

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Abraham's Altars

Sermon: Jesus - Our Highest Altar

Hebrews 12:1-3, 9-16 (The Message)

Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without ever knowing it! Regard prisoners as if you were in prison with them. Look on victims of abuse as if what happened to them had happened to you. Don't be lured away from him by the latest speculations about him. The grace of Christ is the only good ground for life. Products named after Christ don't seem to do much for those who buy them.

The altar from which God gives us the gift of himself is not for exploitation by insiders who grab and loot. In the old system, the animals are killed and the bodies disposed of outside the camp. The blood is then brought inside to the altar as a sacrifice for sin. It's the same with Jesus. He was crucified outside the city gates—*that* is where he poured out the sacrificial blood that was brought to God's altar to cleanse his people.

So let's go outside, where Jesus is, where the action is—not trying to be privileged insiders, but taking our share in the abuse of Jesus. This “insider world” is not our home. We have our eyes peeled for the City about to come. Let's take our place outside with Jesus, no longer pouring out the sacrificial blood of animals but pouring out sacrificial praises from our lips to God in Jesus' name.

Make sure you don't take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of “sacrifice”—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets.

Sermon

We are wrapping up a sermon series on Abraham's Altars. In his journey's it is recorded that Abraham made 4 different altars in his life, each at different times and stages in his life. The Old Testament is littered with altars. Noah built an altar. Abram built several altars. Isaac built an altar. Jacob did to. Moses was a master builder of altars. Joshua on down, altar altar altar. In the Old Testament, we read about an elaborate sacrificial system that the Israelites had to go through in order to remain right with God. There are many chapters in the Law that describe the sacrifices, festivals, and elements found in and around the Tabernacle. Even after the days of sacrifice ended with the end of the Exile, you could still find altars in the synagogue, where the Law rested and offerings were placed. When I started this series, I asked the kids at kids time to look around and find the most important piece of furniture or decoration in this room. Now mind you, it's a sermon series about . . . Altars. We have the light of Christ on the Altar, we put our offering plates on the Altar. After the Lord's Prayer, I place our prayers and petition on the . . . Altar. And so I asked the kids what's the one thing in here that is the most important - and the camera points to . . . the cross. AUGGGHH! I wanted to pull my hair out, if I had any.

If you look through the old Testament, the altar served many different purposes throughout the years.

It was a place of Covenant. Or promise. This is an important idea in scripture. The Bible is split into two covenant, or testaments, that God made with the people of Israel. Old and New. The first altar was with Noah. After the flood, Noah built an altar and the promise came that never again, never again would the world be destroyed by a flood. Global warming, maybe, but not a flood. And in the sky there appeared a rainbow. Abram had his altars of a promise, descendants, land, blessing. These were promises to be made by both

parties. Both sides had to agree, this was contractual language. In ancient times, the term for making a covenant was literally “Cutting” a covenant. Here was the way it was originally done: When people wanted to make a serious commitment, or contract, they chose a special animal and sacrificed it. They would cut it in half and they walked between the two parts. As they walked between the two parts, the idea was that if you break this contract, this covenant, may what happened to this poor animal happen to us. It was a serious matter. When I was growing up, I learned pretty early that fibbing could get you out of trouble. Or just utter denial. It wasn’t a good lesson, but sometimes it pays to stretch the truth or have a little omission here and there. And if we were caught lying, we would get in trouble. But my mom created a nuclear option. If we were telling her a tall tale, and she thought we were somehow stretching the truth, she would say “Do you put your hand on the Bible?” Now, we didn’t really have a bible, but that phrase meant that this just got to Defcon 4. The Doomsday clock just moved. And we were taught that you could get into trouble for lying, but to lie on a “Do you put your hand on the Bible” was just shy of a death sentence. You didn’t mess with that one. Now of course, she could only pull the nuclear option just a couple times a year, on real serious things. Did you shoot a bow and arrow at your brother, qualified. Did you brush your teeth, did not qualify. Will you make sure your brother doesn’t play on the railroad track qualified. Who left these socks here, did not qualify. Those small petty things would water it down. Same with our promises. It is a big deal to borrow a ton of cash to buy a house. Big promise. Lots of papers, lots of sweat and worry. It’s a big deal to stand before the altar and say, Till death do you part. The altar was a place of promise, of big fat hairy deal promises.

