

ZACCHAEUS' DAUGHTER SPEAKS

LUKE 19

OCTOBER 31, 2010

Shalom. My name is Teeaynah, which in Hebrew, means fig tree. I greet you in the name of the Holy One of Israel – Maker of heaven and earth; Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery. The One in whom all the birds of the air find welcome and shelter; the One whose roots grow deep and anchor the world to itself and to what it will grow to become, and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. In the name of that One I bring you peace.

You don't know me; I don't appear in your scriptures. My father does, though. You know him as Zacchaeus. I call him Abba – you would say daddy. And I want to tell you my story and how it is that I stand before you today.

You know my father...well, in truth, you do not, but you have heard a small part of his story. I'd like to tell you the rest. Or at least the part that I know. None of us truly knows another – and this is all the more true of parents and children. I realize that more than ever now that I have a daughter of my own. But I shall tell you what I know. Perhaps his story will take root in you and grow tall – and who knows, some day, become a place of refuge or deeper knowing; a temporary shelter where a dove, descending, will find welcome or some other winged creature blown off course and in danger, may find a home.

From the time I was old enough to remember, we were not welcome, my little brothers and I, to play with the other children in our town. Jericho. We lived in Jericho. My father was a tax gatherer. I didn't know what that was; only that Abba went to work every day and when he came home, he played ball with us behind our house, among the trees there. What he actually DID at work – it never crossed my mind to ask. It was a word. "Tax Gatherer" I only knew that it was spat at us with venom, as though it were a disease with which we – all our family – were infected.

I'd go home crying often, having stood at the side while the other girls played in the street or carried fuel and food for their families. If I tried to join in – or even if they simply noticed me – they'd turn their backs and call me names, or chase me away.

Once, perhaps in an attempt to help, my mother said that I could invite some girls to our home for supper, to celebrate my birthday. I was turning 7. I shyly approached 2 of the girls, ones who hadn't been TOO mean to me in the past. Their eyes widened as I spoke, they exchanged glances, and the older of the two said "*nobody eats at the homes of people like you*" and they turned and walked away.

Whenever I'd go home crying, Abba would say "*don't worry, my little sapling – I love you. Come – we'll go to our special place*" And he'd take me to a place of – well – it was magic. A tree. Right on the edge of town, where our property met the river and the main road begins. It was a fig sycamore...huge. At least it seemed huge when I was a girl. We'd climb into its welcoming branches. The wide and fragrant leaves grew far down the trunk, and we could hide there easily and quickly. I love that part – being so close to everything in town, and yet completely out of sight, unless someone took the time to really look. And of

course, nobody did. That's something I've never forgotten – who is there just out of sight, if we took the time to really look?

Part way up the trunk divided, and formed a V just exactly the right size and shape for one little bottom, and one bigger one, to settle down and think about life.

This is our tree, Abba said. I come here to think about things, and to pray. I learned to do that too. It was as though God's very Spirit were there in that tree. Abba told me stories there about when he was a boy, and about his parents, and about our faith. How Moses heard the call of God from a tree that burned but was not consumed. About Eve and Adam, and the tree in the centre of the garden....I loved it all. I loved our tree. It was big and its bark was rough; at some times in the year when the leaves were new, it was sticky and smelled a bit sour. The sticky buds would get stuck on the soles of my bare feet, and on my robes, and made doing laundry very hard but I didn't mind scrubbing harder. The tree blossomed and then bore fruit that we'd eat, sometimes when it wasn't ripe enough and then...well you know what THAT does. But we didn't mind that either. I loved everything about that tree; how it felt and smelled and it seemed it had been there from the creation of the world. A leafy, luscious leftover from that original garden. And when I sat among its branches, I seemed to know things – deep in my knower. The breeze would lift the leaves, they'd whisper things just outside my grasp. Promises, it felt like. Some days, when we were quiet, letting the tree simply give us its treeness, the sunlight played games with the shadows, as if powerful unseen things were happening just beyond my sight.

At night, Abba would show me the stars. He didn't say a lot; sometime we just sat in silence, but one night as we sat eating our snack, he said *"Teeaynah – outer space is so beautiful isn't it? A gift from the Creator. But here, in the tree, this is my own inner space. As infinite as the moon and sun and stars, but more exciting because in here I have my very own moon and sun and stars within me. You have them too.*

Once when I was crying very hard after some rejection by the neighbourhood children (I never seemed to learn – always some part of me hoped it would be different the next time) Abba had taken me to our tree, and I finally got the courage to ask the question I had withheld until now. *Abba – why won't they come to our house, and what is a tax collector, and why are you one?*

He took a deep breath. He put his arm around me, just one arm, for fear of falling. It was brown and a little flabby – like an arm that used to work hard and now did not. He swallowed, turned to the side a bit, as if shielding something in himself. *I think you are old enough now to know, my love.*

We didn't always live in the house we do now. And I didn't always work at that booth down the road. When you were very tiny, and before your brothers were born, your mother and I owned some land outside of town. An orchard. We made our living there. Instead of going to work every day at the booth, we tended our trees.

We worked with our treed. Pruning them, fertilizing them, picking the fruit and selling it. That land and those trees belonged to us and to my parents before that, and their parents before that. I grew up with those trees, and I loved working among them. They were....my friends. I first kissed your mother under

one of them, and the day we were married, we invited all our friends to a picnic beneath their branches. We wanted the trees to be our guests too; they had watched our love grow from the beginning. As the rabbi signed the scroll, a leaf fell onto the paper and made a small mark, as if to give blessing; to bear witness to such a solemn promise. So many people would come to our home in those days....it was our greatest pleasure to invite good friends for dinner.

