

Sermon – March 24, 2024
“He answered him with fire from heaven”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: 1 Chronicles 21:18-26

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 become a blessing for your people that guides 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 today. 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. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hallelujah! That was the cry of the crowd as Jesus came over the crest of the Mount of Olives on this day and began his descent into Jerusalem. The crowd’s words will be our call and response today, when I say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” you respond with” Hallelujah!” Let’s try that. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” You respond with “Hallelujah!” Try to respond as one in the crowd who has just seen Jesus coming down from the Mount of Olives. Welcome to Palm Sunday, the Sabbath on which we celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and begin Holy Week. I hope our week will be blessed as we move together this time through Holy Week. We may have been through Holy Week before, but we have never been through it this time. I pray we will set aside time to read scripture about Jesus’ journey through this week. I pray that we will find time to come and join together with each other for the

Northumberland Charge Holy Week services: Maundy Thursday at Afton Methodist Church, where we will share in Holy Communion, Good Friday at Fairfields Methodist Church for a Tenebrae service, and on Saturday at Fairfields cemetery where we will gather for a short service to remember the time Jesus spent in the tomb and to celebrate the lives of those in our fellowship who have died in the past year.

Today marks the end of our sermon series where we have visited altars found in the Word of God and begun to learn what we might need to do to rebuild and reclaim the altar in our lives so that it would become a meeting place with God. Today we will look at one last altar. It is the only altar that God tells His people to build. But before we get to today's altar, let me help us recall the altars we have visited. We started our journey with the altar Noah built to encounter God by giving thanks through a sacrifice of gratitude for bringing him and his family through the flood. Our journey began with our seeking to make a place to encounter God. Next, we walked for three days to a place in the Land of Moriah where Abraham was sent to sacrifice his son Isaac, his only son whom he loved. We, with Abraham, were able to begin to surrender control of our lives to God as we witnessed Abraham's surrender of the promise of God to God as he took the knife in his hand to kill Isaac. And we saw the provision of God at that place, the place Abraham named "The Lord will provide." At that altar, we begin to seek to trust God to provide for us a place and the means that we also might meet with Him and surrender all. Then we journeyed to the top of Mount Carmel where Elijah rebuilt an altar of stones, prayed to God, and fire fell from heaven, consuming the bull, the wood, the stones of the altar, and the water in the trench around the altar. As did the people of Israel, we have begun to look at our own spiritual foundation and to seek to rebuild any scattered stones of faith in our lives and to turn again to Jesus in the joy of repentance. Next, we stopped on our journey to witness Jacob wrestle with a man all night as he struggled with the fear from his past, and we saw Jacob find freedom as he surrendered his fear and trusted the LORD. We saw the transformation of Jacob from one who sought to carry his past transgressions and their apparent consequences into a follower of the one God, a man who was freed from his past as he surrendered his sin to God and was freed to live and love as God transformed him. We witnessed the altar Jacob built at Shechem in gratitude to the God of transformation. We heard the LORD give Jacob a new name, Israel, God heals, and in response, we added to our rebuilding of our altar as a place where our past burdens of sin that we struggle to carry can be brought and left and we are freed to meet God and experience

forgiveness, mercy, and grace. We have journeyed far and learned much as we have traveled and sought together to learn how we can rebuild our altar into a place where we can meet with God.

Let me provide some background to give us context for where we find God at work among His people this morning. If we will reach back to the parallel passage to our reading from Chronicles and look at 2 Samuel, we find that at this time God is angry with the people of Israel. The reason for God's anger is not clear. Perhaps it has to do with their treatment of the Gibeonites. David has been victorious over all the nations around Israel and has moved Israel into a time of peace. As David begins to look at what he has done for the kingdom of Israel, God allows Satan to stir David's heart to take a census. At this time in history, there are two reasons for taking a census: to determine the number of fighting men available to a leader for some planned engagement or to collect taxes. Given that David's General Joab is the collector of census data and that he reports the number of fighting men from the census he takes, we have some support to think that part of David's desire for a census had to do with determining the military might of Israel. Even with David's advisors telling him not to conduct the census, he, as king, overrules them and the census is taken. When it is completed, David is stricken with the realization that he has sinned, that he has sought to see what he has done and not what the Lord has done. David has failed in his role as a shepherd over Israel, and he is given three choices by God through the prophet Gad for punishment. David fails in his leadership of God's people and is given the choice of consequences for the people. Notice how God deals with our failures differently than the world deals with failures. We should find in the example of David's failure and God's response that God deals differently with our failures. We should note that, like David, we can release our failures to God and trust Him to show mercy and love in the midst of our failures and to lead us through the consequences and out of them to restored relationships with God and others. As David reflects on the options for punishment, he is overwhelmed with his failure and chooses to have God's hand be the source of consequence, as David counts on God's mercy and does not want to face the merciless response from the world. David knows the mercy of God and clings to his faith in the steadfast love of God. As David makes his choice, he repents and offers himself and his family to God to suffer the consequences in place of the people of Israel. God sends a plague on the people and a considerable number die from the plague. But God has mercy, and just as the plague is about to move into Jerusalem, God sends Gad, the

prophet of God, to David and commands David to go to a certain threshing floor and build an altar there.

