

Altered By An Altar

Let me share a bit of church news before the message. Some time ago we heard a pastor speaking at a minister's conference. He repeatedly used a phrase that really resonated with us, referring to those in ministry who had been raised up in his church as sons and daughters of the house. Being a son of this house, it always seemed right somehow – who better to serve in ministry here than those who were raised up here. So when Bryce resigned we began to think and pray about what to do to fill that position. The conclusion we reached was that it should be sons and daughters of the house. We have asked Lori Swisher to serve as our choir coordinator and PJ Muilenburg to serve in the role as the worship coordinator. Dusty Hutchinson is going to be working alongside them as well as with our media team as our sound coordinator. These are not interim positions, but they will fill these roles on a permanent basis. God raised them up in this church and I know they feel a calling to minister to the church. They will be working together to make our worship a rich and meaningful experience. They have a vested interest in seeing this church become all God intends us to be because this is their church, their family. We so appreciate the many gifted people in this church who sacrifice and give their time and talent for the work of the kingdom of God. I wanted to make you aware of these decisions.

You've noticed the extra furniture. In our evangelical and Pentecostal traditions we call these altars. If you go back a hundred years you'll find people calling them mourner's benches. Many of us grew up in churches where these altars were at the front of the sanctuary and they were the center piece in terms of prayer and encountering the presence God. We talked about praying around the altars, tarrying at the altars. We still refer to an invitation given at the close of the service as an altar call. It is a part of our faith tradition.

When we moved into this facility in 1967 we left the altars behind at the old church. Our pastor at that time, Bro. Pieratt, said that every pew, every space in the sanctuary was an altar, a place of prayer and he was right. I don't want anyone to hijack this sermon with "It's about time we brought the altars back. That's what's been wrong." This is furniture. It's pieces of wood nailed together to provide a place to kneel in prayer, a place to surrender, a place to mourn, to repent, to be transformed, to be altered by meeting with God at an altar.

I mentioned wanting to preach about this and we found these smaller altars in storage. We had used them in the youth room in the past. I wanted something a little bigger and Pastor Jeff said, "We can build them for you." This week, with all he had to do to get ready for the

missions trip to Mexico, Pastor Jeff and Michael Hudson and two of our students, Louis Autry and Diego Bravo built these altars for us. Thank you!

I want to give you some background and a bit of a history lesson concerning the altar and just where it came from to help us understand the reason I have them here today. I've called this message *Altered By An Altar*. The word **Alter** means **“to change or cause to change in character or composition, to adjust, convert, reform, remake, remodel, transform.”** The word altar in Hebrew is *mizbeach* (*mizbe'ach*). **Altar** means **“a place of slaughter or sacrifice.”** It was a place where an animal was slaughtered as a sacrifice and offered to a god, burned upon the altar. It's at an altar, a place of sacrifice, that our life can be altered, remade, transformed.

The first hint of an altar and a sacrifice is found in Genesis 4. Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord and Abel in particular brought “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” which would indicate a sacrifice, a burnt offering, but there is no mention of an altar being used. The word altar is first mentioned in Genesis 8 after Noah comes out of the ark, after the great flood. The bible says, **“Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it.” Genesis 8:20**

The next mention of an altar is in Genesis 12. God has called Abraham, at that time still known as Abram to leave his home and go to the land God would give him and his descendants. The bible says, **“The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.” Genesis 12:7-8**

Everywhere Abraham went he built an altar to the Lord where he would sacrifice and worship and call on the Lord. His son Isaac built an altar as did Isaac's son Jacob. Notice it says he built an altar to the Lord and “called on the name of the Lord.” The altar for these Patriarchs was a place of prayer and a place of encountering God's presence. It was also a memorial in some sense, because it seemed to mark a place of encounter with the Lord. They would come back to that altar. It set it apart as a sacred space. “Here is where I met the Lord. Here is where I heard from God.” Genesis 13 tells us Abraham returned to Bethel from being down in the desert, in the Negev. He came to Bethel where his tent had first been and where he had first built

an altar and the bible says “there Abram called on the name of the Lord.” Genesis 13:4 Abraham came back to that place where he had encountered the Lord, back to a place where he remembered God spoke to him. It was a place of encounter, a place of remembrance, a place of honoring the Lord and offering sacrifice to him. The altar was a place to pray and call on the name of the Lord.

