

“Building an Altar”

Genesis 12: 1-9

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March 16, 2014

The first prayer I remember learning as a child was a traditional bedtime prayer:

*As I lay me down to sleep, I pray the lord my soul to keep.*

*If I die before I wake, I pray the lord my soul to take.*

When I was saying that prayer each night, I had no idea what the words meant. I remember asking my mom once and she told me it was about keeping me safe at night so that I could sleep with no worries. That was good enough for me, and for years, long after she finished tucking me in, I would say that same prayer. It is as embedded into me as saying “bless you” after someone sneezes is. Even now, as an adult, on nights when I am restless and can't fall asleep, part of my routine is to return to that prayer—calm my mind, and repeat the same words that have brought me comfort my entire life.

We have been a praying people for as long as there have been people. Long before Jesus lived, there was a man named Abraham who had a wife named Sarah. And before he was Abraham and she was Sarah, they were called Abram and Sarai. They were related to Noah, who we know from the Ark. Noah was the great great great great great great great great (8x) grandfather of Abram.

When Abram was 75 years old, which was young for those days, God sent Abram and Sarai away from their home, away from their families, and away from the only land they ever knew. God told Abram that they needed to leave, but if they did, God would bless Abram. God would bless him so much that he would become a blessing. His name would be a blessing, his life would be a blessing, and his family would be a blessing.

Who can tell me what a blessing is? It is a type of prayer. God made Abram's life a prayer. He sent him on a journey, and by following that journey, he became a prayer. All of his actions and words

became prayers. It didn't matter what he was doing! He could have been eating breakfast or scolding his son for teasing the camel or filling his canteen with water. Everything he did was an act of prayer.

Each time Abram reached a new place on his journey, Abram made an altar for God, and he prayed. He did this first in the land of Canaan, to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Morah. He stopped, he built an altar to God, and he prayed. He did this again when he set up his tent on the hill country, looking to Bethel in the west and Ai in the east. He built an altar, and he prayed. He took God's words seriously, and prayer became a central part of his life. It marked his travels, his family life, and even the way he ate. Abram embodied what it meant to be a blessing or a prayer. And he wasn't the only one!

When Abram became known as Abraham, he became the father of many nations: so many nations that we sing the song *father Abraham had many sons, many sons had father Abraham ... I am one of them, and so are you...* God said he would make all of Abraham's descendents blessings, so if I am one of them, and so are you... our lives are a blessing. They are a prayer. Everything we do becomes a kind of prayer. Each of us is a prayer. Which makes everything we do a prayer.

We talk about praying, but have you ever thought of your entire life as a prayer? It really breaks down the idea that there are sacred things and secular things or there is the churchy part of our life and the regular part of our life. If our life is a prayer, everything is sacred. Everything infused with the spiritual. Instead of being ashamed of things you have done or feeling like parts of you aren't good enough, you can begin to understand them as a cry for help or a prayer of confession. Everything becomes a blessing in disguise.

For the last few weeks, both in worship and in Church School, we have been talking about what it means to be in the season of Lent, and prayer is a big part of that. It makes sense that if our lives are a prayer from God, we would need a season to steep ourselves in what prayer means and how we can embody that idea of being a prayer or a blessing from God. In Lent, we look beyond ourselves. We uncurl our spines and open ourselves to the world around us: we look up and examine our relationships,

we study the ways we impact people and the environment around us. And we try to make those relationships and that impact more loving and more sacred—we try to make our words and our actions more prayer-like.

The season of Lent is a prayer of confession over any harm that we have caused. It is a prayer that asks for forgiveness for the injustice we have ignored. We ask for help to start anew, to find ways to make the prayer of our lives echo louder. We keep coming back to this season, to this idea of starting again, for the same reason that we return to those prayers we love again and again.

Just as I did as a child, we return to familiar prayers to carry us through tough moments or to ground ourselves once again. I believe that the prayers we repeat are partly about the meaning in the words, and partly about the familiarity of the ritual of saying them. When a prayer is familiar, there is a rhythm in speaking it that takes the prayer to a deeper level. The rhythm helps us join in familiar prayers, the cadence calling us and inviting us to respond before we even know we are praying. Some of you might know this one:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*The courage to change the things I can,*

*And wisdom to know the difference.*

The words carry meaning, but the rhythm is what enables us to join in and keeps drawing us back. It is what turns our familiar prayers into poetry and music. The rhythm of those repeated prayers are the rhythms of the season we experience in our life as prayer—Lent being the time when begin our prayer again, creating a new rhythm for the next year.

Along with much of Glastonbury, I saw the high school's amazing production of Les Misérables. Throughout the story, I kept seeing the prayers that were woven into the story. The prayer of lament from Fantine in “I Dreamed A Dream” or the prayer of longing from Eponine in “On My Own.” The crowd of Parisians rising up in the chorus of “Do You Hear The People Sing?” is right out of the books of the prophets with its condemning the government and demands for justice for the poor.

The character of Jean Valjean in particular struck me as someone whose life was so obviously a prayer and a blessing. After he has been ostracized and beaten and labeled as a violent criminal, Jean Valjean finds refuge with a bishop for the night. After the bishop goes to bed, Jean Valjean steals the silver in the house and leaves. He is caught by the police and returned to the bishop to pay for his crimes. However, the bishop protects Jean Valjean. He says that he gave him that silver and adds, “I’m so glad you returned sir! You forgot these candle sticks!”

The bishop shows Jean Valjean a moment of kindness when he is at his darkest, and in doing so, claims his life for God. He reminds him that his life is a prayer or a blessing and he should live it as such. It awakens the goodness in him and taps into his ability to love and nurture others once again. His life becomes a prayer of repentance and gratitude as he strives to live honorably. He keeps the candlesticks with him, and sets them up in each place that he lives. Just as Abraham built an altar to God in every place that he rested, those candlesticks became Jean Valjean's altar. They became the marker and reminder that his life belonged to God and as such, was a blessing.

Altars are the things that we set up to remind us of God's presence. They ground us and move us back into sync with our place. They are a focal point. They are the visual reminder that our life is a prayer and as such, God should be at the center of our lives. Jean Valjean's altar was a pair of candlesticks, but for others it might be a photo or a pile of stones, a copy of a favorite poem or a dried sprig of flowers. It is whatever reminds us of the sacredness of our lives and points us to being a blessing.

Because we are talking about prayer today, I would like us to end with a prayer. We will say together Psalm 121, the same one we heard earlier. This time, as we say it in unison, I would invite you to take note of what you notice: is it the words or the rhythm, does it draw you closer to God or remind you of the blessings in your own life? Let us turn in our pew Bibles and pray together:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?*

*My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

*He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.*

*He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

*The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*

*The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.*

*The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*