

Sermon – February 18, 2024  
“Then Noah built an altar”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Genesis 8:15-20

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint these words. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and renew our desire to be laborers in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Welcome to the season of Lent. During Lent, there are additional opportunities for us to interact with God to help us as we journey through a time of seeking God through reflection and repentance. We will be meeting at 5 p.m. on Sunday evenings for a time of teaching, prayer, and fellowship as we break bread and enjoy soup. Plan to come as you are able. Also, we will gather Thursdays at noon for a time of reading scripture and prayer. Come and join in a time of prayer as you are able. You don't need to pray for the entire hour. Come as you are led, stay as you are able, pray, and then return to the rest of your day.

Throughout the season of Lent, the sermons will feature altars we find in the Bible. Today we will begin with the first altar in our Bibles, the altar Noah builds after coming out of the ark. The sermons will parallel material found in Seedbed's Wake-Up Call, a free resource you can find on the Seedbed website that comes to your email every morning or that you can listen to as a podcast each day. Susan Kent is the writer for the series. I hope many of us will take time to listen to her each day and follow her lead as we journey through Lent.

If I asked you to get up and go to the altar in our church, where would you go? Most of us would go to the altar rail. But the altar is the large table structure within the space behind the altar rail. Did you ever think about why we have an altar in our church? Did we ever stop and wonder what the altar is for? Maybe we have wondered why we place and light candles on our altar each week during our service. Think about how we use the altar in our church. It is a place where we have candles. We place our tithes and offerings there each Sunday. We put bread and grape juice on it on Communion Sundays. We display items there that relate to the life of our church and remind us of Jesus. We come to the altar rail monthly as a congregation to have communion with Jesus in a Holy Meal of remembrance. On our altar is a cross that reminds us of the sacrifice Jesus became for us so that we might be reconciled to God through belief in him. And the altar rail is a place we pray from at times in our lives. Many of us were married before an altar in a church. Some of us were baptized before an altar. Some of us have stood before an altar and publicly proclaimed Jesus as our savior. Yet, in spite of all of the uses for our altar, do we know where this idea comes from and what it means for us as believers in Christ? Over the next several weeks, we are going to visit altars found in the Bible and, as we do, we are going to seek to grow in our understanding of why there is an altar in our church and maybe, as we learn, we can begin to reclaim our altar for the purpose it was placed in our church.

We might also recall that most weeks after we gather our tithes and offerings, they are prayed over and then placed on the altar. The placing of our offerings on the altar is a good place to begin our look at altars. Now I will confess to you that I don't recall a lot of the sermons I have heard over my life during worship times, but in my memory, there are some stories that were shared in sermons that for some reason have always stuck with me. One of these is a story a pastor, whose name I no longer recall, shared from his time serving a small, very rural church in a poor community. His story that stays in my memory was about the altar in that church. You see, in that church people didn't just bring money and place it into the collection plate. They also brought animals, fruit, and vegetables from their farms and placed them on the altar as their offering. It was not unusual for there to be a chicken in a small cage on the altar on a Sunday morning. I have long lost the sermon point the pastor was making with the illustration, but I do recall that I wondered what he did with the produce and chickens as he, like myself, had other churches to go to on Sundays and would not have had time to deal with all that was left on the altar. When I asked him that question after the service, he shared that when the service was over,

he would hold an auction on the church steps and convert some of the gifts from the farms that he could not use easily to cash. Think about him auctioning the chickens in cages on the church steps after a service as an example. And as I thought about that story of items on the altar, I recalled another church I attended where a congregant brought apples in the fall, placed them on the altar, and they were blessed and distributed after the service. There is something attractive to me about this picture of people bringing from what God has placed in their hands to place on the altar as an act of worship. We bring our tithes and offerings in monetary form each Sunday and they are gratefully placed on our altar and then used to support the work of Christ through this church. We are grateful for those gifts and sacrifices that people bring in monetary form, but for me, there is a connection to creation and God's provision I find that helps me see worship of God at the altar in a different light when surrendered items, someone's sacrifice that they acknowledge they have received from God, are placed on the altar. As we look at altars in the Bible, we will find items being placed there that represent a sacrifice that has been surrendered to God.

