

### **Team Jesus**

We find ourselves in the final days of not one but two high holy seasons: Lent and March Madness. I should be clear that the two are not at all equal in importance. The days leading to Holy Week and Easter are of course central in shaping our understanding of who and whose we are. March Madness is about a game, lots of games where teams battle it out through a few shining moments to cut down the nets. And in our household, the bracket challenge, known affectionately as TTC, The True Competition is a highlight of the year, especially if my team—or my bracket—wins out. I submitted two different brackets this year. One has the teams I thought would win; the other has the teams I wanted to win. I didn't have the option of choosing my beloved Wildcats, so I had other favorites. Go Vandy! Go Drake! My other bracket has not fared all that well either. I picked Duke to win it all in that one. Oh well.

We've done this for the entirety of our married life, dating back to the excitement of picking up a copy of USA Today early on Monday morning, so we could do extensive research. My mother had her own method, picking teams based on whether she liked the coach or a team's uniform. She was also known to choose against Gonzaga because a boy who went there broke her best friend's daughter's heart. While it's safe to go with the heavy favorites, it's thrilling to pick the year's Cinderella. And even if I don't pick them, I love watching an underdog topple Goliath, seeing players find their rhythm on the big stage, or discovering a coach who at least seems to care more about nurturing young people than beefing up the

bottom line. Bandwagon-ing gets a bad rap, but is it really a bad thing to fall in love with a team of unknowns who defy the odds and surprise everyone?

The passage that Timothy read for us is Jesus' third and final passion prediction in Luke's gospel. The crowds have grown exponentially since Jesus set his face for Jerusalem in chapter 9. The bandwagon is real, and the disciples are understandably swept up in the momentum. I sense that Jesus wants to take a moment to be as transparent as possible about what lies ahead. He wants to be clear about what it means for them to align themselves with him, what it means to be on Team Jesus. It's not that Jesus is a clairvoyant with a crystal ball; he doesn't have to be to know that he is on a collision course with the powers that be. Those powers have no interest in or use for a Messiah who upends the oppressive status quo, a Messiah who is unwilling to bow to the whims of a ravenous, self-serving, power-protecting empire that gains and maintains control through intimidation and fear. Although all three passion predictions point to Jesus' death and resurrection, each one emphasizes different details. The first insists that his suffering and death will be at the hands of the religious elite. The second speaks only of his being betrayed into human hands.<sup>1</sup> In this third and final prediction Jesus details the utter degradation he, the Son of Man will endure: "he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon,"<sup>2</sup> before he is beaten and killed. He will be publicly humiliated by those who are threatened by his unsettling presence and frightened by his popularity. Jesus will not lift a hand against those who terrorize him, nor will he denigrate them. He will not play the game by their

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/zacchaeus/commentary-on-luke-1831-43191-10>

<sup>2</sup> Luke 18:32, NRSVue

rules, and he will reveal to the world what authentic divine power looks like. In his words and actions, he will remind us that intimidation, bravado, and cruelty are weapons of the empire, not fruits of the spirit. And in his degradation, Jesus will choose once again to align himself not with those in power but with the cast out and the cast aside. The disciples don't get it yet, Luke tells us. It's hard news to face. I'm guessing such information is too difficult to imagine. They don't want his prediction to be true.

As Jesus and his followers enter Jericho, a blind man cries out from the sidelines in a very particular way: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"<sup>3</sup> The ones in the front tell him to be quiet, either because they have decided he is a nuisance or because calling someone "Son of David" has political implications. The title "Son of David" refers to a particular kind of Messiah, one who will liberate the Jewish people from their oppressor, in this case, Rome. Mention of this title places Jesus, his disciples, and the blind man in danger. This is the first time this title is used in Luke's gospel, and Jesus does not shy away from it. Those around him may try to shove the man to the side and police the man's language; Jesus does not. He steps toward the man and asks what he wants. The man responds, "Lord, I want to see again." Jesus restores his physical sight and tells him that his faith, his trust has made him well, has made him whole. This one who sees what the disciples could not, becomes a disciple, too, following and praising his Savior. And once again Jesus reminds us that he will always embrace the least, the lost, and the left out. He understands himself as one of them and comes to save them and make them and everyone else whole.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 18:38, NRSVue

