

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock service

The Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"A Little in Front of Us"

Luke 19:28-38

What would it have looked like to live in the time of the Jewish temple? I've always wondered. Now we Baptists are not very temple-minded people, but I grew a mile away from Oregon's Mormon temple, so I have an idea of what it would feel like to have such a massive, imposing, mysterious structure around. The temple is always a little in front of you. When you're driving around town, the golden statue of Moroni, an angel from the book of Mormon, will suddenly surprise you, sticking up on their spire past the tops of trees, or you'll be driving down I-5 and there it is on your left: that gleaming white marble mass impossible to ignore.

A building like that is a centering point for its worshippers. It's a holy place, a place set apart, where sacred things happen, where the divine is present in a special way.

Now for most of my hometown the Mormon temple didn't mean much outside of being quite large and impossible to miss. But imagine living in Jesus time. Where there is this great big, beautiful temple. And not just a small group, but *all of Israel—even Jews outside of Israel*—is worshipping the Lord God of this temple. For all of Israel, this temple is the most important part of their religious life. For all of Israel, what happens at this temple shapes what their lives look like. And I'm not saying that in a metaphorical way.

See, the temple was a microcosm of how the world was supposed to work, a concrete illustration of the way different kinds of people were supposed to be related. *The physical layout of the temple literally ordered Jewish social life.* So imagine this: As you walked into the temple you would have been in the court of the Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles alike were allowed to be there.

Then if you were a Jew—and only if you were a Jew—you could have entered through gates and gone into the Court of Women where both men and women could have entered. Beyond that was the Court of the Israelites where only Jewish men could go and within that was the Court of the Priests where only Jewish, Levite priests could go, and within that was the Holy of Holies, the place on earth closest to God, where only the Jewish, Levite high priest could go once a year on Yom Kippur after a lengthy purification process. Gentiles. Women. Men. Levite priests. High Priest.

That's how the social and worship life of Israel was structured. And there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. How do you change something as powerful as 1,000 years of tradition embodied in stone and wood and gold and these complex social structures? You don't.

The Jerusalem temple is where culture-makers hang out. The Jerusalem temple is where the ruling elites make their decisions. The Jerusalem temple is where things get done. It is Washington D.C. and the Vatican and New York City all rolled into one.

The Jerusalem temple is where Jesus has been making his way toward for the last ten chapters of the Gospel of Luke, ever since he and the three disciples had descended the mountain glowing with the glory of Jesus' transfiguration. See, Jesus is headed back to Jerusalem to take back the power. Palm Sunday, Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem is all about Jesus' taking back the power.

I want to pause here for a moment. See, the power behind all this is the power of getting to say who's in and who's out. The power of saying

“this person’s a good person” and “this person’s a bad person.” The power—and it’s a true power— of saying, “I am close to God.” The temple and Jerusalem held the same kind of power that the popular kids in the school cafeteria hold today: you can sit here, not there. You are cool, or not cool. You are acceptable or unacceptable.

Whenever humans—whether age 14 or age 45— make themselves the center of things, there is always going to be a flipside. Think about it: there’s something essentially competitive about this kind of thinking. If *I’m* the center of the world, it means you’re *not*. With this kind of thinking, after all, it wouldn’t be very special to be the center of the universe if everyone else is at the center, too. The whole point of this way of thinking is to make ourselves important by comparing ourselves to others, by making others *un*important. And so there’s always going to be an “unacceptable” to the acceptable, an outside to an inside. And these lines that divide the inside from the outside, the included from the excluded, when they are drawn not just in the imagination, but concretely in the way temple life is organized, in the very material barriers of stone, wood, and cloth that divide worshipers based on whether they are Jew or gentile, male or female, Levite or non-Levite, they have a very real power. These lines have the power to determine how a person is able to worship, how close a person is allowed to be to God. And **that** is the kind of power Jesus is taking back. He’s taking back the power of being the arbiter of what’s in and what’s out. He’s taking back the power of the center.

You know, it always amazes me that it’s only been five centuries since the world thought that the entire universe revolved around the earth. Isn’t that astounding. To have looked up at the night sky and seen the planets shifting through the seasons and thought “Wow, all of those are moving around me!” What a shock it must have been when Copernicus came around and said,

“Nope. We here on the earth are actually moving around the sun! The still point in our universe isn’t us!”

See, the religious leaders, the ones closest in to the holy of holies thought that they were that still point in the universe. They thought the weight and grandeur of this temple had securely anchored them at creation’s center. And everyone else was on the outskirts.

But what happens when the true center shows up? Well, the same thing that happened when the master in the parable of the pounds showed back up at the property last week. The usurpers are kicked out. And the same thing that happened when Jesus was born. Herods and Caesars and all who pretend to power are shown to be false.

When the true center shows up, everyone and everything that has been attempting to be the center is knocked out of place. And when that happens, those who have set themselves up as false centers are threatened and get mad. We didn’t read this today, but Luke chapter 19 ends with the chief priests and the scribes and the leaders of the people looking for a way to kill Jesus.

See when people thought the sun went around the earth, the sun couldn’t very well show up in physicist’s lab and set things right. But what about the center of Israel’s temple? What is the true heart of the temple? It was the holy of holies where the ark of the covenant resided. It’s the presence of God! Jewish social life is supposed to be centered around the presence of God.

And **this** is how Jesus is taking back the power of the temple. The Lord’s very presence was only supposed to be in the holy of holies, only accessible to that one high priest. And yet now, God has been walking around the Galilean countryside. The holy of holies in the flesh talking with women, eating with Gentiles, and criticizing *priests*! That is why the people praise

God as Jesus goes up to Jerusalem and declare him to be king even before he enters the city! Jesus is not going up to Jerusalem to conquer it, he already has! He conquered the power structures of the religious and social elite when the Holy of Holies, the heart of the temple, the center of Israel's life was born in a stable to a young girl back in Bethlehem. Imagine that. A young girl who wouldn't have ever been able to approach the Holy of Holies in the temple, holding God's very presence in her arms.

[quieter and slower] God had turned the life of Israel upside down in Jesus and in turning it upside down he's turned it right-side up. Israel's true King has come back to his rightful throne. Israel's center is back in place.

God is always a little in front of us. We think we've finally got God secured down in the temple. We've finally got him pinned down to the little space of the holy of holies and then what does the Lord do? He shows up in backwoods Galilee. He walks around with fishermen. He sets us free! No longer do we have to approach God from a distance imposed on us by social structures and temple hierarchy. No. God has dwelt among us, making himself the center, refusing to give up his place at Lord to any who try to take it.

So what place does that leave for all of us then? It leaves us the place of following the God who is always a little in front of us. Who is constantly surprising us. If we are going to call ourselves Christians, it means that we don't try to run ahead of Jesus, but we follow behind the God who is always on the move.

We follow Jesus. The living temple. A temple not made with human hands. A temple who is out with the people, travelling among them. A temple who redraws society's lines around himself.

Thanks be to God that God is always a little in front of us. Thanks be to God. From lifting up the Gentile and the woman. For releasing the captives. For setting us free from false centers. Amen.