Something else we should notice on our altar is fire. Each Sunday we light candles on our altar. We may think of their lighting as our bringing the light of Christ to the altar, and then after our worship of God, taking that same light back out into the world through us. And that is a very valid symbolic image of what we are doing. As we look at the altars in the Bible, we will find fire present on those altars. We will find a consuming fire that is used to turn sacrifices into smoke. We will find many times the words, "a pleasing odor to God" as we visit biblical altars. And we will find again and again the surrendered sacrifices being consumed by fire and people tending those fires to keep them burning night and day. Now, don't begin to think of God as having a big nose and sniffing our offerings. God is unseen so He doesn't have a nose to sniff with. The idea of a pleasing odor is that God is pleased with our hearts as we surrender and make sacrifices. And don't forget that at Pentecost, Holy Spirit comes as tongues of fire resting on those who receive him. There is a clear connection that we will see grow with time between the fire on our altar and the consuming fire of Holy Spirit working in our hearts.

Let's look at the altar Noah builds after the flood recedes. His altar is the first one we encounter in the Old Testament. We most likely know Noah's story from Genesis. It begins with "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually."<sup>i</sup> God decides to destroy life

on the earth with a flood but to keep a remnant alive through Noah by keeping him, his family, and the animals of the earth safe in an ark. The story of Noah as a children's story I have enjoyed a lot. The story of Noah's ark was one of my favorite Bible stories, and toys that represented the story were great, I thought, until one day someone pointed out that a large number of people die in the flood, a very large number of people, and that thought has changed my approach to sharing the story. I still like the story a lot but now see it through the lens of God's rescue of humanity by working through Noah. Noah's story has become for me more of a focus on God's grace at work in the lives of His people than a fun little story with lots of cute animals. Today we join Noah's story at the end of the long, rainy winter and the dark days and nights that God has brought Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark through. After forty days and nights of rain and many days of receding waters, God has remembered Noah and His creation, and it is a time for a new beginning. Noah had listened to God's commands, built the ark, gathered the animals, gone into the ark, and ridden out the flood. Now God commands Noah to leave the ark, as the waters have receded, and he does. We see the earth beginning to return to life through the olive branch the dove brings back from its flight. The olive tree, by the way, is one of the most difficult trees to kill. With the new green olive sprout, God lets Noah know that the earth has begun to put forth new life. Noah is commanded to bring out the clean and unclean animals. The clean animals are those they eat, and the unclean animals are those they do not eat. God's purpose for bringing them out is so that they may multiply and be fruitful on the earth. God's provision and creation continue. Noah continues to do all God commands him to do, but then Noah does something God does not command or ask Noah to do. Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifices of the clean animals. We don't know what the altar looked like nor what it was built of. Most likely, Noah built it of uncut stones that were available. We do understand that he kills some of the clean animals and with fire, burns their bodies. They are burnt offerings, offerings that are consumed completely by fire. Imagine coming out of the ark after the long nights of darkness and winter, forty days and nights of rain, and days of high water that slowly receded. The land is desolate and empty. Noah and his family are alone. New life is just beginning to emerge. They do not come out of the ark into paradise; instead, they enter a land that has been flooded, and all life is gone or at best slowly emerging. They are in a wilderness. God has rescued them from the flood, but they are now on their own. Noah's response to being brought through the waters of the flood is to build an altar and sacrifice of what is in his hand. He does not surrender from a place of

