

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 30, 2022
Habbakuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 119-137-144
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Luke 19:1-10

The Channel in Which Your Life Flows

It started around 2011. I discovered how much I liked kayaking.

And so about once a year we would rent kayaks while we were on vacation and explore rivers or bays or mangrove swamps.

Then in January 2015 I attended a disaster training sponsored by Episcopal Relief and Development at Dayspring Episcopal Conference Center in Parrish, Florida.

Dayspring is situated on the Manatee River. Before and after the morning and afternoon training sessions, we had the opportunity of taking kayaks out on the Manatee River.

One afternoon, in the golden glow just before twilight, kayaking with two others also attending the training, I watched birds flying home for the night, and together the three of us offered our evening prayers aloud on the open water.

Another day, in the foggy grayness before dawn, another attendee and I took out two kayaks. Floating on the Manatee River we saw the Bands of Venus just before the sun came up. And we watched over the mangroves along the river as terns, herons, egrets, ibises, cranes, and robins made their morning commute.

In the evening and in the morning, I felt centered and content in a kayak on the river. It's the same feeling I had had every other time I'd been on or in a kayak on rivers, lakes, bays, mangroves, and marshes. It's a feeling of connectedness with self, nature, and God, a feeling of being grounded in way that energizes and renews and reminds me of the well of gratitude from which my life and love and service flow.

Right about this same time as my disaster training, in late January 2015, I encountered this quote from Henry David Thoreau: "Dwell as near as possible to the channel in which your life flows." *Dwell as near as possible to the channel in which your life flows.*

Wow, I thought. I love kayaking so much, the sounds and buoyancy of the water, the breeze in my face, the observable wildlife, the smell of the outdoors, the feeling of connection, the feel of the paddle slicing through the water, the responsiveness of a little boat to every stroke. I love it so much. Why do I only do it once a year?

Kayaking is a lifegiving channel for me. Why was I not making choices that would let me do it more?

Well, there were lots of good reasons why. It takes time. It requires purchasing or renting or borrowing the necessary equipment. I didn't live right beside the river like I did for that week of training at Dayspring.

In short, I wasn't doing it because, even though I love it so much, I wasn't making it a priority. I made other choices and spent my time and money and energy differently. I also had some other obligations. But, in any case, the choices I was making didn't line up with me spending more time kayaking, which is to say, my choices and my kayaking were not aligned.

But that line from Thoreau stuck with me, and it snapped me back to attention several times over the course of the year 2015 and quite a few times since then.

“Dwell as near as possible to the channel in which your life flows.”

I actually started a kayak fund in 2015. I put money into a designated jar for the purchase of a kayak. At one point I had almost enough to buy the boat I wanted plus a paddle and a PFD.

And then our garage door lifter broke. And there went my kayak money.

I saved some more. And then one of our cats got really sick. And there went my kayak money.

But, something so pleasurable, something providing me so many benefits, and still I only made it out on a lake or river once or twice a year. My choices and my kayaking were not aligned.

What if the value I placed on kayaking and the resources I devoted to kayaking matched up? What if they were aligned? Would things look different?

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Evidence of alignment. We invest resources in the things we actually value, the things we identify as important. And when what we are spending our resources on really matches what we value most, we are in alignment.

This morning part of what I want to say is that's what stewardship is: aligning our resources with our values. Dwelling as near as possible to the channel in which our life flows. Figuring out what is most important to us and then orienting our choices around actualizing those things.

Is that easy? Sometimes. Is that difficult? Often. Can we do that? Yes. Do we want to do that? Hmm. That's the recurring question.

If we want to do that, how do we get clear on which choices to make?

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Sometimes, oftentimes we may find ourselves in the situation of the prophet Habakkuk in today's first reading. Violence and destruction all around. Evil seems to prevail. No justice. No peace. In the midst of dreadful circumstances, it's easy to get distracted and to forget that God is bigger than our immediate circumstances always and everywhere.

