

“At the Altar of the Lord”

Introduction: You’ve no doubt noticed that our order for worship for a communion Sunday has changed just a bit today. It is to help us get used to the fall, when, on the first Sunday of each month – communion Sunday – we will remain together, adults and children, for the entire hour of worship. So, given that we’re together, I have decided to have our time in God’s word lead us into our celebration at his table.

As we begin that new order, how meaningful to have a new table, or altar, in celebration of our twenty years together! So, it seems appropriate to spend out time in the word this morning thinking about this unique piece of furniture that is a part of our worship. What’s the purpose of this table? Is it just a place to put our cross and a couple of candles? Or is there more to it? While the history of how we got from the first altar in the Bible – that built by Noah – to the one recently built by Steve Brown, is a long one, I want to highlight a few aspects of what an altar is and represents that can be helpful in understanding the meaning of our faith. Specifically, an altar is a place of worship where God offers himself to us, and we offer ourselves to God; it is a place we and God meet.

I. Two Kinds of Altars

A. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of altars that we find mentioned in the Bible: lay altars, and priestly altars. A lay altar is essentially a pile of earth or rocks, which any worshipper of God can build. Most likely, it looks somewhat like one of those “cairns” that you see when hiking above the tree line, a simple pile of rocks that marks and helps keep you on the trail. These simple kinds of altars marked, and helped the worshipper respond to, a specific action of God on their behalf. And so we see Noah, as recorded in Genesis 8, building an altar to the LORD in response to God having brought Noah and his family through the flood. We then see Abraham building a couple of altars, in response to God promising him and his descendants the land of Canaan (Ge. 12:6-9), one of which he returned to after God had protected him while in Egypt. As the Biblical story goes on, altars of this type are built by Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samuel and David, all in response to, and celebration of, something God had done. Often, but not all the time, a sacrifice was offered on this altar as a part of the worshippers response to God.

Before moving on to the second kind of altar, it might be worth thinking – where do you go to celebrate something God has done in your life? Not necessarily a pile of rocks but a place of worship, where you go to meet, and even celebrate, with God? Place is an important aspect of our spiritual life. What, and where, is yours?

B. A second broad category of altar that we find in the Bible are the priestly altars, places where the priest ministered before God on behalf of the people. There were two of this kind, as our text from Exodus reveals, the altar of incense and the altar of burnt offering. These were the two altars that were a part of the tabernacle, or traveling sanctuary-tent that went with the Israelites, and then the later, more permanent, Temple in Jerusalem. While a lay altar could just be a pile of rocks thrown together by an unskilled, ordinary bloke (like me!), we see from Exodus, that the priestly altars needed to be built by skilled, and Spirit filled, craftsmen, like the master craftsmen Bezalel and his assistant Oholiab, according to precise standards.

C. These standards are found in the large section, Exodus 25 – 40, in which God gives the Israelites instructions for the construction of the tabernacle. If we take the time to plow through these chapters, we see that the tabernacle is to represent a microcosm of the creation as it was meant to be. The wonder and beauty of the materials to be used affirms the goodness of God’s

created order, while the precise and perfect dimensions required affirms a sense of order, and a sense of God's holiness and glory, amidst the chaos of the world around it.

Illustration: Part of the reason I chose this text for our reflection today is that I remember when Steve first bumped into it a number of years ago. As a highly skilled furniture maker, Steve found in Bezalel kind of a patron saint, one who affirmed for him that God has filled some men and women with artistic and creative talents that were to be used for his glory. As you take a close look at our new altar, it is evident that Steve has certainly used his Spirit given wisdom and ability and expertise to help fill this sanctuary with God's glory!

D. Now, the altar of burnt offering was to be placed just inside the entrance to the tabernacle. It was the place where sacrifice for sin was made. The incense altar was placed inside the holy place, just before the curtain that separated off what is known as the most holy place, where the Ark of the Covenant, representing the presence of God, was kept. The incense on this altar was burned twice a day, and represented both the need for the High Priest to be protected from the holy presence of God, as well as the prayers of the people that were being offered up to God. As the psalmist declares, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice" (141:2).

E. Noteworthy here is that Zechariah, who we meet at the beginning of Luke's gospel and who would become the father of John the Baptist, was the priest who had been chosen to burn the incense on the incense altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. He did so while the people were praying in the outer courts and it was at that moment that an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and said that his prayers had been heard and that he would have a son whose job it would be to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord Jesus.

What is an altar? It is a place of worship, a place of sacrifice, a place of prayer. It is a place where God and his people meet and celebrate. How are we to think about this now that Jesus has come?

II. The Altar and The Cross

A. Well, the place where we meet God and where God meets us, the place of sacrifice, and, we might even say, the place of prayer, is now the cross. The unique, one-time, sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sin is the sacrifice that all the other OT sacrifices were ultimately pointing toward. And so we hear the writer of Hebrews declare: "Your strength comes from God's grace, not from rules about food, which don't help those who follow them. We have an altar from which the priests in the Tabernacle have no right to eat" (Heb. 13:10). As you work through the context of this text, it reveals that Jesus is both the sacrifice, and the sustenance of his people, and that it is available to all those who recognize in the cross as the place where we meet God and where we receive his strengthening grace.

B. How are we to respond, since we're not bringing the sacrifice to this altar because God himself, in his Son, has provided it? Hebrews goes on: "Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name. And don't forget to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God" (13:15-16). To the church in Rome, Paul spells it out in this way: "Therefore, in view of God's mercy [in view of how he has met us on the cross] offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship" (Ro. 12:1). The sacrifice we offer, in other words, are lips and lives that bring glory to God, by what we say and by what we do.

So we come to this beautiful table, this altar, on which rest both the cross, and the bread and the cup, both of which point to the sacrifice and sustenance offered in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. May we meet God as we receive them; and may God be pleased by the lives that we offer in return.