Next, we meet the wee little man, Zaccheus. As you may suspect, I have a soft spot for Zaccheus. While I have sadly shrunk to just under 5 feet in the past few years, I have been in the front row for group photos since sometime around seventh grade. I've never been all that good at climbing trees, however. Zaccheus has me beat on that. Neither one of us would stand a chance at lining up any lucrative NIL deals. Zaccheus is the last one picked for any team, for a host of reasons. He is Jew who has aligned himself with the empire by serving as a tax collector. He makes a living gathering taxes to fill Roman coffers. This is not a dutiful IRS agent simply doing his job. Tax collectors were independent operators who often lined their own pockets by extorting more than they needed to satisfy the empire's demands. You may recall that in chapter 3 of Luke's gospel, when tax collectors come to John to be baptized, they ask what a repentant life would look like for them. John replies not by telling them to find a new profession but to "collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."<sup>4</sup> So one can be a tax collector *and* live a repented life. Stereotypes and pigeonholes can be hard to shake, however. And clearly Zaccheus is not well liked by his Jericho neighbors as evidenced by the way they block him from seeing Jesus. Like the father hiking up his robe and running to welcome his long-lost son, Zaccheus casts his dignity aside, hikes up his own robe, runs ahead, and clambers up a sycamore tree just to catch a glimpse of this Jesus he's heard so much about. Once again, Jesus sets his sights on this odd man out. He calls Zaccheus by name, tells him to climb back down, and invites himself over to Zaccheus's house. And the crowd grumbles. Zaccheus responds by standing his ground and declaring that he will give half of his possessions to the

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:13, NRSVue

poor and repay anyone he has defrauded far beyond what the Torah requires. The original Greek is all present tense, suggesting perhaps that this generosity is something Zaccheus already does: “I *give* half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I *repay* them four times as much.”<sup>5</sup> Either way, Zaccheus is not the crooked scrooge the crowd believes him to be. Jesus declares out loud that Zaccheus is a child of Abraham and that salvation—wholeness—has come to and even through his house.<sup>6</sup> Zaccheus’s generosity will have an extraordinary impact on those he shares his fortune with and those whom he repays. His changed heart and life will help to save others, will play a part in making others whole again as well. Jesus knows this and names this. Jesus sees Zaccheus as one of God’s own, even if the crowd cannot. In Zaccheus Jesus sees and celebrates one who embodies the repentant life Jesus has been calling everyone to embrace all along, and he is happy to have the little guy on his team.

While we do not know how the Road to the Final Four will end tomorrow night, we do know where this road is headed. Next Sunday we will celebrate Jesus with palms and pageantry only to hear the crowds deride him and his friends deny him in a matter of days. We know where Jesus will wind up. His team will largely abandon him when he finds himself degraded, ridiculed, terrorized, and executed by the powers that be. We still find ways to abandon him today, and yet he still refuses to abandon us.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 19:8, CEB, emphasis added

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to my colleague Rev. Mary Ann McKibben Dana for this observation.

This passage that begins with a brutal account of what Jesus will soon endure ends with a stunning promise. This one who will soon find himself among the left out and the overlooked, the derided, the disenfranchised, the disappeared, and the dismissed, the tortured and the terrorized still insists that he has come to seek and save the lost. This is who Jesus is, and this is what he does. He comes as one of us to save all of us. In the face of ridicule, humiliation, torture, and death, he refuses to pursue earthly power, refuses to stoop to petty antics, refuses to write anyone off, and refuses to save his own skin. He stubbornly pursues us and calls us to repent and change our hearts and lives. It doesn't make sense. It's not March Madness; it's madness on another level. He does not deserve what comes his way. And moreover, we do not deserve him. And yet, Jesus keeps seeking, keeps loving, keeps challenging, keeps saving until every last lost one is home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.