

Altar'd: Making Space to Surrender

Pastor Paul Dinges

February 18, 2024

Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Genesis 8:15-9:7

Do you remember the season when COVID first grabbed hold of the world and we were mandated to stay inside? At first it felt like having an unexpected snow day – when school is cancelled due to winter weather. And, as a kid, a snow day was fun! But after weeks and months, the experience changed. It turned from an unexpected break to a punishment of isolation. It became very clear to us just what we missed in our ordinary, everyday lives.

As a pastor, I remember waiting to hear that church would be considered an essential business so we could open our doors and help people who were in need. It also meant we could begin planning how to safely gather for worship. And when we did begin to have in-person worship again, people would tell us how much they missed church and how desperate they were to be together again as a family of faith.

The story of Noah has similar circumstances of isolation. Imagine if you were shut in your house for a year with your immediate family and hundreds or thousands of animals. Consider the constant noise and the awful smell. Now imagine that the day came when you could open the doors and leave your house. How would you respond? What would be your first act? For Noah, he built an altar to worship the Lord. After the flood, to face a new world and a new life required making space and surrendering to the Lord.

Noah and his family had been chosen by God to escape the flood, which killed all living creatures. He had been given instructions by God to place inside the ark seven pairs of every clean animal and one pair of every unclean animal.

Noah followed God's instructions and his family, along with the animals, had been safely sequestered inside the ark for just over a year when the water dried up.

We all have priorities, but we often don't know what they are until we find ourselves in a crisis. Like COVID, it wasn't until most of us were limited in actions that we had to determine what was most important to us. Lent is an intentional time in the Christian calendar where we are invited to reflect on our lives and assess our priorities.

Up to this point, Noah had been a doer; God spoke, and Noah obeyed. Now we see Noah chose for himself his first act after being allowed to leave the shelter of the ark. His first act was worship. He created an altar, a space to encounter and honor God who had saved his family and provided them with a new life. This is the first altar mentioned in the Bible and was a sign of Noah's faith. His first priority was the Lord.

When Jesus began His ministry, He said that in all things we should seek first the kingdom (Matt. 6:33). So, what is our first priority this Lent? How are we making space to worship God both physically and mentally? Jesus often made space to be with His Father. As He traveled with His disciples, He would go out in the early morning to pray, or He would find space for silence and solitude.

As Jesus went off to be alone with His Father in prayer, He also taught the disciples in Matthew 6:6: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

The 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 (Rom. 12:1), our resources (Phil. 4:18), and our praise (Heb. 13:15); this is where new life begins.

After building an altar, Noah made a costly sacrifice by taking some of the clean animals and clean birds to sacrifice to the Lord. Noah was beginning a new life with limited resources. Sacrificing some of the limited resources was a sign that he trusted the Lord would continue to care for his family. In this space, Noah gave what he had as an act of surrender. As followers of Jesus, our lives must be centered on surrender. It is in the act of sacrifice that we experience the transforming power of Christ.

God's plan of salvation was always going to require sacrifice. Prior to the coming of Jesus, God provided instructions for five different offerings they would need to offer as sacrifices. These sacrifices would provide temporary atonement for their sins and restore their relationship with God. Whether burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, or guilt offerings, each act would be a form of worship and would require a sacrifice.

In each of our altar stories this Lent we will see different acts of surrender as God's people center their lives on surrender. When God in flesh came to the earth in the form of Jesus, He was a living sacrifice and showed us what a life of surrender looked like. The Greek word for surrender is *paradidomi* and can be expressed in different ways including to commit in obedience, to yield, to entrust, and to deliver over. Jesus surrendered His life in all these ways, and He was the ultimate sacrifice on the cross.

As we walk in Jesus's footsteps and learn how to surrender, we will experience the transforming power of God in our lives. However, surrendering is not always easy. In Mark 10, Jesus shared a story of the rich young ruler: "'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me'" (v. 21), but he was unwilling to surrender and so lost the

gift of new life through Christ.

It is in seeking Christ and creating space to encounter Him that we become changed into His image: “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1-2).

