

New Year's Day (is every day)

Luke 19:1-10

Two days after Christmas, with piles of wrapping paper still lying all over the living room,
and Christmas dinner leftovers still in the fridge,
Brigitta and I headed to JFK with a bunch of other church friends, all embarking on Greenfield Hill's annual mission trip to India.
We got back on Tuesday, just in time to catch the tail end of the polar vortex,
and after a pretty wonderful ten days of being with people who are doing amazing work,
people who are this church's hands and heart and hope in places of immense poverty and need.

We changed up the schedule this year --
we always used to go over February break, prime mission trip time for churches,
but with Fairfield schools doing away with February break -- grrrrr--
Christmas break it was.

As a result, for the first time, we were going to be in India for New Year's.

So, I said to our Indian CHristian friends,
What's New Year's Eve going to be like?
I had visions of wild dancing in the streets,
Samosas and curry all night long,
and whatever the Indian equivalent of a ball drop would be.

We go to church, they said.
It's our tradition to be in church when midnight comes.
Oh, I said, oh, of course, church. (It didn't seem appropriate to sound disappointed.)
And then, they said, on New Year's **Day**,
we have another tradition.
What's that? I said.
We go to church, they said.
All righty then, I said.
And you'll be preaching, they said.
And so it was that on New Year's Day,

I and the other folks representing you piled into a van and drove a very very long way into the middle of rural India, to the town of Jamalapuram, for church.

Folks had gathered from all over -- there were people from ten different villages, all sitting under a colorful awning, erected next to their church, so there'd be room for all.

It was a pretty big deal that the Americans had come -- our kids were swarmed by friendly folks, little children ran up, shouted "Hello How Are You I am Fine" and jumped and down with excitement.

There was song after song after song, and then, much to our mortification, **we** were asked to sing -- we went with He's Got the Whole World in His Hands, which seemed fitting for folks from Fairfield County standing shoulder to shoulder with the people of Jalapuram, India -- the whole world seemed pretty small right then,

And then it was time for me to preach, on New Year's Day in Jamalapuram.

I gotta tell you, it's not the easiest thing to preach in rural India.

There are some challenges.

Firstly, there are the monkeys.

There aren't ALWAYS monkeys, but on New Year's Day, there were.

A lot of monkeys.

It's hard enough to hold people's attention as a preacher --

but with a monkey dangling right behind you -- fuhgeddaboutit.

And secondly, what you preach has to be translated,

which does weird things to the rhythm of your speaking --

you preach, you pause for translation, you preach, you pause.

And sometimes what you had in mind doesn't turn out to translate all that well.

On New Year's Day in Jamalapuram, for instance,

I told them my sermon was going to be about **do-overs**.

I immediately realized that word wasn't going to work.

My translating friend looked really flummoxed.

Do . Over ..? he said.

Shoot, I said. I'll explain.

So I told them how my son Andres and I love to play board games together. Then I realized that "board games" might not translate that well, either, so I said "you know, like chess."

That seemed to work.

And I told them that much as I love playing games like chess with my son, I am generally terrible.

I seem to be incapable of thinking strategically.

I make rash and stupid moves.

And here's the thing -- Andres, God bless him, always, upon seeing me make these idiotic mistakes, says "Mom, let's pretend you didn't just do that."

He gives me another chance to get it right, I said.

That's a do-over.

The translator translated, and the folks under the awning nodded, "ah."

And you know what? I said.

Jesus was a big believer in do-overs.

Jesus was a big believer in second chances.

And then I told them the story of Zacchaeus, the story Mike just read to you this morning.

I've always loved the story of Zacchaeus, because I've always been short, and that was Zacchaeus' problem, too.

The Sunday School song I grew up singing said,

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he,"

and I always thought "I know what that's like."

On the day Jesus came to town, Zacchaeus was stuck at the back of the crowd, couldn't see a darn thing except the back of the guy in front of him, and so he scrambled up a tree.

And that's when Jesus spotted him,

spotted him, called out to him by name, 'Zacchaeus! I see you! Come on down! I want to come to your house for dinner.'

I loved that. The triumph of the shorty. The height-challenged dude gets picked to be Jesus' best bud for the evening.

What I never fully grasped as a kid hearing this story was that Zacchaeus was actually a class-A jerk.

The short guy was also the most hated man in town,

not cause he was short, but because he had pretty much cheated every last one of them at some point.

Over-taxed them, short-changed, robbed --

and he was into conspicuous consumption, too, so every day they had to look at his gold chains and his big house and be reminded of his colossal jerkiness to them.

So, when Jesus picks him out as his dinner host for the evening,

when Jesus says "hey, Zacchaeus, been looking forward to hanging out with you," the shock waves that run through the crowd can't be overstated.

People are -- well, annoyed, but annoyed is way too weak a word -- they are flummoxed and furious.

But all it is is classic Jesus.

Jesus is giving Zacchaeus a do-over. Jesus is giving Zacchaeus a second chance. A second chance to, well, stop being a jerk.

And it works.

Zacchaeus scrambles out of the tree, and falls at Jesus' feet.

And there in the presence of the One who is everything good, the One who is pure Love,

Zacchaeus **gets** that he needs that do-over. He needs to start over, make his move again, re-do his whole life.