How Abraham knew what to build, we don’t know. Other people groups and religions had altars, built on high places to offer sacrifice and offerings to their gods. Perhaps it was just what people knew to build. But notice this, in the time of Moses and the Israelites, when God began to prepare the people to inhabit a land where the Canaanites had built altars to idols and where their worship was unholy, for the first time God gave specific instructions to Moses concerning the altar. Perhaps in order to draw a definite line, to show that the God of Israel was not like the idols of the nations and to show a distinction in every aspect of their worship, God instructed Moses that even the Israelites altars were to be different.

The Lord said, **“Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.” Exodus 20:24-26** Unlike the pagans, the people of God weren’t to cut the stones but to use stones from the fields, uncut. The altar wasn’t about celebrating man’s ingenuity, his cleverness in cutting stones and building an altar, but the altar was a place to surrender to the Lord, to acknowledge Him, his presence and his provision. In addition, where the Canaanites often involved temple prostitutes and sexual immorality in their worship, the people of God were to avoid even a hint or suggestion of anything sexual in their worship. Later on the priests were given different garments to wear and steps were allowed, but in the temple there was a ramp to access the altar. The point was to show the distinction between God’s people and their worship and that of the idol worshipers living around them.

(Here is a picture of an altar, made of dirt and uncut stone.) This may have been the kind of altar Abraham had built and that Moses built in Exodus 17. But then, when God gives the law to the Israelites and gives them instruction concerning the tabernacle and their worship, he gives them a new design for an altar that would travel with them in the tabernacle in the wilderness. **“Build an altar of acacia wood, three cubits high; it is to be square, five cubits**

long and five cubits wide. Make a horn at each of the four corners so that the horns and the altar are of one piece, and overlay the altar with bronze...Make a grating for it, a bronze network and make a bronze ring at each of the four corners of the network. Put it under the ledge of the altar so that it is halfway up the altar. Make poles of acacia wood for the altar and overlay them with bronze. The poles are to be inserted into the rings so they will be on two sides of the altar when it is carried.” Exodus 27:1-7 A portable altar that can be carried as they moved around in the wilderness. A cubit is estimated at 18 inches, so the altar was about 7.5 ft. square and about 4.5 ft. tall. **(Here is an artist’s rendering of what that altar might have looked like.)**

We can fast forward through Israel’s history. Saul built an altar. Prior to the temple being built David built an altar. Solomon finally built the temple and constructed a much larger, permanent altar. By the time of Jesus, Herod had built the temple in Jerusalem on the site of Solomon’s temple. **(Here is an artist’s rendering of the altar area of the temple.)** When I thought of an altar, I always thought of something much smaller, like the images we have seen. But according to Josephus, the Jewish historian, he says the altar in the temple in Jesus’ time was 86ft long and wide and about 22 feet high. From the back of the platform to the back wall is 86 feet. In other words, the altar was about the size of this sanctuary. (Another source said it was about 55 ft square, which would be about the center section of the sanctuary.) Either way, I think Bro. Pieratt was right, every seat, every place in this sanctuary is an altar!

Think about the size of that altar, but think too about the crowds that came, especially at Passover and the thousands of animals that were sacrificed. It had to be massive! Remember, it was the altar – one Hebrew Bible translates altar as “slaughter site,” (“build a slaughter site”) a place of sacrifice. Understand that for us as Christians when we see the altar, it points us to a spiritual altar, to another type of “slaughter site” - the cross, where Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice for sin, was slaughtered. The altar becomes a symbol or reminder of the price and place of our redemption. Jesus was our sacrificial lamb that was offered upon the altar of God, offered and consumed for us so that we might be redeemed and declared forgiven and free.

