

WHERE IS THE ALTAR?

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on October 26, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first scripture reading is abstracted (Genesis 28: 10-12, 16-22):

“Jacob left Beersheba, and he came to a certain place, and stayed there that night. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place,’ and he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for [an altar]. He called the name of that place Bethel. ‘And this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house.’”

The second scripture reading is in toto (1 Corinthians 3:16):

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?”

The Sparrow and the Swallow Find a Home

I’d like to continue this morning with a third scripture reading. You read above the famous story of Jacob’s Ladder and his dream, and then you also read a very simple verse from the first Pauline Letter to the Corinthians, which says that people are God’s temple. Now I’m going to recite a few verses extracted from Psalm 84, and I want you to hold the following question in mind as I read it.

The question is this: *Where is God’s altar?*

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young,
At your altars, O Lord of hosts, my king and my God.
Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise!

....

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.
For the Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly.
O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.”

Jacob Awakens from Sleep, and Thinks “Holy Smokes! Wow! This Is Awesome!”

Traditionally – or rather in terms of more-primitive religious practices – the altar is the point of contact between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, and between spirit and flesh.

So in the story of Jacob’s Ladder, for example, Jacob wakes up and realizes, “Holy smokes! Here is the very place where God has touched earth,” and so Jacob calls it Bethel, which means the house of God. His response is, “Wow! This is awesome!” And the first thing he does is to build a “pillar,” or altar. Remember that this is the better part of four millennia ago. Religion was primitive at that time, and so Jacob erects an altar on the site using the rock upon which he had laid his head to sleep. In so doing, he sought to recognize that this is the place where heaven touches earth.

Upon the Ancient Altar Lies Blood Atonement for Your Souls

As the Hebrew religion grew, matured, and modified over the years, it was very much linked to the following understanding, which comes from Leviticus 17, verse 11:

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life.”

That was the explanation given for all the blood sacrifices upon the altar throughout the centuries and even millennia. The ox, the bull, the calf, the pigeon, the sheep, the ram – all of them sacrificed upon the altar.

It had to do with the core understanding that Jacob had, as explained in Leviticus. That here’s the contact point. Here’s where God is going to be receptive. It’s the pick-up and drop-off point. You drop off a sacrificial life, and you pick up a redemption, a forgiveness, a restoration. That’s really primitive.

Bump It Up a Bit to the Middle Ages

Less primitive, but still rather like a Neanderthal mentality, is church understanding during the Middle Ages.

If you will recall the structure of a cathedral, it’s classically in the shape of a cross, or a cruciform. You’ve got the long center aisle, or nave, and then you’ve got the two arms, or transept, off to the side and the chancel beyond the transept, opposite the nave. So if you look at a floor plan, it’s very similar to a cross. What’s at the center is the classic archetypal understanding of the cross; it is the joining of the vertical with the horizontal, the God plane with the human plane.

And what’s placed right at the intersection? The altar.

The Risqué Understanding of the Middle Ages

I need to apologize at this point because my explanation will be a bit risqué. I'm not making this stuff up. That understanding got overtly sexualized throughout the Middle Ages, when the male priest, as the vicar of Christ, enters the church, which is symbolic of the holy and pure bride of Christ. They meet at the center, where the altar is placed.

So now you can get a sense of why the Roman Catholic clergy, even today, must be male. That is because what happens at the altar is the conception of new life in Christ. New life is conceived for the church and for each individual. The forgiven, the restored, the redeemed soul is conceived at this point. This then led to the veneration of Mary, which is, of course, the virgin's womb, the archetype of this altar meeting, reenacted in the Sunday mass every week.

Can we get past this antiquated practice as a church? I don't think the average person thinks about such things when they go to mass on Sunday morning, even though it's still the official teaching, the official understanding of the Roman Catholic church that this is what's going on. I am hopeful that we really can get past this kind of thinking, which brings me back to Psalm 84. Where's the altar?

The Answer Is That It's Everywhere

It's in the temple, it's in the synagogue, but then there's that enigmatic verse about the sparrow and the swallow that builds her nest on the altar of God. Immediately people tend to think it's like, *Aw, shoot!* You know, they're building their nest, and they're pooping on the communion table. *God, it's a mess!* And it's just like.... I'm sorry, but no, no, no, no, no. That's not it at all! It's where the swallow builds her nest, where the sparrow is building her nest. That *also* is the altar of God!

This brings up a very radical thought for both Hebrew theology and the Christian church. And that is.... *Well, wait a minute!* What happens if the altar of God really is *everywhere*? Literally everywhere. This means that everything in our world is worthy of being placed on the communion table. It's all holy. It's not just candles and decorations and a cross or a Bible or the wine and the bread. It's like all of creation is actually worthy of sitting upon the altar of God.

