

Welcome

Back in 2016, Amanda and I went to Germany. A good friend of mine who lives there invited us to his wedding, and we jumped at the chance to go. We flew into Frankfurt, which is really the city of Frankfurt and three large suburbs - total population of just under 800,000. While we were there, we dropped in on the Nazarene church in Frankfurt, called Church in Action.

They held worship in a movie theater. There were around 300 people there, and it was a format very similar to ours (but, you know, in German). It turns out we got lucky because they only meet every-other-week. After the gathering, I met the lead pastor, Philip. When he found out I am a fellow Nazarene pastor, he got super excited. “Do you want to preach for me tonight?” he asked?

I blinked. Um... yes of course I do... but, like. What?

He laughed and explained: their church wasn't actually this gathering we'd just attended. They actually have more than 25 micro-congregations spread out among Frankfurt and its three suburbs. Some of them look a little like traditional church - like the place I'd be preaching that evening.

But a lot of them didn't look much like 'church' at all - there was a group that had befriended a lot of the sex workers in Frankfurt, and worked to help them get into safer careers. Another goes to the hospital and holds a prayer service in the chapel for any patients who want to join them. The place where Philip invited me to preach for him is a rooftop bar in one of the suburbs. On Sundays, it opens at 7pm, so Church in Action holds a small gathering before they officially open. A guitar player leads a couple of songs and then Philip offers a short, informal teaching.

This particular Sunday, he'd just returned from a long trip, and having he was ecstatic when I agreed to cover for him, as long as he translated. My German wasn't nearly good enough to preach a whole message.

So anyway, that's how I ended up preaching at a bar in Germany one time.

Church in Action gets a ton of attention from church leaders because they're a growing church in a culture - Europe - that doesn't care about church anymore. In fact, Europe today looks exactly like where the US is heading if church attendance keeps trending the way it has been for the last 50 years or so.

Church in Action's secret sauce is in their name - they broke church out of the box of the church building and set people free to follow the Spirit to do whatever the Spirit is leading them to do - visit the sick, make friends with prostitutes, preach in bars.

So today, as we approach the end of our own season in a building, I want to ask what it might look like for us to follow the Holy Spirit out of the box. Because the truth is, God has never been bound by a building.

Message

We're in a series called New Leaf. Now, I know you're thinking that this feels like more of a spring series but I live in Texas, which quit having real seasons a few years ago. And this is a series about change. Change happens to us all the time, at every level. We experience personal change in the form of new relationships, the end of long-term relationships. We experience it in changing jobs. Having kids, kids growing up. We experience change when we move and the world around us changes when we stay put.

And of course our church is changing. For almost 15 years, we've been a building-centric, locally focused congregation. But over the last few years, our circumstances have changed and we just voted on a new direction for our congregation. That's scary. I don't know very many people who love change, who seek it out. Most of us prefer predictability and stability, and one thing we know about change is that it's seldom predictable or stable.

So we're spending six weeks looking at some people in Scripture who had to face big changes - changes that felt as existential as the changes we're facing right now. We're going to explore the nature of the changes they faced, compare them to the changes facing us, and we're going to ask what we can learn about how to be faithful now from how they were faithful then.

We began by looking at the role of faith in change. We saw Abram's encounter with God and how he responded with faith in the face of uncertainty. Last week, we explored Joseph's story and saw what it looks like to have faith God is at work even when our Plan As fall through. Last week, we met Moses, who had a bevy of very good reasons he couldn't be trusted with the change God called him to lead. Then we saw how Nehemiah led all God's people to join in the work of rebuilding.

Today, I want to look at the most obvious change we're experiencing, which is selling our building and moving to a model that doesn't employ a single, central meeting space. This is a massive shift for us - even though our virtual folks have been experiencing this for a couple of years now. But the idea of church without a church building is hard for us to wrap our minds around.

It's one of those cases where our lived experience clashes with our knowledge (like texting and driving - we all know that texting while driving is as dangerous as driving drunk, but we still do it). Most of us know the 'church' answer to what church is, is the people of the congregation. But in our bones, church is a building. We 'go to church', meaning we show up in a building on Sundays to sing and listen to a sermon. So while the idea of a post-building model makes a lot

of sense, it doesn't *feel* good. It feels scary, like a total abandonment of everything that makes sense.

I get it. I feel those things, too! So I want to take you through God's people's experience of God in a building, and how Jesus took God out of the box.

Turn with us to [Mark 13](#).

This bit takes place during the Passion Week - the week Jesus was crucified. It's Tuesday, the day after Jesus cleansed the Temple. He's come back to the Temple the following day and spends it teaching and debating some of the most important religious leaders in the country. This bit happens just as Jesus is leaving the Temple:

As Jesus was leaving the Temple that day, one of his disciples said, "Teacher, look at these magnificent buildings! Look at the impressive stones in the walls." Jesus replied, "Yes, look at these great buildings. But they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!" — [Mark 13:1-2](#)

Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple (which does, in fact, happen, about 40 years from now). But notice what prompts his prediction - it's the disciples' captivation with how magnificent the Temple is. They are totally enamored with the Temple - both its physical appearance and what it represented for them - the center of the universe, the very place where Heaven and Earth overlap.

And Jesus is saying, "Don't get too comfortable with it. It's coming down."

I want to try to get at why this would have been such a shock to the disciples because it can help us wrap our spirits around the change we're facing.

