

“Altar’d - Making Space for Surrender”

Scripture: Genesis 8:15-20; 9:1-7

Graphics: altar, fire, surrender

Big Truth: God calls us to make space to surrender so we can experience the power of transformation. There are many altars in scripture and in our lives. They are places where a space was created (a meeting point between God and people), a sacrifice was offered (something was given, someone was surrendered), and a transformational shift took place in the life of the person. Space + Surrender = Shift.

Focus Phrase: A new life requires space and surrender.

1. Introduction

- A. (communion table) THIS is an altar. Technically, it’s a communion table. For it to be an altar, in the historic Old Testament sense of the word, it would need to be used for animal sacrifices and worship. Of course, we’re no longer asked by God to make animal sacrifices, thankfully. But we’re still asked to gather for worship before a holy God, which is another thing that happens at the altar.
- B. When we use this communion table on Sundays we celebrate communion - the Eucharist - then this table takes on the characteristics of an historic altar in the Old Testament. But, now, instead of animal sacrifices being offered on this table, we place the bread and juice of communion on the table to symbolize the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus, sacrificed as the perfect Lamb of God who takes away our sin, once and for all.
- C. In my years as a pastor, I’ve seen many times when people were referring to the altar and mis-spelled the word as altEr (with an e), and opposed to altAr. Whenever that happens, I pause and reflect on the relationship between an altar (with an A) and alter (with an E).
- D. An altar is a place of change...of transformation. And so, we’re altered at the altar, whenever we encounter God.
- E. We’ve entered into the season of Lent...the 40 days that lead to Easter (this year on March 31). Lent is a time of internal and external change. Lent is time to reflect on your walk with Jesus and how you’re responding to His call on your life. Lent is about change - being altered at the altar.
- F. I’ve had three profound encounters at three different altars in my life.
 - i. The first was when I was 12, and knelt before the congregation at the altar of the Bowmansville United Methodist Church for my confirmation. The pastor and my parents laid hands on me and prayed. In that moment, I truly did believe that I trusted in God’s grace for my salvation.
 - ii. The second altar was when Stacy and I knelt before God at our wedding over 30 years ago, to take vows before Him with the congregation supporting us. That’s the second best decision of my life...second only to

- accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. That second altar led to children and now grandchildren, which is such a joy to us.
- iii. The third altar was when I knelt down before the Bishop and my mentors at my ordination in 2011. It was such a blessing to share that moment with some of you, and this pulpit (which has my ordination date on it) will always be a lasting reminder of that moment, every sermon I've preached in this sanctuary since then, and every one I will preach in the future.
- G. Three altars in my life. Three times when God made a space for me and us to encounter Him. Three surrenders. Three transformations.
- H. Every week during this Lent season, we'll be looking at the importance of altars in the Bible.
- i. God instructed His people to build altars and to bring an offering as a way to honor Him and encounter His presence.
 - ii. Altars were sacred spaces, where God spoke, and gave direction and blessing.
 - iii. An altar is a special place, where God and people come together.
 - iv. God speaks, and blessings are poured out, and commitments are made at altars throughout the bible.
- I. As we study God's Word, we'll find, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, as people encountered the power and presence of God to change lives, there were some similarities:
- i. a **space** was created - a meeting point between God and people...
 - ii. a **sacrifice** was offered - something was given, someone was surrendered...
 - iii. and a **transformational shift** took place in the life of the person.
- J. Author Susan Kent explains it this way: "**Space + Surrender = Shift**"
- K. In your notes, write this simple phrase down: **A new life requires space and surrender.**
- L. This sermon is called: *Making Space to Surrender*. That's where it begins. God calls us to make space so we can experience the power of transformation. Susan Kent wrote, "The transformational shift we experience, comes only through the power of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."
- M. Many of us want to experience a shift - a change in our lives - because we know that this world, and let's be honest, we ourselves, are not yet fully as it and we should be. We are going on to perfection, as John Wesley said.
- N. Throughout this series, we'll be looking at how people were changed, "altered", at an altar...and what that means for us.
- O. Let's PRAY! PRAY! (Jesus, You are Lord...)**

- P. Let's open the Genesis chapter 8, to read about our first altar starting in verse 15. This is the story of Noah, coming out of the ark, and the first thing he did was build an altar and worship.

2. Scripture

A. READ Genesis 8:15-20

- B. This seems like a dumb question, but do you remember when we were in lockdown at the beginning of the COVID pandemic? In some ways, those first few days and weeks felt like a really long snow day, as we hunkered down and spent a lot of time inside.
- C. But, after a couple weeks and into months, that experience changed. It went from an unexpected break to a punishment of isolation. It became clear pretty quickly that we missed our ordinary days.
- D. I remember on Easter morning in 2020, when the church would be abuzz with people and smiles, Stacy and I walked across the street at 9am and rang the bell in our bell tower, just to celebrate SOMETHING outside the house. No one was around to hear it, so we had to put it on Facebook, so people could hear it!
- E. As a pastor, I remember waiting to hear when we could come back to worship together. When we did, I also remember people saying how thankful they were and how much they missed worshiping together...how desperate they'd become to worship as a family of faith.
- F. Noah and his family must've experienced similar circumstances of isolation.
- i. Imagine being closed up in the ark, with your family, and hundreds or thousands of animals for a year. Think about the constant noise and the smell, and the cramped conditions.
 - ii. Finally, after almost a year, the ground dried up, and Noah could open up the huge doors and leave the ark for the first time.
 - iii. Remember, the ark was given by the grace of God to save Noah and his family from the flood. The flood came because humans had completely given into their desires and God wanted to wipe away everything that had degraded His creation.
 - iv. Our author said, "The flood washed away the sin, but it also showed the power of God to provide salvation."
 - v. As the earth dried up, and Noah and his family left the ark, they faced a brand new reality. Nothing was the same, except their family! In almost every way, they were given a new life.
 - vi. If you were Noah, and you stepped onto that dry ground for the first time, what would you do first? What would you be thinking? I picture Airmen in