And it's pretty dramatic what happens.

I'm sorry, Zacchaeus says.

Anyone I've cheated, I'm going to restore it, fourfold, and I'm giving up half of what I've got to the poor.

Then today salvation has come to you, says Jesus.

I told the folks in Jamalapuram what I tell you right now.

I think this story is the perfect New Year's story.

'Cause why do we love New Year's so much?

Why do we stay up until midnight, blow our noisemakers, hug each other and raise a toast --

or spend all night in church, if that's the way you do it ...

Because we love the idea of a clean slate,

of starting again,

of getting a second chance, a do-over.

Zacchaeus gets that. Zacchaeus gets to start again.
He gets a second chance to be the person God created him to be.
He gets a do-over, I said to those folks.
That day, that day when Jesus came to town,
that day was Zacchaeus' New Year's Day.
That day was New Year's Day for Zacchaeus.

The most amazing story I've heard about second chances and do-overs
was a story I heard right here at Greenfield Hill,
a story which a number of you heard, too.
We got to hear it when Walter Everett came to town,
fifteen months ago.

Walt Everett -- and you probably remember this --
Walt Everett is a pastor, a Methodist pastor here in Connecticut.
And a number of years back,
he lost his son, Scott.
Scott was killed, shot and killed by a guy named Mike.
Walter and his family attended every day of the trial.
They were there when Mike was sentenced,
the same day Mike said to them, as he was led away, "I'm sorry."
Sorry meant nothing to Walt;
he was so filled with grief and rage that if anything the 'sorry' only infuriated him more.
And that anger took over him;
it was he felt first thing in the morning and last thing at night;
it dominated him, it near destroyed him.
Until the first anniversary of Mike's death,
when Walt heard God whispering to him,
that God of second chances.
Walt heard God whisper to him "you have to forgive."
And Walt sat down and wrote a letter, a letter whose every word was so hard to write,
a letter that said "I forgive."
He sent it to Mike.
And that would be remarkable enough, enough of a story,
but then -- and you probably remember this -- then Mike asked if Walt would please
come visit with him.

And as hard as it had been to write that letter,
how much harder was it to walk through that prison door and sit with his son's killer,
but Walt did it.

That day and then again and again.

And again.

And when Mike came up for parole, it was Walt who spoke for him;
it was Walt who invited him to dinner when Mike was released,
Walt who helped him find a job,
and Walt who, three years later, officiated at Mike's wedding.

I told that story in Jamalapuram, and the people were as astonished by it as I had been
the first time I heard it.

Walt gave Mike a do-over, didn't he? I said. Walt gave Mike a second chance.

Just like Jesus gave Zacchaeus another chance to re-do his life,

Walt, who loves Jesus, gave Mike a chance.

And you know what, I said --

when Walt did that it wasn't just **Mike** who got to start again.

Walt's life started again.

All that rage, all that soul-destroying anger,

Walt got the chance to leave it behind.

Two men, one story,

and a New Year's Day for both of them.

The truth is that for those who know God's love,

any day can be New Year's Day.

For those who have heard the good news of forgiveness,

any day can be New Year's Day.

God offers to each one of us the do-overs that we need;

Jesus holds out to each one of us the chance to start again,

to let go of whatever we have been and done

just as Jesus held out his hand to Zacchaeus and said

'come on down -- now's your chance to get it right.'

Whatever we have messed up,

whatever hurt we have felt or caused,

God forgives, Christ accepts,

and it is New Year's Day.

For those who open their hearts to the power of God's redemptive love,

any day, every day, is New Year's Day.

And that, **that**, is awfully good news , from Fairfield to Jamalapuram and every place in between.

Because it doesn't matter whether you're sitting on an old wooden pew in a Connecticut suburb or sitting cross legged on the ground where monkeys play, wherever you are, whoever you are, there's something in your life you wish was different, and something in your life you need forgiveness for, and someone in your life you need to forgive. Everyone needs a New Year's Day. Everyone needs a do-over.

After worship had ended in Jamalapuram, two and a half hours after it began -- after the kids had jumped up in relief -- Indian kids are as happy when church is over as American kids --

a man came up to me.

I did like I'd do at the front door on any Sunday -- smiled and extended my hand for a handshake.

But he didn't want a handshake.

He'd brought a friend with him to translate to me.

"He wants you to pray for him," the friend explained.

"He needs a new day, what you said, a New Year Day."

I turned to the man.

"No good man," he said, and tears filled his eyes. "No good."

"Oh honey," I said, which probably didn't translate at all.

"Oh, honey, it's okay. You're okay."

And I put my hands on his shoulders and I prayed not for God to forgive him, because I knew God had gotten there well before me.

I prayed instead for him to know how much he was loved.

I prayed for him to know how much he was cherished.

And I prayed for it to be his New Year's Day.

I pray it for each one of us today, on this 12th day.

I pray it for each one of us who needs a do-over, a second chance,

a Zacchaeus moment before The Lord of Love.

And I pray it knowing full well that God has already gotten there before me,
loving you, loving me, more than we can begin to imagine.

Happy New Year.

Amen.