abundance of clean animals to eat. Yet, he surrenders some of them and sacrifices them to God. Noah surrenders what he has to God as an act of worship, expressing his gratefulness and trust in God. We may not understand the idea of animal sacrifice. We may find it repulsive, or it may make us uncomfortable to think about killing animals. God looks differently on this moment. God is looking at the heart of his servant, Noah. Animals are the commodity Noah has and understands. Noah gives in thankfulness of what he has, of what he needs to survive in the wilderness, with a heart turned to God in thanksgiving for surviving the flood, for being brought safely through the ordeal. Noah surrenders what he needs as a sacrifice to God. Noah's heart is what God sees at the altar. Noah's sacrifice is an act of surrender. Here the surrender of what Noah has to survive is given to God through sacrifice. Noah surrenders to God and trusts him for care and provision. Noah comes before God at the altar with a heart turned to God and surrenders what he needs to live. God smells the pleasant odor of Noah's sacrifice and blesses Noah. Noah comes to the altar with surrender in his heart that he might be in the presence of God.

Let's begin to unpack what an altar might be. Susan Kent in her Lenten devotions tells us, "An altar is a space that becomes holy by the presence of the Lord. According to Scripture, we are called to worship the Lord with our bodies (Romans 12:1), our resources (Philippians 4:18), and our praise (Hebrews 13:15); this is where new life begins."<sup>ii</sup> We see these aspects of worship through Noah's actions at the first altar. He comes before God and brings himself as one seeking to live out God's commands and responds in gratitude to the saving work of God's mighty hand. He brings of his limited resources to God, surrendering them completely by burning them with fire on the altar he has built.

As we look at altars, we as a church should begin to seek to recover our altars, to move them from a place where we bring our offerings, to a place where we come into a space made holy by God's presence. We have already begun to do this. For some time, we have opened the altar rail during our intercessory prayer times, inviting people to come to this holy place and be in the presence of God. Some of us will have gotten up out of our pews and walked down the aisle in response to a call of God through Holy Spirit to accept Jesus as our Savior and once knelt at an altar, received Jesus, and were transformed to a friend of Jesus. Some may have come forward to the altar for healing. Some may have come to make a public profession of faith and join with the body of Christ. Some may have exchanged vows of marriage before an altar. I hope that as we look at altars, we begin to realize there is much more available to us at the altar. An

altar is a place where we can meet with Jesus, where we can surrender more fully to his cleansing power and allow Jesus to continue the transformation of our hearts. The altar is a place of offering ourselves to God. An altar is a place where Holy Spirit can begin to burn more brightly in our hearts and set us completely on fire for Jesus, transforming us more completely into his image. We don't know where Noah built his altar, but we do know that God met him there, received his sacrifice, blessed him, provided for him, and worked through him to bring about new life on the earth. God waits for us today to come to the altar and offer there an acceptable sacrifice. As we learn about altars in the Bible, may Holy Spirit guide us to open our hearts to a more complete surrender, not only of our tithes and offerings but also of ourselves, to be transformed so that we might become those who help to complete the works of the one who sends us. May our learning help us to open our hearts to being set on fire and transformed. May our learning give us the desire to continue to come to this altar, to more fully surrender our hearts to Jesus, and to allow him to work in us to complete the transforming work he waits to do in each of us. Don't hesitate to come to the altar when we pray. Don't hesitate to come to the altar if your heart is stirred before the service. And please, please, if your heart is stirred as we meet, if your heart hungers for the love of Jesus, if your heart is starving for grace that comes with repentance, if you desire to encounter fresh fire from God, come and linger at the altar after the service. No one is going to think badly of you. They too may be encouraged by your presence at the altar to come and be in God's presence and surrender their lives more fully or to just linger and pray with you in this place. Let's begin to reclaim our altar as a place where we meet with God, freely surrender ourselves, and allow the fire of Holy Spirit to consume us and transform us into the image of Christ.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we come before you this day with a hunger deep within our hearts we do not understand. We confess we have built an altar but have not yet offered ourselves completely to you there. Jesus, give us courage to come to your altar and be in your presence. Open us to more complete surrender to you and the transforming fire of Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Genesis 6:5 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 41). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Seedbed Altar'd Material.