

Sermon – March 10, 2024
“An Altar of Praise”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Joshua 8:30-35

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, move among us, fill us anew, and anoint the sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people that leads us on to life eternal and fruitful labor as we follow you into your mission field right here, right now. Lord come and astonish us with your word. 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! Today is the fourth Sunday in the season of Lent. I pray that as we journey through Lent, we are finding time to come before the Father and allow our hearts to be turned again to God. Let's visit a fourth altar in the Old Testament this morning and see what new insights we might gain to help us reclaim our altar for its purpose. Before we turn to today's altar, I would like to teach us a scripture for us to use during today's and future sermons. Some of us will know how this works. In a few short weeks, we will begin to listen for the words, "Christ is risen" so that we can respond with "He is risen indeed." For today's sermon, I want to challenge you to listen for the words, "This is the day the Lord has made!" and when you hear those words, respond with "Let us rejoice and be glad in it.!" Let's practice that a few times. "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!" So, have your response ready as we look at our fourth altar.

We have moved backwards in the history of God's people from the altar Elijah rebuilt as he called Israel to turn their hearts back to God, to the time when Israel, under the leadership of Joshua, has entered the Promised Land and with God's help, has begun to drive out the inhabitants of the land. Israel has defeated Jericho and has begun to move rapidly through the cities of the land, defeating and removing the inhabitants. God is with them, and they are successful as they follow God's leading. But in the midst of their success, they do something strange. Instead of moving on to the next city, the next small kingdom they are to remove, they stop and move to an empty place between two mountains. And there Joshua builds on Mount Ebal an altar to Adonai, the God of Israel. At this place, all the people gather: men, women, children, infants, and the aliens residing among them. Instead of heading on to the next city while they have momentum and a winning game, they stop and build an altar. Notice the altar is constructed of unhewn stones on which no iron tool has been used. Joshua sets up stones available on the mount for the altar. He uses stones that have not been marred or shaped by humans. The altar he builds is no clean, shining, polished altar but a rough altar, unscarred by the tools and hands of men. Joshua's altar will be different from the altars the previous inhabitants of the land used as it will bear no marks of human influence. And here in the midst of the land of Canaan, Joshua offers burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, or peace offerings. He writes a copy of the Law of Moses on stones and reads the Law to the people. We might wonder what Joshua is doing. We might wonder what Israel is doing at this place.

Let's break down the parts of what Joshua has done. Let's start with the writing and the reading of the Law of Moses. For those who have been blessed to have been part of an Epic of Eden Bible study, you will recognize the parts of a covenant in Joshua's actions. The idea is that God is the authority, the Suzerain, and He has given to the people, the vassals, through Moses, the terms and agreement of a covenant. The people are to live by or keep the conditions of the covenant (think the Law) and if they keep the law or covenant, they are promised land, (think the Promised Land) and God's blessings and provision. The covenant also contains provisions for what happens if the covenant is not kept, (now think curses), and finally, copies of the covenant are to be written down and read on a regular basis so that all the people might be reminded of the terms and keep them. Joshua has stopped in the midst of their victories over the inhabitants of the land to renew the covenant. He has written down the terms on the stones, read the terms to the people who have all come, men, women, infants and residing aliens, all of the people of the

covenant with God, so that they might know the terms of the covenant and be diligent to keep them.

Let's look more at what Joshua does. First, he offers a burnt offering, an offering that is turned into smoke. The burnt offering is an offering that is totally consumed and rises to God as a pleasing odor. Next, he sacrifices offerings of well-being. From these offerings, only the fat of the animal is burned, and the rest is given to the people to eat. The offering of well-being is an optional offering in the Law and it is given when people stop to praise God. The offering of well-being is an offering of praise to God: "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

These descriptions of Joshua's actions might help us to understand the reading and writing of the Law of Moses, the covenant between God and His people, but what about the two offerings that are made at the altar? The burnt offering is the offering offered to God for the remission of sin, so it is a purifying offering, offered on behalf of those gathered. The burnt offering is an act of worship before the God they are in covenant with and with whom they have renewed their covenant agreement. But what about the sacrifice of well-being? The offering of well-being is an offering of praise to the God of the covenant. The offering of well-being is offered when the people of God rejoice in God and enjoy the sacrifice together. They eat the part of the offering of well-being that is not burned. It is an optional offering that is made in times of rejoicing. Here they are rejoicing not only over their victories that Adonai has led them to, but they are also rejoicing before the God of the covenant with whom they have just renewed their covenant relationship. It is a time of celebration. "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!" One way of thinking of the sacrifice of well-being is to think of a church potluck dinner. At a potluck dinner, people bring their very best dish to share with each other in a time of fellowship and renewal before God. It is a shared meal with all who come, and is a time of being at a table, breaking bread with each other in the presence of Jesus. Church potluck dinners are a time when we bring our sacrifices before God and share them with each other as we rejoice before God around a table. It is the food version of praise, "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!" Like Joshua's call to all the people of Israel, it is time when we come together and rejoice with one another over a shared meal that all are invited to participate in even if they did not bring an offering. Those who come are moved by the God they are in relationship with and because of their love for God, they bring a dish, their

offering, and all who are present are blessed as their offering is shared. Our hearts are moved to come together and share with each other as we rejoice before God who has provided. The fourth altar is an altar of praise. “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

Our praise to Jesus can take many forms besides a potluck dinner. Praise can be prayers of thanksgiving lifted to God. Praise can be our voices lifted in songs of praise: think our singing of hymns, psalms, and praise songs together each Sabbath during our worship. And praise can be our reading scripture together.