As the Christian faith grew, churches were built, and as the Eucharist or what we call communion was celebrated from a table, that table began to be referred to as an altar. Paul refers to this as the table of the Lord in 1 Corinthians 10 and the Greek word he used was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to an altar. It was the place where the bread and

the cup, his body and blood were offered and received in communion. In Catholic and Orthodox churches the Eucharist is considered a re-presentation of Jesus' sacrifice, his body and blood being offered or made present again so it made sense that this area was called the altar. **(Here is a picture of what many churches call the altar.)** We would simply call it our communion table while other traditions would call the table and the entire space surrounding it the altar.

Eventually, among protestants, something else was added that we began to call an altar: the mourner's bench. This bench was introduced as a place to repent of sins, to sit or kneel to pray, to mourn, to call on God, to encounter God. It was a place of sacrifice as well, but this time we would offer ourselves as a sacrifice, giving ourselves to Jesus. Paul writes, **"I urge you in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."** **Romans 12:1** A physical altar like the one in the temple is no longer needed upon which to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. Jesus was and is the once and for all sacrifice offered for our sins on the cross. But now, in light of his sacrifice, we come to him and place ourselves upon this kind of altar, a living sacrifice offered in full surrender to Jesus.

The Methodists say John Wesley introduced the altar bench, a mourner's bench. Wherever it came from, this altar bench was viewed as a place where one could encounter God's mercy, which is exactly what happened at the altar of sacrifice: atonement was made, sins were forgiven and mercy was offered and received.

I'm calling this an altar today because in our tradition, it is that, a place where heaven meets earth, a place of redemption where God's mercy meets the repentant heart of anyone who calls on him. Like the altar of Abraham, where he called on the name of the Lord, this altar is a place to call on the name of the Lord, to seek him and his help, to find his direction and peace. Like the altar where an animal was sacrificed in place of the sinner, this can be a place of mercy and forgiveness.

I called this altered by an altar because that's what happens when we encounter God and his mercy. Whether it's at a wooden altar or at your seat or in your car or sitting at your kitchen table or somewhere else, we can be altered by an encounter at his spiritual altar. Remember, to alter means "to change or cause to change in character or composition, to adjust, convert, reform, remake, remodel, transform." That's what we need, an encounter with God that transforms us. An encounter with God at an altar, a place of surrender and sacrifice, a place to be altered!

Next Sunday we are going to talk more about what the bible says about the altar as a place of spiritual encounter, a place of sanctuary and asylum, but today, I just want us to think about this as a place like Abraham, to call on the name of the Lord.

I said earlier, I didn't want anyone to hijack this sermon, to make it some kind of statement about the church in 2019. "That's what wrong with us, we don't have altars." Once again this isn't about the furniture. I don't know how long these altar benches will stay in here and I'm not trying to appeal to a sense of nostalgia although that might happen, but I do want to call us to an awareness of our need to call on the Lord. If the benches help, so be it.

A preacher asked me this week, "what's the number one thing Carbondale needs?" I didn't have an answer. I've felt like we are in a holding pattern of some kind. You know me. When I feel like God has said something, I'm going to tell you. When I feel he has given me direction, I've told you. Right now what I've felt is we need to seek Him. What I felt was that I was to talk about the altar and for us to seek the Lord. Not necessarily to seek his direction, but to seek him. God will respond to the hunger of his people. He will respond when we seek him and call upon his name. He will satisfy our hunger with himself! We built an altar and we have come to call on the name of the Lord. We need his mercy. We need his forgiveness. We need his help. We need his direction. We need Him! We need an encounter with the Lord and for this moment, this season, I believe this is a place set aside to encounter him.

Do you need to be altered by an encounter with Jesus at an altar?