Things on My Personal Altar:

A Wood Carving, an Ancient Fossil . . .

Here are some things – just to give you a feeling for it – that are on the altar at my house:

Straight from Bethlehem, an olive-wood carving of Madonna and Child. It's beautiful. I think it's just plain cool. However, it's also symbolic. I know of no other love existing on this planet that is more pure, more lovely, more ferocious than a mother's love for her child. I do not get in the way between a mother bear and her cubs. It is the finest love that I know of. This carving is for me a symbol of the pure beauty of this kind of love.

A trilobite fossil also has a significant place on my personal altar. During the stressful times of my life as a minister, I tend to worry about a talk I must give next Tuesday. I worry about next Sunday's sermon because, as soon as this one's over, *by golly* the congregation is going to want another one next week! The committee meeting I have this coming week will go on and on and on. I tend to stress over what's coming up, what I have to do, how I need to prepare for it. I'm not unique; we all have similar worries.

And so it's good to remind myself of geological time. Not only will the time of stress pass but the day will come when this whole edifice will be dust. That's a good thing; it's the way it ought to be. The day will come when all of our bodies will be dust and long-gone. And the day will come when there will be nobody left alive who will remember your name. That too is good. All life will eventually be replaced with other life that we can hardly imagine in today's world. I submit to you that it does the soul good to be reminded of geologic time.

. . . A Key, A Turtle, a Crane, a Lotus Flower . . .

From a tourist-trap gift shop in Capetown, South Africa, comes this replica of the key that was used in Nelson Mandela's cell during the long years of his imprisonment. For me it's an extraordinary symbol of the way we can create bondage, or the way we can turn the key and create freedom. Scriptures talk about how religious leaders can place strictures on ordinary people and ruin their lives. Or we can lift those burdens and free their lives. This is a reminder that, with our words, our actions, and even objects, we can bind somebody or release people to worship as they wish.

The next object is a replica of a 14th Century statue in a Zen temple in Japan. It shows a turtle, a crane, and a lotus flower. All three have their feet or their roots in the mud and their heads or the flower up in the air. The statue is a reminder from the Zen point of view of what the human being is. We have our feet in the mud and our heads in the air, meaning that we are flesh and blood *and spirit*. And don't forget one or the other. If you become too spiritual, remember that there are people who are hungry. If you become too engrossed in things of the flesh, remember that you are a soul, that you are a spirit.

**. . . A Cross, a Bowl of Water, an Acorn, a Fall Leaf,
And my Favorite, an Uncut Log Signifying Potential**

A cross is on my altar to reflect the entire world of my profession, of my very being. Sometimes there's a bowl of water, symbolic of life. Where there's water, there's life; where water is missing, things tend to die. And there's an acorn with its multiplicity of obvious meanings.

And right now, there's a beautiful fall leaf, orange and red and yellow. A fall leaf because it's a symbol, a reminder that the end of life can also be beautiful. I need it

personally at this juncture of my life, and you know why – that when life comes to its inevitable end, this also is beautiful.

One of my favorite altar pieces is a simple log. Once again in the Zen tradition of Japan, it is symbolic of human potential. It is a piece of raw uncut wood, a log, or a board that has not been finished, which can be fashioned into a weapon or a beautiful statue. Or it can be a huge, totally untouched piece of timber of any length that is turned up on end to become a giant statue as it stands in its naked glory. It can be used to build a house or a prison. It can be used to warm your home or start a forest fire.

It is symbolic of raw potential, reminding me as a given soul and you as individual souls that each one of us is untapped potential, capable of either good or evil. Therefore, it behooves us to choose the sacred over the profane.

The point of this catalogue of my altar pieces is that everything – please understand me literally – everything can be a pointer toward the holy. Everything can be symbolic of something that is higher and pure and good in our lives.

What Is the Final Question?

Now the final question: Of all the things that have potential to point us toward the holy, is there *one* that is supreme? Is there one above all others? I would submit to you that there is. There is one thing in this world that is without parallel, without equal in the sense of pointing toward the holy.

What is it?

Your fellow human being. There is nothing else that walks the face of the earth that is explicitly created in the image and likeness of God. Nothing else. You want the best pointer? The best object for your altar is your neighbor, your friend, your enemy. The angry Muslim on the other side of the world. The person who may have Ebola in West Africa. Any person is the perfect pointer for the holy, made in the image of God.

So we don't need to butcher livestock. We don't need to sexualize it overtly either. We just need to look at our neighbor and remember that the atonement – the “at-one-ment” – is best found through your relationship with your neighbor.

Amen.