[Image: Temple] So: when a Jewish person looked at the Temple, what did they see? Well, obviously it was the place where they worshiped. But it was more than that.

People in the ancient world understood the world to be a cosmic temple. When I say, "picture the Earth", you see a ball of rock floating in space, orbiting as the third planet from a medium-small star.

Not ancient peoples. Whether they were Egyptian or Mesopotamian or Canaanite or Hebrew, when they thought about the world, they imagined it as a world-sized temple, one where they served the gods.

So the Jewish Temple was a micro-representation of the world. Specifically, of the Garden of Eden, where God and humanity lived together. You can see it in the architecture of the Temple - (review picture).

Turn with us to [Exodus 40](#).

Jewish people experienced their story as one of Exile - God created a world for humanity and God to live together. But we rebelled, and God exiled us from the Garden.

Fast-forward to Abram and we see God embark on a mission to restore our relationship with God. God chooses Abram, then liberates his descendants from slavery.

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at Moses' story. Exodus opens with God's people in slavery. It ends in a way that strikes us as strange, but was powerful and beautiful for ancient peoples. Exodus ends with Moses setting up a tent.

That tent is the Tabernacle - which is literally a portable Temple. All the measurements of the Temple are double the size of the Tabernacle. They have all the same design elements, from the water to the trees and gemstones.

Once Moses finishes setting up the Tabernacle, here's how Exodus ends:

Then the cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle. Moses could no longer enter the Tabernacle because the cloud had settled down over it, and the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle. Now whenever the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out on their journey, following it. But if the cloud did not rise, they remained where they were until it lifted. The cloud of the LORD hovered over the Tabernacle during the day, and at night fire glowed inside the cloud so the whole family of Israel could see it. This continued throughout all their journeys. — [Exodus 40:34-38](#)

God lives with the people, in the midst of the tent that looked like the Garden. The people have moved from slaves ruled by a Pharaoh to a free people following their creator.

THAT's what the Temple represented to the people - God's rescue, the place where God's physical presence lived among them.

This is the vision we've always longed for - living with God, together as one community!

Song

We obviously don't worship in a Temple today so... what happened?

It's probably no surprise to you, but the Temple didn't remain good news. By Jesus' day, it wasn't really a home base for God's people as they worked to share God's love with the whole world. It had become more of a bunker where they could hide from a world that was hostile and cruel.

But as often happens when we live out of fear instead of generosity and hospitality, when we close ourselves off instead of being vulnerable, God's people became the very thing they were afraid of. The Temple became a site of oppression and exploitation, one that served to alienate people from God rather than build bridges between people and God.

This is why Jesus cleansed the Temple.

He knew that the Temple was never God. It was God's house, but not God. Before there was a Temple, there was a Tabernacle, a tent. Before there was a tent, there was a mountain. Before there was a mountain, there was a garden.

And now, after the Temple, there is a body.

Turn with us to [1 Corinthians 6](#).

This is one of those famous passages of the Bible that even people who don't know the Bible know... or at least think they do. Because it's also one of the most mis-interpreted. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, and they're struggling with the way Jesus binds them together as a community. Paul reaches for Temple language to describe their new reality:

Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? — [1 Corinthians 6:19](#)

You've heard this, haven't you? Maybe in relationship to tattoos or working out or something. The way we hear it is that each of our individual bodies are temples for the Holy Spirit. But that's not what Paul is saying here - it's clearer in the original Greek, but he's plural address. Let me show you a more accurate translation (let's call it the TX Standard Version):

Don't you realize that y'all's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? — [1 Corinthians 6:19](#)

Y'all's body - not y'all's bodies, and not your (singular) body. Paul is saying, "the entity that forms when you all come together, *that* is the Temple, the place where God and humanity dwell together.

Paul's making a radical statement here - God isn't found in a building. In *any* building. God has always been found among the people.

And there was a time when the Temple building served the people well. But when the building became more of a hindrance than a help, Jesus announced the days of the Temple were over. Ladies and gentlemen, God has left the building.

That's why he warned his disciples not to get too impressed:

As Jesus was leaving the Temple that day, one of his disciples said, "Teacher, look at these magnificent buildings! Look at the impressive stones in the walls." Jesus replied, "Yes, look at these great buildings. But they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!" — [Mark 13:1-2](#)

Friends, I have been convinced for a long time that the time of the traditional church in America is done. Over the last decade, Christian institutions from the Roman Catholic Church to the Southern Baptist Convention have covered up abuse and harbored abusers. Four out of five voted for a self-confessed sexual predator, twice. Churches and pastors have led the way resisting anti-racist policy, banning books and anti-queer legislation.

There are a lot of good explanations for these decisions. Christians have felt embattled and attacked in a changing world. Across the country, that fear has driven Christians into our buildings, hiding from the world around us.

It's no wonder that, for the first time in history, fewer than half of US citizens don't affiliate with church or other religious institutions. But friends, God is not the institution of the church. God is not the building. God has used buildings, and God may use them again. But we are in a time when the buildings have come to stand for a lot that is anti-Jesus. So, as he did with his disciples at the very beginning, Jesus is inviting us out yet again. To follow him out in to the world he created, the world he loves, the world he died to save.

Communion + Examen

Around the table is where Jesus brings heaven and earth together!

How have I encountered God where I didn't expect in the last week?

How might my expectations of how and where God works caused me to miss God in the last week?

How might my expectations of how and where God works cause me to miss God in the coming week?

How can I listen for God in the week ahead?

Assignment + Blessing