

Genesis 12:1-8

Second Sunday in Lent (Series A)

Lessons for the Day: Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 4:1-8, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Lord of My Life and God of My Salvation

March 8, 2020

“Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

An old legend about Zacchaeus, the little man who climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, says that in the days following Jesus' visit to his home, when he came to know the joy of the true life through faith in Jesus Christ, Zacchaeus would leave his home early each morning, without a word. After a while, his wife became curious, so one morning she followed him. At the town well she saw Zacchaeus fill a jug of water and carry it to the sycamore tree outside the town walls. He cleared away the rubbish and debris that had accumulated at the base of the tree. Then he poured the water from the jug on its roots. After this, he gently caressed the tree and stood there for a few moments as if he were reminiscing about something wonderful. At this point, his puzzled wife came out of hiding and asked, “Zacchaeus, what are you doing?” His simple answer: “my dear, this is the tree that enabled me to see Jesus.”

I don't know if this story has any truth behind it, but we do know from the biblical account that Zacchaeus was a different man because of his encounter with Jesus. He was changed by the grace of God at work in his life from being a cheat and swindler and became a generous philanthropist. I believe it is fair to assume that the man who was ready to give so much to others was a man who knew the importance—and the blessing—of living day by day in a special relationship with the Lord of his life and the God of his salvation.

We see that faith in Abraham, too. Every time we read Scripture, it is like a diamond, shining with many different facets. The facet that caught my attention this week was the fact that twice within this text we are told that Abram built an altar to the Lord. The experience of God's love and the assurance of His guidance and protection day by day moved Abraham to respond in worship and praise. His faith and his worship were not just a Sunday morning thing: Abraham was a man who knew the grace of God in all of life, and who responded to that grace day by day as he walked by faith with the Lord of his life and the God of his salvation.

Do we make room in our lives day by day for the Lord of our life? Do we rejoice day by day in the God of our salvation? Is God—and our worship of Him—a daily part of our life? It so often seems that we take our faith for granted, or that we only take it out to dust if off when we put on our Sunday clothes. But the rest of the week, in the midst of all the things that happen at work, at school, or wherever we may be, we often forget the God who is always with us, who always works in all things for our good. The God who has saved us by His grace is more often an afterthought than the centre of our lives. But the psalmist says to us: **“Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually! Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of Abraham, his servant, children of Jacob, his chosen ones!”** (Psalm 105:4-6, ESV) As the spiritual descendants of Abraham, we are called upon to remember the Lord, and like Abraham, to take our faith with us as we walk day by day with the Lord of our life and the God of our salvation.

There is nothing so beautiful as the heart that sees the power of God at work and which responds to God in praise and thanksgiving. That is the heart we see in Abraham. On four different occasions we are told that Abraham built an altar to worship God. But would we expect anything less from Abraham? After all, God spoke to Abraham! We don't know how—whether directly or in dreams and visions, but He definitely spoke to him. Once, God even appeared to Abraham in human form, to tell Abraham all that was going to happen to Sodom and Gomorrah. Not only did God talk with Abraham; He also made a covenant with Abraham: *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” God had big plans for Abraham, and made it very clear that He was with Abraham and would be with him wherever he would go. With that kind of presence of God in his life, it seems only natural that Abraham should build those altars and give thanks to the Lord of his life and the God of his salvation.

Abraham didn't build the altars to be monuments. They were acknowledgements of God's grace. In building the altars, Abraham took time to acknowledge and worship God. The word here that is translated “altar” means “a place for slaughter.” It deals with sacrifice. Yes, that is the way Abraham would have worshipped. He would have offered some sort of animal to the Lord, giving from his possessions to show his thanks and praise to God. In this way, he was declaring, as did the people of Israel after crossing the Red Sea: *“The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.”* (Exodus 15:2, ESV)

God called Abraham to leave everything behind, and to go where the Lord would lead him. Abraham was far from perfect, yet each step of the journey seems to give him reason to stop and worship God. He saw God's wonderful, gracious presence with him, and he simply had to give thanks to this great and wonderful God.

So, when was the last time that you built an altar to the Lord of your life? By that, I don't mean that you actually constructed some sort of table out of wood and stone. Rather, do you give more than a passing remembrance to the grace of God at work in your daily life? Do you treasure what it means that God so loved *you* that He gave His only Son to save you? Do you cherish the fact that you are a baptized child of God? Do we remember that we are not our own, we were bought with a price—the price of Christ's death for us?

There are times when we know, beyond all doubt, that we have every reason to give thanks to God. We may drop everything to acknowledge God's goodness in that moment when some great potential disaster has been averted, such as when we are driving down the Deerfoot and just miss being involved in a major accident. We may give thanks for a great miracle of healing—or for being spared from the coronavirus. Yet more often than not we go through the day with nothing more than a passing thought to God's grace at work for our good—if we even acknowledge Him at all. And yet the God of Abraham is the same Lord who walks with us wherever we go, so that our journey through life unfolds under the watchful eye of a loving Lord, who is at work in all things for the good of His beloved children. We seem to forget that it is by the grace of God that we have those days when life just seems to go on without a hitch. We forget God is with us when we get a good grade on a test, or when every light was green on our way to work on the morning we were running late. Do we remember His presence with us in that fun day we had with our family, or as the one helping us to get that work project finished on time? Unfortunately, we are more apt to criticize God for what we think He has not done than we are to acknowledge His gracious guidance day by day, moment by moment.

Abraham knew that it is only in and by God's grace that we even have each new day we enjoy. The Lord of our life is with us, ruling all things for our sake. Yes, that applies even to those things that we see as terrible burdens; even in those things we can't understand; even in those circumstances when we want to question why God allows these things to happen, He is still doing what is best for us. When we think of all that our God does do, we realize that we have every reason to give thanks and praise to Him whose loving presence is with us at every moment of our life.

But the greatest reason to rejoice in the Lord of our life is that He is the God of our salvation. Abraham built an altar that he might worship and praise God. His worship involved sacrifice—sacrifices that were reminders of sin and which offered various animals as substitutions for the people. The death of these animals was a reminder of how horrible sin is—and how great the cost of it is. But what sacrifice could Abraham—or any of us—ever offer that would be enough? As

the hymn says: *Not all the blood of beasts On Jewish altars slain Could give the guilty conscience peace Or wash away the stain.* (LSB 431, st. 1) But the God of our salvation shows His grace once again, as He gives us the perfect sacrifice; He gives us Himself in Jesus Christ. Jesus is offered, not on an altar, but on a cross, dying in the place of all sinners, including us, that we might have life in Him. His sacrifice, and His glorious victory over death assure us that God is concerned with more than just the things of this world; he has dealt with our eternal salvation as well.

Abraham built an altar to worship the God who was with him on his journey. He remembered to praise the God who had blessed him. He walked by faith with the God who had saved him from sin, death and hell. We have every reason to build our altar, too. As we go on our way through life, we will see with the eyes of faith, that our God is with us to guide us and bless us. In each remembrance of His blessings, we will find new and greater reasons to thank and praise the Lord of our life and God of our salvation. Amen.