As you know, I have not been a full-time minister all that long, but since I’ve been here in Belton, and earlier at other times and in various places, I have preached quite a few special occasion sermons. I have preached Christmas and Advent sermons, a Thanksgiving sermon or two, Good Friday and Easter sermons, Pentecost, sermons for the New Year and back to school, and to honor graduates, wedding and funeral sermons; I preached a homecoming sermon at my home church in Cleburne, and the final sermon at Lakeview Christian Church the last Sunday before that congregation merged with Casa View Church. I preached on Mission Sunday at a church in Jamaica, and very recently I preached a 100th anniversary sermon- I thought that was an especially nice church service. Well, if you put all that together, it may seem rather impressive. But today is my first Halloween sermon. I’ve never thought until now that Halloween could make for an appropriate sermon, but this morning I really think we’ve got something. Just look at that title, it is all Halloween, isn’t it?

And I’m kind of thinking that someone like Zacchaeus was perfect for Halloween. He was rich and, by his own admission, generous, so if you rang his doorbell for tricks or treats you should collect lots of candy. But if you chose not
to go to his door, if you wanted to trick him, to egg or paper his house or maybe a little graffiti, instead of asking for treats, that would work, too, because nobody liked him. He was something of an outcast because he was the taxman, and a person you could blame for all the ills that might befall you: he took your money, he cheated you, he worked for that evil Roman government, where the people would have no recourse to judges or other branches of government if they wanted to argue their tax debts. And he wasn’t just the taxman, he was the head tax-collector, and so even more deeply involved in that very corrupt tax system. In all of Palestine the chief tax-collector would have been hated above almost anyone else. The genius of the Roman system was that their collectors were local people, so that every day the people of Jericho would walk by the house of Zacchaeus, or see him in the streets, and be reminded that here was a fellow Jew, collaborating with the occupying government. Time and again in the gospels, the tax-collectors are called “sinners,” as he is here in our passage, or they are lumped together with many others, labeled by the pious folk as “sinners.” So, whether getting loads of trick or treat goodies from Zacchaeus, or wreaking minor Halloween destruction upon his property, both might seem to be justifiable ways of paying him back.
But something has happened in these few verses that Jesus declares to Zacchaeus, “today salvation has come to this house.” So that Zacchaeus receives the best treat of all. On Halloween you are supposed to wear costumes and masks and pretend to be something or someone else. In these days Halloween is mainly just for fun, but in olden times people thought there were real reasons for wearing masks during certain ceremonies or particular seasons of the year when the spirits were out: you would cover your face so that the spirits couldn’t recognize you, or so you could blend in with the other demons, or you might wear the really scary masks to frighten even the spirits. And so masks could keep you safe. That was the idea behind them. And isn’t that the way of our lives so often in our relations with people, we try to keep from being found out, we hide our feelings, try to cover up our fears and insecurities so we can’t be hurt? So that others cannot know what we really are. Maybe Zacchaeus wore a mask so that others could not know who he truly was; or perhaps other people wore masks that prevented them from seeing him. Maybe they were happy to hate him, and it made them feel better about themselves to call Zacchaeus a sinner. But Jesus is not fooled about Zacchaeus for a moment.
We need to understand a couple of things about this passage, and the first is that Jesus is just “passing through.” We have discussed the past few weeks, in this long middle section of Luke, how Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to his crucifixion, and so, we know he has no plans to remain in Jericho. And if we read closely, the sense of urgency in these verses bears this out: Jesus passing through, Zacchaeus runs ahead, Jesus calls out to him, “hurry down,” and Zacchaeus does “make haste” and climbs down out of the tree; and grammatically, this passage is just one very long compound sentence that rushes us through it, the phrases and ideas connected by a series of conjunctions, “and this, and that, and then.” Everyone is in a hurry, yet Jesus says, “I must stay at your house today.” And secondly, we should understand the emphasis in these verses upon seeing. In the preceding story, Jesus had healed a blind man, and here Zacchaeus “sought to see Jesus,” and climbed a tree in order to see him; Jesus came to where Zacchaeus was and looked up and saw him; and in verse 7, they all saw Jesus and Zacchaeus together and grumbled, “he is going in to be the guest of a sinner.” We have already noted that the people may have never seen Zacchaeus correctly, but Jesus saw who he truly was, saw his need and the kindness of his heart. We can see that Jesus has found one of the lost ones he was seeking, as he spoke of it in verse 10;
and Zacchaeus is found by the Lord he has been seeking, as described in verse 3. This is the reason Jesus stays with Zacchaeus that day. Despite the breathless rush of the passage, Jesus came to seek and save; the grace of our Lord has met the hurt and need of one man, and that day salvation had come.

We put on our masks. It’s safer that way, and we can hide our loneliness and insecurity, we can scare off others who might get too close. Don’t even try to tell yourself that you never do that. The fact is we are frightened of some aspects of personal relationships, of someone getting too deep inside, afraid of losing control. But then, Jesus stops and looks up and sees us, sees past our cover-ups, and says “come down right now; I must stay with you, for I came to seek and save the lost.” That’s the point where we can find ourselves at the intersection of our seeking and his seeking, of our fear and need and his love and mercy. It is the greatest treat of all, and no tricks. And so, Happy Halloween to those who are truly seen and known by the Lord and called into fellowship with God.

Like Zacchaeus, this sermon is shorter than normal. But his size is important to us only because he had never seen Jesus and he tried to find a way to see him. So he climbed the sycamore tree to look over the heads of all the people.
I’m guessing that the crowd in Jericho was like all the other crowds that followed Jesus, calling out for healing or favors, but Jesus stopped under Zacchaeus’ tree and called out to him. Why is that? Compare him to all the others Jesus had cured or saved. He is one of the few rich people who received a blessing from Jesus. And I think it comes down to the tree. Zacchaeus and Jesus had never met, and yet Jesus looked up and recognized— not just someone he could help— but a heart that yearned for God.

So maybe the lesson for us is this: that if the crowd is in the way, or if something may try to hinder, we must be like Zacchaeus, and create a situation so that we can receive what we need. We need to get to where we can see Jesus.

One of those funny and inspirational posters is a kitten hanging onto a branch, with the caption, “Hang in there!” I wonder if that’s the way Jesus looks around, and looks up into trees, and recognizes the lost ones he came to seek and save, because they are just barely hanging on. Perhaps he saw Zacchaeus barely hanging onto a branch of the sycamore tree. If you can see yourself in that position, just “hanging in there,” then take hope- Jesus, who is close at hand, will see and call to you and say, “I must stay with you today.”