw* the young, uniformed **Marine**.

He reached out his hand.

The **Marine** wrapped *his toughened fingers* around the *old man’s limp ones*,
squeezing a message of **love** and **encouragement**.

The **nurse** then brought a chair – so that the **Marine** could sit beside the bed.

All through the night,
the **young Marine** sat there in *darkened room*,
holding the old man’s hand,
and *offering him words* of love and strength.

Occasionally, the **nurse** suggested that the **Marine** move away – and rest awhile.

He refused.

And – whenever the **nurse** came into the ward –
the **Marine** *was oblivious* to her,
and to the *many night noises* of the **hospital**.

Now and then, she heard him say *a few gentle words*.

The dying man *said nothing*;
he *only held tightly* to his son all through the night.

And – along towards dawn – the old man died.

The **Marine** released the *now lifeless* hand he had been holding,
and *went to tell* the **nurse**.

And – while she did what she had to do – *he waited*.

Finally, she returned.

She *started to offer words* of sympathy,
but the **Marine** *interrupted her*:
“*Who was that man?*” he asked.

The **nurse** was startled, “*He was your father*” – she answered.

“*No, he wasn’t*,” the **Marine** replied.

“*I never saw him before in my life.*”

“Then, why didn’t you say something – when I took you to him?”

“I knew right away there had been a mistake.

“But I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn’t here.

“When I realized that he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son,
and – knowing *how much he needed me* –
I stayed.

“*I came here tonight* to find a **Mr. William Grey**.

“*His son was killed* in **Iraq** today, and I was *sent to inform* him.

“What was *this gentleman’s* name? “

The **nurse** – stunned – and with tears in her eyes –

answered, *that was "Mr. William Grey....."*

Friends, just because we're **Christians**
does not guarantee that we are *good practitioners* of the **gift of presence**.

But – the **Good News** is –
when we are willing to do the duty that lies nearest –
God will work all things together for good!

In fact, people who study **evangelism** – and **church growth** –
tell us that *a lack of this thing* – called "**presence**" –
is a **major reason** why *people leave* churches.

They leave *by the back door* – not the front.

And they leave – *not because they're turned off* – or *angry* –
but – simply –
because their **hearts** *have not been warmed* by **human fellowship**.

And so – just as **Jesus** *made himself present* to **Zacchaeus** –
we need to be present to others –
in our **homes**, in our **schools** –
even if they are the Academy of Life Long Learning,
in our **communities**, and – even – in our **church....**

We need to *take time* – or *make time* – to simply *be there*.

And – when we do so –
the power of the **Holy Spirit** will turn it into
a *blessed foretaste* of the **heavenly kingdom!**

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Amen.*

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)**

From A Declaration of Faith, 1977

**We believe Christ gives us – and demands of us – personal lives that
are centered in God and open to God's reality and rule. Christ teaches us to**

put obedience to God above the interests of self, family, race or nation; to offer God joyously our money, ability, and time. Life in God's presence issues in life for others, for if we do not love siblings whom we see, we cannot love God whom we do not see. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

In our reading from Luke's Gospel,
Jesus was sure that Zacchaeus needed the gift of his powerful presence.

And, that young Marine – who ministered to Mr. William Grey –
was sure that Mr. Grey needed the gift of his personal presence.

As we go forth from this place –
we may also be sure that those whom God puts in our paths need ours,
as well!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....