The place where David is sent to build this altar is the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. At the time David is going to seek to secure the threshing floor, Ornan is there working to separate the wheat from the chaff of his harvest. He is tossing the harvested wheat seeds into the strong breeze found at this high place and gathering the seed for food, but preparing to burn the useless chaff. The location of Ornan's threshing floor is an interesting place. There has been an altar built on this site before, built by Abraham when he was commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac. It is the place Abraham named "The LORD will provide." It is the place where Jacob, as he ran from his brother Esau for his life, dreamed of a stairway to heaven and set up a stone. It is the threshing floor where Ruth came and lay down at the feet of Boaz. Ornan's threshing floor sits on the place named "The LORD will provide." As David arrives, it is also the place where the angel of the Lord is standing with a drawn sword to carry out the command of God to bring a plague on the people of Israel. David comes here at the command of God to buy the threshing floor and the land around it from Ornan so that he might build an altar and offer on it a burnt offering to God. David negotiates with Ornan who tries to give David the land, the oxen, and their yoke for the burnt offering, but David will not accept the gift. He knows he needs to have the offering cost him something, and so he buys the land, builds the altar, makes the sacrifice, and God has the angel place his sword back in its sheath. The plague is stopped and in the place called "The LORD will provide," God again acts to show mercy and provide an end to the suffering of the people. God's mercy is seen in this place where the LORD will provide. Because David comes to repentance and trusts the LORD to provide and does as he is commanded, the LORD is faithful and shows mercy to Israel, taking away their punishment.

David builds the altar to the LORD, places his sacrifice on the altar, and calls on the LORD, and is answered by the LORD with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering. When David sees the response from the LORD, he moves the place of sacrifice for Israel from Gibeon, where the tabernacle that Moses made is in the land of Benjamin, to this place and declares that not only will this place be the new site for Israel to offer burnt offerings, but it will be the site where the house of the LORD God will be built. We have now seen our sixth altar in our journey, the one built at the command of the LORD, the one where the LORD God accepts the burnt offering for sin and ends the consequences that have come upon the people. We have come

to an altar where God reveals how He deals differently with our failures by showing mercy to His people. We have come to the place where the LORD will provide and we have witnessed God's abundant provision.

We now need to jump forward in time hundreds of years. As we journey, we will see Solomon's temple built on the land David purchased from Ornan. We will see Israel struggle with worshipping God alone in the influence of the world around them. In time we will see the temple Solomon built at this place destroyed and Israel taken into captivity. We will see a new temple built and the sacrifice of burnt offerings begin again at this place as the people of God return from exile. We will witness Jerusalem rise again from captivity around this place, and in time we will see Herod build a new grand and beautiful temple structure on this site. And then on the first day of the week, we will hear the shouts of a crowd coming over the nearby Mount of Olives crying out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. Hallelujah!" We will see a humble man riding on a donkey come down the road with a small crowd following him, praising the arrival of a new king in Jerusalem. We will witness the small crowd grow very large as those who have gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover are drawn to this procession, and the crowd grows in size and volume as they shout the words of welcome to a king: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. Hallelujah!" On this day, the people of Jerusalem welcome the arrival of Jesus, riding on a donkey. Jesus will come to the temple, look around at the activities going on there, and then leave to return on the next day to begin the final steps to becoming the one who comes in the name of the LORD to bring blessings to all people. As Jesus comes to this place, we should recall the words of John the Baptist who spoke to the coming of the one for whom he prepared the way. John told those sent to him, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."ⁱ David offered burnt offerings at this same place where Herod's temple now stands and they were accepted by God and brought mercy in a time of failure. Jesus comes to this same threshing floor not to be a royal king but to offer himself as an exchange for our sin debt. Jesus comes not just to stop a plague sent upon the people as consequence for David's sin and God's anger with His people, but to bring an end to death, the consequence of our sin. Jesus comes to this place to be the sacrifice that we could never offer. Jesus comes to

make a way for the wheat, those who believe in Jesus, to be brought into eternal life with God the Father and for the chaff, those who do not believe in Jesus, to be burned up. David sought to establish a place for worship so that Satan might be kept at bay. Jesus comes to defeat Satan and to set up the kingdom of God. Jesus comes to the place where the LORD will provide as the provision of God for all people. Jesus comes not to lead an army to military victory, but to die that we might live eternally reconciled to God. Jesus comes as the provision Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Here on Palm Sunday, we come with the crowds to the place where the LORD will provide, as witnesses this time to the arrival of Jesus to the cry of the crowds who welcome him with their cry of “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. Hallelujah!” Let us walk with Jesus this week and witness his actions as we travel with him this time through Holy Week, through the arrival, death, and resurrection of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Pray with me: Father, we are amazed when we see your provision throughout the story of the people of God on the mount where the LORD will provide. Jesus, transform our hearts to become altars where we willingly surrender all to you as you surrendered all for us on the mount where the LORD provides. Jesus, transform us more completely into your image that we might become wheat gathered into your eternal storehouse. 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.

Go forth and tell the world that the LORD will provide for them. Amen

ⁱ NRSV Matthew 3:11-12