

What Happens When Jesus Steps Out of the Church

Isaiah 35:3-6

Acts 3:1-10

July 26, 2020

Rev. Robert R. Howard

Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tempe, AZ

Take one look at this story, and you'll discover just where "getting happy" started. With a guy formerly mobility-impaired, just dancing all over the place. Walking and leaping and praising God, just like the song says. One glance, and you *know* that this guy is not Presbyterian. Nothing "decently and in order" about this cat! Which is just what happens, when Jesus steps out of the church. Jesus shows up, stuff happens, and people just gotta show their joy.

Well, take a look at the scene two seconds before Peter and John show up. Here's the Jerusalem Temple, the heart of Judaism. An institution set up to bring you closer to God. Organized to a high efficiency. For travelers, they even provide moneychangers to translate your foreign cash into coin useable in the Temple — for a fee. If you're coming from a distance, no need to lug those sacrificial animals for miles, you can buy them here. At a reasonable markup. And of course an institution needs contributions to keep it going, pay the salaries, food, light bill, bribes when necessary. So there is an organized Temple tax – oh, wait, an opportunity for voluntary contributions. The institution as a well-oiled machine to help *you* get close to God. And also primed for quality-control, to keep out the riff-raff, the deficient, the unclean, the unworthy, the LGB *and* T, and all whose bodies are damaged goods – like that mobility-impaired guy lying there on the front porch, beside the richly ornate Beautiful Gate. Not a prayer does he have to enter this Temple, so he's there every day just outside, been there for decades, gripping a cardboard sign with a hand-scrawled message on it. And he, too, has his own financial game going. He depends on the trickle-down of kind-hearted alms from those headed into the Temple, hoping to impress God with their giving, both outside and in. He is deposited there every day by friends, who themselves are part of the machinery – dropping him there on the outskirts of the holy, and vamoosing until sundown, when they lug him back home. This is the way life is. Well-oiled. Everybody knows their place. Everybody *stays* in their assigned role. World without end. Temple, supplicants, mobility-impaired guy, and his friends. That's the way life is.

When up stroll two other folks. He pokes one hand out. They stop. He waits expectantly. Play the game. Just play the game and move on. One of them opens his mouth: "Don't have any silver or gold," he says. Oh. Well, move along then. Next. "But what I *do* have, I give to you." And he looks straight at the guy lying on his mat. Straight *into* him. As if he sees him for what he is, what he has become, all the games he has had to play for forty years and more, all the machinery he has become a part of, sees it all with absolute clarity. And then sees *beneath* all of that, sees *who* he is, sees *who* God knows him to be, sees who he *really* is. And then grabs that outstretched hand in his own, grabs and won't let go when the guy flinches it back. And speaks: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!" And you hear the shattering of a thousand thousand rules and regs, you see cracks spider-webbing the Temple institution, you feel a fresh wind of Spirit filling the sails of your soul, and you know – you *know!* – that something has *changed*. There is a tectonic

shift in the order of things, and this guy, this mobility-impaired guy . . . stands up. Face utterly shocked. Peter releases his hand, the hand of a new person now. Eyes check out new straight ankles, strong, strong. And he just erupts. Walking, leaping, praise bellowing out toward God, tears of joy leaking down his cheeks. The power of Jesus' name has just left the building – and touched *this* guy. And Peter and John link arms with this former mobility-impaired guy, on either side, and in the power of the name of Jesus, *walk* him *into* the Temple from which he had been forever barred. What just happened here, when Jesus stepped outside the Temple? Oh, that guy was changed inside, true, physically, emotionally, spiritually — *so he could change the world outside*. The name of Jesus freed him from life as a sequence of mere transactions, a status quo trapped within a cage of unchanging social realities, playing within rules set up long ago by this institution. Set him *free!* And now, now the earthquake of an authentic encounter with God dropped a rock into this static pond, and who knew where the ripples would go? He was changed *outside* the institution, so that he could start changes *inside* it. See him walk into his new life. Into *God's new reality*.