An altar is just a piece of furniture unless there is holy fire to consume the sacrifice. In Leviticus 6, the priests who oversaw sacrificing the animals on the altar were given specific instructions to keep the fire burning: “The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out” (v. 12a). In fact, it was so important that it is repeated three times. They were not to let the fire die because it was a reminder that God was always with them, and it was a reminder of God’s mercy. God was always willing to provide forgiveness and reconciliation through the offering of a sacrifice.

Once Noah sacrificed his offerings to the Lord, he received a blessing from God. The Lord gave them dominion over the animals and gave those animals as food to eat, but God also gave Noah a warning: they would be responsible for what God had given them; He would demand an accounting for their sins (Gen. 9:5). Noah and his family were dependent on their relationship with God, and they would need a way to keep and reconcile that relationship.

Just as Noah was accountable, so are we. We must be obedient to God’s commands, and when we sin, we must surrender ourselves. The altar is the intentional space where we seek to encounter God and the fire is the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. We keep the fire going by listening and obeying the Lord and allowing His presence to transform us as we abide with Christ.

First Thessalonians 5:19 says: “Do not quench the Spirit.” The coals of the fire become cold when we do not seek God, when we do not stay in relationship with Him, and when we disobey. But the Lord is quick to forgive, so, like Noah, our hearts should long to worship God and to offer all we have as a sacrifice to Him. It is by making space to surrender that we will be transformed and experience the blessings of God.

I close with this excerpt from the Altar’d daily devotional reader by Susan O. Kent, titled, Day 4: “Space, the Final Frontier.”

EPHESIANS 3:14-19: For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide

and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

CONSIDER THIS: If you ever get a chance to watch one of the 20,000 (okay, probably an exaggeration) home improvement shows, pay attention to the computer-generated interior design programs. They are fascinating. The designer can literally imagine hundreds of different ways to utilize the space he is given. He can rearrange furniture, remove cabinets, and raise the ceiling. Sometimes he will even take down walls to create a larger space.

The goal for the designer is to create a physical space that reflects the heart of the family who lives there. This is the same goal for an altar. It's a physical space that reflects the longing of a heart to encounter God. Let's look at the physical space we have created and how it reflects our own hearts. In today's passage, the apostle Paul is praising God for all that He has done to unify the believers under Jesus. He gives thanks to God for bringing all people together into the family of God through the Spirit. When Jesus fulfilled God's covenant through His death and resurrection, the walls of restrictive laws of the Torah were taken down and there was room made in the family of God for Gentiles (non-Jews). Like a beautiful renovation, space was made for all people.

Paul then prayed for the believers to make space in their lives so that Jesus could dwell in their hearts, and they could be transformed by the Holy Spirit. I love that Paul used the word dwell, which in Greek is *katoikeō* and means "to inhabit" or "settle." This imagery paints a picture for us that is helpful to understand Paul's prayer. There is a difference between occupying a space and dwelling in a space.

If you have ever moved into an apartment or a dorm, you most likely moved in with a mindset that it wouldn't be permanent. You may have been hesitant to hang 14 ALTAR'D photos on the wall or bring all your belongings. You moved in, but you didn't settle in. However, if you have ever purchased a home, you probably moved in with a different mindset. You wanted to dwell in that space, to settle in. You wanted to paint the walls and hang pictures. You wanted to make it your own because it was permanent. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is that they would allow Jesus to permanently settle into their hearts and dwell there so they could be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Is Jesus fully settled in your heart?

As an altar, our lives become the space where the Holy Spirit dwells and those around us see evidence of God's presence. Have you created space for the Lord in your heart and in the physical space of your home, work, or school? During this Lenten journey, we may need to do a little remodeling so Jesus can dwell more fully in the altar of our lives.

THE PRAYER: Jesus, as we kneel before You, we pray for the Holy Spirit to come and dwell in us. Fill us to overflowing with Your grace and mercy so we may be a witness to others. Amen.

THE QUESTIONS: Does it feel like Jesus dwells in your heart? If you are unsure, consider what space you have made for Him. What are some physical reminders around you that reflect your devotion to Jesus?