

Opening: When Worlds Collide at the Center

If you spread out the map tonight and zoom in on Jerusalem, you're looking at a place where stories, roads, and rival kingdoms collide. Jerusalem sits on the spine of the hill country, perched just south of the Central Benjamin Plateau, a kind of "saddle" in the hills where north-south and east-west routes meet. Because of that geography, power has always converged here, trade, armies, ideas, and empires all squeeze through this narrow zone.

By the time we get to Jesus riding a donkey over the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem is like a pressure cooker. Rome holds the military power, Herod's dynasty clings to political power, the temple leadership guards religious power, and different Jewish factions, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, are all fighting for the future of God's people.¹

Into that convergence rides Jesus of Nazareth, proclaiming another kingdom, God's kingdom, right in the middle of all the others.² The question under all of our texts this week is simple but searching: *When rival kingdoms converge, which kingdom do we actually trust?*

Jerusalem the Convergence: Roads, Factions, and Rome

Dr. Cyndi Parker describes Benjamin's territory, Jerusalem's backyard, as a narrow diamond draped over the hill country, with Jericho and the Rift Valley to the east, Gaza and the coastal highway to the west, and north-south routes threading right through the middle.³ Because Benjamin sits in a "saddle" in the hills, roads from Jericho climb up and meet the north-south ridge road here, then spill down toward the coastal plain and the empires beyond.

Jerusalem itself, Parker notes, is powerful and vulnerable at the same time. To the east, the city drops off quickly toward the Mount of Olives and the Judean wilderness, with no easy east-west road running straight through the city. To the west, short wadis fall toward the Shephelah valleys, the Aijalon, Sorek, and others, that act like swinging doors, opening and closing with each new empire. Control Jerusalem, and you pinch the traffic between plateau, wilderness, and coast.

Ray Stedman helps us see what has changed during the "silent years" between Malachi and Matthew. Persia gives way to Greece under Alexander the Great, then to the divided Greek kingdoms, then eventually to Rome. The royal line of David fades; the high priesthood becomes a political appointment; factions form, Pharisees guarding tradition, Sadducees aligning with political power, Hellenists compromising with Greek culture, and later Zealots ready to take up the sword.

By the first century, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, Rome's eagle standards are never far from view. Herod's family, descendants of Esau through Idumea, sit on the throne only by Rome's permission, while the temple has become both the beating heart of Jewish hope and the contested stage on which all these powers perform.

From a Bowen Family Systems perspective, Jerusalem is an anxious system under chronic stress, multiple "selves" (parties, rulers, movements) triangling around fear, threat, and control.⁴ Rival kingdoms are converging, and everybody is watching for a Messiah who will take their side.

¹ Ray C. Stedman, "The Four-Hundred Silent Years," in *Adventuring through the Bible*, October 2, 1966.

² Luke 19:11–27 NASB; N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

³ Cyndi Parker, *Listen to the Land*, BS600-11, "Benjamin"; BS600-12, "The Shephelah."

⁴ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

Palm Sunday: The Wrong Kind of Victory Parade (Luke 19)

Luke 19 shows us Jesus deliberately stepping into that convergence.⁵ He sends disciples to fetch a colt, fulfilling Zechariah's promise of a king who comes humble and riding on a donkey. Pilgrims crowd the road, shouting, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!", language that sounds dangerously political under Roman occupation.

But look where He's coming from. He crests the Mount of Olives, that eastern ridge overlooking the city and the temple mount, with the wilderness dropping off behind Him. From this vantage point, Jesus can see the city as the prophets saw it, a place of promise and peril, beauty and blindness.

And He weeps. "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace!" Jesus cries, "but now they have been hidden from your eyes." The word for "peace" is *eirēnē*, shalom, wholeness, the very thing Jerusalem's name seems to promise but cannot deliver on its own.

Friends, this is the clash of kingdoms. Jerusalem wants peace through control, through clever alliances and careful compromise. Jesus offers peace through surrender, through a cross.

In Bowen terms, Jesus is the most differentiated person in the most anxious city on earth. He knows who He is, He knows His mission, and He stays lovingly connected without getting swept into their reactivity. Where we would escalate, He weeps.

Temple, Trials, and Cross: Rival Kingdoms Laid Bare (Luke 19–23)

What happens next in Luke is all temple-centered. Jesus walks straight into the place that sits at the collision point of Rome's power, priestly authority, economic interests, and people's hopes. He drives out the money-changers, quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah as He declares, "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a robbers' den."

This is not Jesus losing His temper; it is Jesus staging a prophetic sign-act. He is saying, in effect, "The system at the center of your life has become misaligned with the heart of God, and judgment is coming."

From that moment, every group takes its shot at Him. The chief priests and scribes challenge His authority. The Pharisees try to trap Him with questions about taxes to Caesar, "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?", hoping to force Him to choose between Rome and the people. The Sadducees devise clever riddles about resurrection that they don't really believe in, trying to expose Him as naïve. Even the people's expectations become another kingdom pressing in: "Give us the kind of Messiah we want, powerful, nationalistic, victorious."