Well, guess what? That's what happens when Jesus steps out of the church. Oh, Isaiah nailed it, way back when: "Strengthen the weak hands," he said, "and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! *Here* is your God.'" In his world, when the national leadership had just walked off and said "I'm not responsible," when the 1% were stealing from the poor, when unemployment soared, when unmarked police were targeting outcast groups, when society was *paralyzed*, Isaiah planted his feet, looked *into* his society, and said, "*Here* is your God!" Keep hope alive! And he reached across the centuries, straight into that mobility-impaired guy's world, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame – excuse me, mobility-impaired – *shall leap like a deer*, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy!" Because that's what will happen, promises Isaiah, when God steps out of the Temple, reaches into the lives of those cast down, because they don't measure up. When God steps out of the Temple, reaches beyond the well-oiled machinery of institutional maintenance, life will change. The machinery of crucifixion linked Jewish religious leaders and Roman politicians together to rid themselves of a troublemaker named Jesus, but He stepped out of that tomb, and a new world dawned. God's resurrection power was set loose in this world, and no power on earth can stop it. That's what's going to happen, promised Isaiah. So be strong, and do not fear. *Here* is your God! Stepped out of the well-oiled machinery that tries to contain God, market God, restrict access, control behavior. Stepped *into our world*, to change things. To change the whole game. "Then the eyes of the blind *shall* be opened."

So look around you, friends. Jesus has stepped out of the institutional-maintenance church, and into our needy world. What else do you think is happening with the whole "Black Lives Matter," uprising – all over the world? The late Civil Rights icon Representative John Lewis was deeply moved to see millions pour into the streets across the globe last month, "young and old, [gay, lesbian, trans, straight,] Black, white, Latino, Asian-American, and Native American . . . to speak up," he said, "to speak out, to get into-what I call-good trouble. . . ." (1) The status is no longer quo! This is now the turf of God's New Creation, happening live before our very eyes. One thing this coronavirus has done is to pull the curtain back, reveal the social inequities that have been there all the time. Now the eyes of the blind *are being* opened! We've seen the knee on the necks of people of color, not just for eight minutes and forty-six seconds – but for over *four hundred years*. Now the whole world is watching. And high time, too! "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears"

has stepped out of the Temple, is stirring up this world, throwing sand in the gears that have kept people down. Do you see it? No wonder that guy was walking and leaping and praising God! God had changed him, so he could change his world! I think he saw Patrick Hutchinson at that London Black Lives Matter protest in June, carry that beat-up white guy, pick him up and carry him over his shoulder to the police, surrounded by others forming a barrier to protect both of them. “I just want equality for all of us,” he said. “At the moment the scales are unfairly balanced and I just want things to be fair, for my children and my grandchildren.”(2) Jesus stepped out of the church, used Patrick Hutchinson, and changed the world. Walking and leaping and praising God. I think he saw Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in the very depths of South Africa’s apartheid era, speaking to a packed church, the walls lined with armed government security forces – Archbishop Tutu looked out at those armed men, and saw what they couldn’t see – that they were standing on the turf of New Creation, and he said *to those men clutching their weapons*: “Come join the winning side!”(3) “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!” Jesus has stepped out of the church, touched lives, and He’s sending people out walking and leaping and praising God! Just look around!

Oh, friends, do you see? Do you *see*? That crazy guy is *still* dancing with happy feet, because he *knows*. He’s singing, “I’m so glad trouble don’t last always.” He’s *seen* what happens when Jesus steps out of the church! When institutions fail, God finds another way. God’s power of resurrection is working on the machineries of death right now – and they will *crack like matchsticks!* When every door seems locked tight, when you’re not only shut up in your home, but you feel like your very *spirit* has shut down, listen – listen for that word from Isaiah: “Be strong, do not fear! *Here* is your God.” In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk! Come join the winning side! Amen.

Notes

(1) “10 Quotes From Late Civil Rights Icon John Lewis,” by James Crowley, *Newsweek*, 7/18/20; accessed online on 7/18/20 at <https://www.newsweek.com/10-quotes-john-lewis-civil-rights-icon-died-rip-1518831>

(2) “Black Lives Matter hero who rescued injured white man during violent protests in London says: I just want equality for all,” by Imogen Braddick, *The Evening Standard*, 6/15/20; accessed online on 7/17/20 at <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/black-man-rescues-white-man-london-protests-patrick-hutchinson-a4468876.html>

(3) Related by Sojourners founder Jim Wallis in a talk I heard in Lexington, KY years ago.