The altar was also a place to find God. To have an encounter with the divine. You don’t need furniture to have a sacred experience, but the altar provided a place, a monument of something special. And sometimes we put up a monument that shares special significance. Anybody stop at historical road signs? Something happened here. And they put up a monument. I’ll stop at any historical monument. Steph drives right on by, and she’s right most of the time, but I’ll stop and read anything on the road. You can learn a lot. We were recently down in the lava beds in Northern California, just south of Klamath Falls. Big road sign monument. This is where General Canby died at the hands of Captain Jack. Also killed was a Methodist minister who was negotiating peace with the Modoc, so maybe I’m taking this a little personally. Big monument out in the middle of nowhere. And we go to these places to encounter history, our past, our story. This one commemorates the namesake of our little town of Canby. Jacob built an altar after an encounter with God. This is where I felt God’s presence. Some of the most important places to me might not have an altar, but I find myself going back to those places time and time again to encounter something greater than myself. The hillside where I gave my life to Christ. The small chapel, in a theme park of all places, where I’ve preached and remember my roots. The college where I met my wife and shared our first kiss. There are a few places and buildings and structures have meaning to us. I know you have yours.

And lastly, the altar was a place to offer sacrifice. The brazen altar at the temple in Jerusalem was huge. Countless animals found their destiny atoning for the sins of Israel. Even when Jesus was presented at the temple on his 40th day, they offered sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or pigeons. This Sunday, in Catholicism is the Feast of the Presentation. Throughout its history, sacrifice was a major tenant of the Jewish Faith. There was a sacrifice for everything. You commit adultery, here is your sacrifice. You want to buy land? Here’s your sacrifice. And it goes on and on and on. And it became a sticking point for the prophets. You might remember the prophet Amos saying something like, “I hate, I despise your religious festivals, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Or Micah, Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? No. What does the Lord require? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. There’s a famous painting by Hayez on the fall of Jerusalem, the Destruction of the Temple. It metaphorically shows the Sacrifice of Jerusalem, on the altar. It was a big altar! How did we hear it today? Make sure you don’t take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of “sacrifice”—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets. Even today, we place our own

offerings on the altar, showcasing our sacrifice of time and resources for the greater good.

The altar - three major roles that it fulfills for us. Its not just sanctuary furniture, but a place where we take covenant, where we encounter the divine, and sacrifice.

The writer of Hebrews took the imagery of the Altar and its role within their tradition, and used it to describe Jesus. In a sense, Jesus is our altar. So the video person had it right several weeks ago - the cross is our altar for today! I can put my hair back in. Consider:

The altar is a place of covenant, where we dedicate ourselves and who we are to be. We do this with Jesus. Jesus, I love you, and I want to live my life for you. I remember when I did that, years ago. Where I took that step forward and said, I want to be a Christian. I want my life to exude the fruits of the Spirit, love kindness, gentleness, self control, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, joy. Teach me to love others, even those who don't like me. Let me put my trust in you, not only for heavenly reward but for earthly living. You're here. On a Sunday morning. You could have slept in. You could be getting ready to watch the Patriots lose. But you're here. Because this means something to you. This gathering, and praying and singing and learning and proclaiming. Every Sunday we gather to remember the Christ who was, who is, and is yet to be. And who we were, and are, and what we may become. He is the new covenant, written on our hearts. And our lives are a witness to that fact. That hope. That love.

The altar is a place to encounter God. And so it is with Jesus. You want to know the mind of God, you want to know what God is like? Look at his Son. He's not like God, he's not in the image of God, but somehow he IS God. The essence of God wrapped up in flesh and bone. Jesus is the embodiment of who God is. That's what Immanuel means. For some, Jesus is a healer. Another might say that he is a teacher and moral guide. Others might look at him and see a forgiver. Someone else sees him as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And they're all correct. God does a lot of stuff! You want to encounter God? Find out about this Jesus guy. Starting in two weeks, our Lenten sermon series will explore many different encounters that people had with Jesus. Those who needed healing. Those who needed peace. Those who needed some sense knocked into them. Those who needed a savior. Its called Finding Jesus.

The altar is also a place to sacrifice. And he was, our sacrifice - the showcase of man's depravity and the goodness of God's grace that leads to resurrection. This sacrifice, the final sacrifice, for the souls of humankind. Jesus is our altar. And our savior, our redeemer, our friend.

Abram made four altars. We continue to make altars - and rightly so. But God, through Jesus, made one for us. Is it time we come back to the Altar? I put my hand on the Bible. And the family of God said, AMEN.