His voice was soft – his eyes looking at a place only he could see. I had to listen hard to make sure I got every word.

Then – you know the soldiers you see in the street every day?

I swallowed hard and felt sick in my belly. Yes, I knew them – enough to be afraid of what was coming next.

Because their country has conquered our own, they can do whatever they want. Take whatever they please. That's why we tell you not to go near them.

They wanted our orchard, and so they took it. It's as simple as that. We had to fee you and the boys – and so I took the only job I could get. I sit in that booth and take money from the people as they pass by. The money goes to the soldiers and if I want any for ourselves, I have to take more. As much as I want to take. And....Teeaynah, I took a lot of money. From our own people. I was so angry about losing our orchard, I decided I just did not care any more. I'd take whatever i wanted to give you a good life....

And that's why people don't like me my love, and I don't blame them. But I'm so very sorry that you've had to pay the price too. It's not our fault, and you can't do anything about it – but I can –

I reached out and touched his cheek. It was wet. He turned to me. Buried his face in my braids.

The only time I feel good is when I sit here in this tree. It's not like being in our own orchard but this tree has become the place I come to when I need to remember who I am. Here, I can think and feel and hear.....

Suddenly we heard too close to us, the clink of soldiers' boots, and Abba's smiled died., a cloud over the sun. It twisted something inside me to see the change in him then. He was afraid. And he was deeply ashamed that I had seen his fear. For a moment I thought I heard a sound. The hollow sound of a little girl's god falling; landing outside the garden. He was only a man after all. The knowledge of it came softly, and with pain. It whispered a question that neither of us could name or explain....the boots came closer, their sound muffling the whisper, if it had truly been there at all, and the impression vanished.

He went back to work and I went to do the laundry, which is what I was supposed to have been doing all along. But he was different after that day. There was about him and air of something growing, like a seed about to break through the sun baked clay into the sun.

And then –

And then we heard that the teacher from Nazareth was coming to town. The whole place was talking about it. I forgot all about orchards and soldiers and concentrated on listening in on conversations about him. Some said he was coming to get rid of the soldiers and they were prepared to fight to help him. Everyone knew that some of our own people had stashes of weapons hidden in caves in the hills – waiting for the right time. Was this it?

Others said no – he was coming to get rid of the priests at the temple and there was going to be a big fight – still others told stories about him – healing the sick and feeding the hungry but the ones I listened to the most were about how he welcomed the outcasts. Those despised by others. I wondered....

YOU know about Jesus finding my father in the tree. I wasn't there. I was way down the street trying to see through the crowd and avoid the girls who would have pushed me aside. My brothers came through the crowd, running and calling my name. *Get home NOW. They said MAMA SAYS NOW.*

I ran. On the way they told me *"The teacher is coming to our house for supper."* And when I got home it was true.

About that day I have only a child's memories. Flashes – snapshots –

What lingers, imprinted, carved into my bark as it were, are the feelings.

My mother – frantic, putting together a meal she was neither used to nor prepared for

I remember looking at our dining room as if seeing it for the first time. Placing a vase of flowers in the centre and wondering what it looked like to the teacher.

The smell of lentil stew

And about Jesus himself – it's strange, because I can't call up his face. Just an impression. The set of his shoulders as he sat, his back to the window with the light from the setting sun shining through the branches of the tree in our garden, glowing gold against his robes.

His laughter, and the easy way he had with everyone in the room; how he thanked my mother for the food and offered to help clean up. She was speechless.

Mostly Abba – Abba sat at the table with the look of someone who can't quite believe what is happening. At one point he laughed out loud at something someone said. It was a creaky sound, like a long unused gate opening on rusted hinges, and I thought "I don't think I've ever heard my father laugh out loud"

Somewhere during the dinner, he and my mother slipped out, and when they emerged from their chamber, they said *"we have something to announce"*.

Half of everything we have we will give to the poor, Abba said. And if I have cheated anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much"

I had no idea what that meant, only that there were gasps in the room – and my mother’s face betrayed fear as well as pride and relief and sleek, unblemished determination.

After that day, things were different. We had to move to a smaller house, there was much less money for treats and sometimes even for food. When the Roman soldiers came to our door to demand an answer, he simply straightened his shoulders – like a tree that’s planted by the water and will not be moved.... and he said *“I too am a son of Abraham and Sarah”* He would no longer stoop to a greasy compromise, for the violence it had done to his soul and to the light of the Lord that had almost gone out within him and had been kindled so lately by kindness.

I’m told that in your world, this is All Saints Eve and that tomorrow is the day when you remember those who have gone before you – All Saints Day.

Have you ever noticed how often people plant trees to remember those who have died? Do you?

When my father died, I went to our special tree, sat in its lap, and howled. . I cried for a long time. And I like to think that the tree cried too. My mother and brothers and I planted a tree for him, and then invited our friends to a funeral lunch beneath its branches.

Each time I gave birth I plant a tree and again when mother died. NOW – we have a little memorial grove behind the house. And I, together with my husband, own a little tree nursery. When someone in our community dies, I offer them a sapling and help to plant it. Most often they accept my offer. We plant that little tree together and when we do that, we graft ourselves to the great tree of life whose roots grow deep and whose life extends beyond our own.

I wish for you a tree of your very own – and a deeply rooted faith that grafts you to the tree of life.