- the Air Force who get back to earth after a mission and kneel down and kiss the ground.
- vii. Noah must've felt the weight - the gravity - of God's justice because he and his family were the only humans alive. Everyone else was gone.
 - viii. But he knew also that his life and the lives of his family had been graciously spared by God...based on Noah's righteousness and faith in God.
- G. As they began this new life together, and left the ark, Noah did the one thing that was a response to God's justice and grace: he made a space to worship the Lord and surrendered to him.
 - H. Noah built an **altar** to worship the Lord.
 - I. And he took of each clean animal (which was pre-determined by God) and made burnt offerings - animal sacrifices - to God, on the altar...right there on the newly dried ground of the new life on the new earth.
 - J. A new life requires space and surrender.

3. Application

- A. Place yourself on that ark for a moment as they were coming out after so long in isolation. Can you imagine the conversations Noah had with his family? What did they long for most? Were they filled with sadness for what was lost or gratitude for God's protection?
- B. Susan Kent writes: "Forty days and forty nights of rain and reflection created a longing for God, a longing to encounter the one who had saved them, a longing to give back to God what He had provided to them. So, Noah built an altar."
- C. He created a space to encounter and honor God who had saved his family and provided them with a new life.
- D. Interestingly, this is the first altar mentioned in the Bible. It was a profound sign of Noah's faith. His first priority was the Lord...to worship the Lord.

E. Making space a priority

- i. Often times, altars become places where our **priorities are adjusted**. When I knelt at the altar with Stacy on our wedding day, our priorities with each other shifted. When I said yes at my ordination, my priorities shifted.
- ii. When Jesus began His ministry, He said that in all things we must seek first the kingdom (Matt. 6:33). That's a clear delineation of priorities. At an altar, our priorities come into focus.
- iii. What's your greatest priority right now?
- iv. On Ash Wednesday, we began the season of Lent. How will you make space to worship God both physically and mentally? How do we make space to love and worship God?

- v. The cool thing is that we can make just about ANY place an altar. Our bedside. Our prayer closet. Our car. Our dining room table.
- vi. Jesus often made space to be with His Father wherever He was. As He traveled with His disciples, He'd go out early in the morning to pray. Or He would find space for silence and solitude. He made that a priority!
- vii. If Jesus, the Son of God, had to get away with his Father, to pray, how much more do you and I need time in a quiet place, making space to be with the Lord. To make **space** at an altar.

F. Making surrender a priority

- i. But, remember, our formula for change also includes **surrender**. (Space + Surrender = Shift). How do we surrender ourselves, and give a sacrifice?
- ii. According to Scripture, we are called to worship the Lord with our bodies. In Romans 12:1, Paul writes: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”
- iii. We’re also to give our resources of time, money, and prayer as an act of worship, to support the work of the Lord. We give our praise as a sacrifice to the Lord. And we give our trust and obedience. At the altar, We worship through sacrifice.
- iv. After building an altar, Noah made a costly sacrifice by taking some of the clean animals and clean birds to sacrifice to the Lord. For Noah to sacrifice some of the limited resources was a clear sign that he trusted the Lord. He believed that God would continue to care for his family. Noah gave what he had as an act of surrender.
- v. As followers of Jesus, **our very lives must be surrendered** to the Lord. And not just some parts or parts of parts. All of us to all of Him.
- vi. The Christian life is not about wanting Jesus to sprinkle a little love and favor into our lives. It’s about completely dying to self, so that Jesus can live his life through us.
- vii. It’s in the act of sacrifice - following Jesus’ example - that we experience the transforming power of God.
- viii. God’s plan of salvation was always going to require sacrifice.
- ix. When God came to earth in the flesh in the form of Jesus, He was a living sacrifice and showed us what a life of surrender looked like. Jesus surrendered his life through obedience to his Father’s will and by yielding his life. He made the ultimate sacrifice on the cross for you and for me.
- x. As we walk in Jesus’s footsteps and learn how to surrender, we experience the transforming power of God in our lives.

xi. It's not easy. This is not a once and one, either. Surrendering your heart to God means having to give up whatever is not of God. And our hearts are very good at attaching to worldly things: greed, success, lust, materialism, bitterness.

xii. Thankfully, even when we're stubborn, the Lord is quick to forgive and woo us to Him again and again.

G. God invites you to meet him at the altar... a space that He's called you to... to offer all you have as a sacrifice to Him.

H. It's by making space to surrender that you will experience the transforming blessings of God.

I. A new life requires space and surrender.

4. Conclusion

A. Noah built an altar to do that. Jesus IS the altar AND the sacrifice for us.

B. Jesus IS the space for people who are hurting, lost, and who long to experience God to surrender and be changed.

C. What priority does Jesus have in your life? Where are you longing for God to bring a transformational shift in your heart and life?

D. What needs to shift in your life? An attitude? A behavior? An outlook? Maybe you need a relationship restored? Maybe you need to recommit your life to the Lord.

E. Let's pray for and experience the transformation that comes as we turn our minds and our hearts to Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

F. Let's use these days to create a space - to be altar'd - where our hearts can meet with God, to name our own sin and surrender ourselves fully to His mercy.

G. God wants to meet you at the altar.

H. Let's Pray...