

“How To Build An Altar”

(Genesis 13-15)

A week and a half ago I found myself sitting in the waiting room of the doctor's office finally following the wise counsel of many in the church and the emphatic insistence of my wife that I needed to have my nagging cough looked into. Always looking for ways to multi-task, I took along the book we are reading this Lent, *An Altar in the World*. After a few pages, I was called back to the exam room, propped myself up on the hard table with the thin plastic cover and the crinkly, wrinkly white paper. I was told the doctor would be with me shortly, which translates into I have plenty of time to read. I reopen the book, found my place and a few seconds later I read this sentence, “Prayer is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing”. I stopped right there. I looked around that exam room with the institutional beige tile, the plain white walls, the laminated posters with the corners starting to come unstuck, and the one wall with a color choice that, had I not been sick would have made me feel a bit nauseous. Surrounded by the stark and sterile room with this sentence about waking up to God no matter where I am or what I am doing roaming around and the only thing I can think is, really? Really here in this place? Here in this room that is in need of an extreme makeover doctor's office edition or at bare minimum a visit from someone, anyone on HGTV. Really, in a place where my back side is already throbbing, this is a place to awake up to God? Then, I looked at the walls and thought about all the prayers of patients who had sat in the room prior to me. I thought about the whispered prayers absorbed into the walls asking for help, especially when the doctor says words the person never wanted to hear. I thought about the sighs of relief people prayed when the news is good. I thought about Anne Lamont who wrote our most basic, heartfelt, honest prayers to God; the ones we utter most frequently are “thank you, thank you, thank you” and “help me, help me, help me.” And I realize that perhaps even in this place I too need to stay alert and awake and be aware of God's presence.

Sometimes the constant motion of our lives creates such a blur as we hurriedly move from place to place, from task to task that it is difficult to get our bearings straight or notice what is going on all around us. Our frenzied pace propels us forward and the never ending to-do list can make us feel like a hamster on one of those exercise wheels, only we can't seem to find the exit so we can stop and notice and rest. So, when we hear how Abram trekked up and down Israel, trudged mile after mile, our feet can sympathize for we know the aches of always being on the go. And yet, three separate times in the span of two chapters, Abram stopped to construct at least three altars. He paused long enough in his journey to mark the places where he encountered the sacred. Now we are not told exactly what the altars were made of, we don't know if they were stone or something else. We don't know if he just reached for whatever was handy that lay nearby or if he happened to reach into his satchel and pull out items that he had packed when he started out on the journey. We are not told in this part of scripture how to build an altar, no instruction manuals are left behind by Abram or suggestions offered that we could translate for living out our faith today. We are left with only a lingering, somewhat vague, notion that an altar can be one way of noticing the holy, a visual way of place-holding a space where the sacred was encountered.

To be honest, I have limited experience with altar building. But it does hold a mysterious fascination that keeps beckoning me to respond. To be sure some of our natural instincts for altar building that come from our ancestors in scripture still remain coursing through our bodies. Several times I've noticed the candle we offer to families on All Saints Day near a picture of the one who has passed from this life into the next. I find that any time I do something different with the altar space people notice. And yet, I still sense reluctance on

the part of some to carve out and create sacred space in their home. And for those who do have a space where a brilliant red leaf from last fall or roses from funerals or a trinket from your grandparents home or a treasured shell found by children at the beach all congregate together, they too are reluctant to share their experiences of altar making with others, lest the response be less than favorable. And so the practice of altar building remains outside the mainstream of many within our faith and rarely talked about by pastors.

So, this week, when I noticed a table that my grandmother had in her home when I was growing up had finally been cleared of the piles of paper that I had stacked there waiting to be filed for months; as this table sat there empty almost cast aside in my office, I decided to give altar building a try. Now, as much as I love the rich wood of this table, there is also something about cloth that appeals to me in my altar building, softening and even serving as a contrast to the wood. I like how the cloth hides some of the table but the legs still showing, peeking out beneath. Since we are in the season of Lent, why not be liturgically correct with a purple cloth? Thinking about what else might help me connect with God's presence when I glance up and see the altar, I decided some candles would be good. These candle holders were given to me by a good friend for being part of his wedding and these candles are from our Christmas Eve service, sometimes it pays in the altar building business to have an "in" with the church. Complete with candles, I found the wheels of my mind turning quickly. This week in the mail I received a jar opener from Cedar Crest which reminds me both of our members who live there and also that when life gets crazy I need to pause and pray for God to help me get a grip. Reminded that altars are not only places for visuals but also space for that which makes sound I add this singing bowl. Finally, reminded of singing, there was one last space left. A bowl I received for Christmas from church member which reminds me of your love sits in that space. You should know, the manufacture calls this color "Gusto" and what else could go in a gusto bowl than chocolate.

Friends, we create altars not as some kind of exclusive claim on the sacred or even as a way to control or contain or confine the sacred to just one space. I think we construct altars in order to help us notice when we stumble across altars not of our making out in the world. The more comfortable we can become with making altars in our homes, blessing the places where we eat and sleep and bathe and relax as also sacred ground for encountering God's presence and experiencing God's love, the more we might start to notice the altars that are made by others and by God. We awaken our senses to take in altars in a friend's home or out in creation. The pile of stones as we walk in the woods is a sign that someone else has hallowed the ground with his or her presence. The camp fire ring still smoldering is a sign that someone else was blessed with warmth and light. Too often we can look for altars only at eye level. So, we can challenge ourselves to glance from side to side, up and down, trying to be aware and alert to our surroundings.

So may you be awake to the presence of God this week, no matter where you are. May you be aware of the altars you stumble across as you go about your day, look for altars not only at eye level, but try raising your eyes to see the sacred in the limbs of bare trees or even in the beautiful UCC emblem that Lois made and reminds us of her. May you look out of the side of your eyes and even try to slow down a bit so what you are passing isn't such a blur. And may you even try altar building in your home, try placing a few items on the table where you eat or on your nightstand. Think about what connects you to the sacred. For indeed, when we commit ourselves to altar building, I believe it helps us notice the altars in our world, even ones when you go begrudgingly to the doctor's office.

Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen!"