In circumstances like these, we do well to follow Habakkuk's example. If you find yourself *under* the circumstances, get yourself someplace where you can get *over* the circumstances. Get a different vantage point. Habakkuk says, *I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, and what God will answer concerning my complaint.*

I know one of my watchposts is on the water, in a kayak. Things line up for me out there. I get re-centered and reconnected and ready to re-engage what matters most to me off the water. God speaks to me on the water. And just FYI, I finally made choices that make it possible for me to kayak more often. That was one of many factors in the choice to answer the call to St Paul's, Key West. Because, now, nearly every Friday morning, I put my kayak in the waters of Upper Sugarloaf Sound.

One of my watchposts is a kayak. Where's your watchpost? Where's the place where you can get clear on your priorities? What is your rampart? What is the location in which you remember what you know and get your values and your allocation of resources aligned?

There's another watchpost in today's lessons, another rampart, and this one is at a higher altitude than a kayak. Did you catch it?

It's a tree in the city of Jericho, and a fellow who is, shall we say, vertically challenged, a fellow named Zacchaeus, climbs up in it.

We often hear that Zacchaeus was short, short of stature, "a wee little man," as the children's song has it. Do y'all know that song? Zacchaeus might have been short; the phrase rendered *short of stature* can also be translated *of diminished stature*, as in, being of low status and looked down upon by others, most likely because of his occupation.

But, whether he was physically short or looked down on—or perhaps both—Luke also tells us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and was rich.

I know Zacchaeus is a character in a story. His name actually means, "Mr Righteous." But what if Zacchaeus is also a real person, full of complications and contradictions like all the rest of us?

Is it possible that this short or looked down on and rich person—who had made a killing off extorting money from others, who was very likely both feared and despised in his town of Jericho—is it possible that he was also hungry for good news, that he was conflicted about his circumstances, that he wanted a change, that he looked around him like the prophet Habakkuk looked around and wanted relief from how things were?

Let's give him the benefit of the doubt for a minute. Zacchaeus climbs up in a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus. He makes the move Habakkuk calls for. He takes up his leafy watchpost and stations himself on a sycamore rampart. And boy, oh boy, does he ever get clear on how to align his true values and his resources.

God comes to him in the person of Jesus the Christ and calls him by name. "Zacchaeus, come down here; I'm coming to your house for lunch." Some people think Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but remain unseen by him, to spectate but not participate. But what if he wanted to be seen? What if stationing himself at that watchpost was also inviting God to see him as he was, meet him where he was, and give him guidance for how to transform his current out-of-alignment circumstances?

Whatever we may know or not know about Zacchaeus and his intentions or

motivations, we hear him confess to Jesus that he will give half of what he owns to the poor. He pledges to make four-fold restitution to anyone he has cheated. Basically, he is vowing to become pretty close to poor himself in order to make things right.

It's a dramatic conversion. Zacchaeus goes from being all about himself to being all about God and God's people, God's suffering people, God's hungry people, God's sick people, right in his own backyard.

And Jesus says, in that transformation, salvation—health, healing, wholeness—salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus.

What is God asking you to give or give back? As we begin preparing the St Paul's budget for 2023, what will our spending priorities as a congregation reveal about what we value most? Where will we invest our time, our energy, our money, our love, ourselves?

When we come near to the channel in which our life flows, when we make choices that align with our values, we join Habakkuk and Zacchaeus and a great and holy host of our ancestors in faith in welcoming salvation—health, healing, wholeness,—to our own homes. And then, like Zacchaeus, we have the joy, the sometimes hard but always holy joy, of more consciously, more intentionally, more wholeheartedly partnering with God and one another in extending those same things to others.

I pray salvation will come anew to all of us and all of our houses. Let's be, with God's help, the stewards we are called to be, the people who live in alignment in our values, resources, priorities, and choices. Let's be people who dwell as near as possible to the channel in which our life flows. AMEN.