Underneath each question is the same demand: *Join our kingdom, Jesus*. Be our champion, our proof, our weapon, our mascot. But Jesus refuses to be co-opted. He will not become Rome's client ruler, nor a zealot general, nor a temple politician, nor a safe religious teacher who leaves the status quo intact.

Instead, He stands before Pilate and Herod as the true King who looks nothing like the kings of this world. He is mocked, beaten, and sentenced to death between two criminals, a failed revolutionary on one side, a hardened thief on the other. The inscription above His head, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS", is meant as a joke, but heaven takes it literally.

From a Friends perspective, this is holiness revealed as *faithful presence* in the place of maximum conflict. Jesus does not withdraw from the convergence of rival kingdoms; He walks right into it and

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996)

bears their violence in His own body. The cross is where every human kingdom, religious and secular, throws its worst at God, and God answers not with more violence but with self-giving love.⁶

Pentecost: God's Kingdom Revealed in the Same City (Acts 2)

If the story ended with a cross, the rival kingdoms would win. But in Jerusalem, the convergence point, God's kingdom is revealed in power three days later. The empty tomb, the risen Christ, and the ascension all point to one reality: the crucified Jesus is now the exalted Lord.

By the time we reach Acts 2, Jerusalem is again crowded, this time for Pentecost. The same city that rejected Jesus now hears Spirit-empowered preaching in a dozen languages. Peter stands up, not a calm leader by temperament, but a man whose fears have been re-ordered by grace, and proclaims that the Jesus whom they crucified, God has made “both Lord and Christ.”⁷

Notice where this happens. Likely in or near the temple precincts, the same contested sacred space where Jesus drove out the money-changers, where He debated with leaders, and where sacrifices were offered day after day. Now the sacrifice is complete, and the Spirit is poured out.

In Friends' language, the Light of Christ is no longer centered on a single building or a single altar but poured out on “all flesh”, sons and daughters, young and old, servants and free.⁸ The “temple” is becoming a people, a Spirit-filled community living out the kingdom in everyday life.

Wesley would say this is sanctifying and missional grace on display, God not only forgiving sinners but forming a people who embody holy love in the middle of the world's empires.⁹ Bowen would add: the Spirit is increasing the community's capacity to stay non-anxious, deeply connected, and clearly centered in Christ even as pressure mounts.¹⁰

Paul Back in Jerusalem: Old Factions, New Courage (Acts 21–23)

Fast-forward to Acts 21–23, and we're back in Jerusalem with Paul. Decades have passed since Pentecost, but the same fault lines still run through the city.

in Jerusalem, a beautiful act of cross-cultural generosity. Yet rumors swirl that he teaches Jews to abandon Moses, and a mob seizes him in the temple courts. Roman soldiers intervene, not out of love for Paul but to keep order in the volatile convergence of empire, faith, and identity.

Then Luke gives us this almost comic scene in Acts 23, where Paul realizes his audience is split between Pharisees and Sadducees. He mentions “the resurrection of the dead,” and instantly the old party lines flare up, the factions turn on each other, and the Roman commander has to pull Paul out for fear they'll tear him apart.

Same city. Same rival kingdoms. Same temple mount. But look at the difference in Paul. The man who once used Jerusalem's power structures to persecute the church now bears joyful witness to Christ in front of mobs, councils, and governors.

He is, to use our familiar language, calmer in anxious spaces. He stays connected to his own people, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city”, while clearly owning his new identity in Christ. He doesn't demonize Pharisees or Sadducees; he simply keeps putting Jesus' resurrection at the center.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* (New York: HarperOne, 2016).

⁷ Paul N. Anderson, *Following Jesus: The Heart of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

⁸ George Fox, *Journal*, in *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John L. Nickalls (London: Cambridge University Press, 1952).

⁹ John Wesley, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

¹⁰ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*.

In other words, Paul becomes in Jerusalem what we are called to be in Marion: a differentiated disciple, bearing witness to God's kingdom in the middle of political, religious, and cultural anxiety.

Invitation: Let the King Weeping over Jerusalem Reign in You

As we close, I want you to picture Jesus again, standing on the slope of the Mount of Olives, looking over Jerusalem. He sees the walls, the temple courts, the Roman fortress, the markets, the crowded streets. He sees the different parties scheming and maneuvering. He sees what will happen forty years later when Rome comes and tears it all down.

But He also sees Pentecost. He sees a remnant filled with the Spirit, breaking bread together, listening for His voice, living a different kind of life at the exact same geographic center. He sees Paul, years later, standing courageously in that same city, bearing witness before councils and governors.

And He sees you.

He sees the convergence in *your* life, the pressures, the loyalties, the fears. He sees the rival kingdoms that promise peace but cannot deliver it. And still He rides toward you, humble and persistent, not to crush you but to save you.

So here is the invitation tonight:

- Where have you been asking Jesus to “join your kingdom” rather than surrendering to His?
- Where do you feel most anxious, most reactive, most tempted to grab control instead of trusting His peace?
- Where is He calling you, not to withdraw from the convergence, but to walk into it as a person rooted in His love?

Let's offer those places to Him. Let's invite the same Spirit who fell at Pentecost to fall on us again, to make us a people who reveal God's kingdom in the very places where rival kingdoms converge.