In our country, we set aside a day to give thanks to God. Thanksgiving is a time when we feast with one another and our families. It is a time when all are encouraged to come together and to share in an offering of well-being around our tables with our friends and families. It is a time when we celebrate the love of God, given to us through the abundant love of Jesus Christ, who died in our place that we might be forgiven all of our sins, and by whom we are made new and transformed into the image of Christ. Now we may not think about Joshua as we gather together to give thanks and we may not renew the covenant or write it down. And I can't fit watching football into the picture of giving thanks to God very well, but Thanksgiving is a time to praise God and to rejoice over all that God has done, is doing, and will yet do for us through Christ. It is another wonderful picture of an offering of well-being. It is an opportunity for us to say, “This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

I also should point out that singing songs and hymns of praise music are forms of a sacrifice of well-being. As we come together in the presence of God, we are to lift up songs of praise as sacrifices of well-being. Take time to sing hymns and praise songs, not only when we gather but also when we are alone before God and our spirits are raised. When we sing, we are to sing with joy, the joy that comes from the saving knowledge we have through Jesus Christ. If we are down and our day has become difficult, let me share that we can always put on a garment of praise for a spirit of joy. Our praise to God, even in the midst of the challenges in our lives, gives rise to joy in our spirit. So let me encourage us to put on the garment of praise. “This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

Prayer can also be an offering of well-being. When we come together and share our joys and give thanks to Jesus for what he is doing in our lives, we are giving offerings of well-being.

When we share how Jesus is working in our lives to transform us, to forgive us, to heal us, and to restore us to God, we are giving an offering of well-being to God.

Reading scripture can also be an offering of well-being. As we take time to read the word of God, to encounter Jesus, the Word made flesh, in the words that have been written down for us, we are able to renew our own covenant relationship with God the Father, through the Son, in the power of Holy Spirit. Take time daily to make this offering of well-being to God. Give your time to listen to the word of God written down for us and let its transforming power move us into times of rejoicing. “This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

I want to share another scripture with us this morning that we might want to spend some time dwelling on at times in our lives. Let us be honest with each other. Not every day of our lives will we find our hearts ready to praise Jesus. We will face times when we can find no praise on our lips and no desire to praise God. When we come to these times, let us be aware that the people of God also have come to such times in the wilderness of life when their hearts struggled to give offerings of well-being. I am going to read from Habakkuk chapter 3, verses 17 -19. It is page 874 in our pew Bibles if you want to follow along. “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.”ⁱ

Notice what the prophet describes in these powerful words. He paints a picture of a time when there is no provision in our lives. He speaks of a time when there are no blooms on the fig tree, a picture of a season when there will be no fruit. He speaks of a time when the olive tree fails to bring forth fruit, the fields have no grain in them to give us bread to eat, there are no animals in our flocks, and none in the stalls of our barns. Habakkuk speaks to a time of emptiness, nothingness, great need, a time when we find no provision from God to give thanks over, a time when our very lives seem threatened by the lack of God’s provision. The prophet speaks to a time of great darkness. The prophet speaks to a time in our lives that we may have experienced or may be experiencing. Yet, in the midst of this time of nothing, the prophet tells us we are to rejoice in the LORD, the God of our salvation. In the midst of our times of despair, we are to realize that “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!” In our times of deep despair, we are to rejoice in the God of our salvation. We are to praise God for

Jesus Christ and eternal life given to us through Jesus' suffering, death on a cross, and resurrection. Even in the times of our lives when we can see no provision, God has, is and will provide. Our response is to rejoice in the Lord, the God of our salvation. Even in our darkest hour, God is faithful to His covenant and will restore us to Him through Jesus for all eternity. The fourth altar we have visited, the altar Joshua built on Mount Ebal in the Promised Land, is an altar of praise. Let me encourage us all to spend some time reading, meditating, and dwelling on this passage from Habakkuk so that we might be ready to turn to praise in the midst of the dark hours of our lives and give a sacrifice of well-being to God in the form of praise. "This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

Pray with me: Father, we come to you in the sunny times of our lives with our gifts of praise and too often forget you as the Lord of salvation when we come to dark days. Jesus, help us to always remember your love and provision for us, that we might rejoice in the Lord of our salvation now and always. Jesus, help us to be people who look to eternity with you. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The LORD, Adonai is God;

The LORD, Adonai is God. Let us turn our hearts again to the one true God
and then go forth to labor in His ripe harvest. Amen.

ⁱ Bibles, Harper. NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 2255). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.