

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5th Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

Duane M. Harris

February 5, 2017

Text: Psalm 84:1-4/Psalm 112

Title: “Fresh Start: Overcoming SAD—Spiritual Affective Disorder. Altars, Altars, Everywhere!”

I’m sure you’ve noticed them as I have. Drive down the highway or any road and you’ll come across them from time to time. People erect them across the country, sometimes in other countries too. In Greece people do a similar thing, only theirs are a bit more permanent and expensive, and when people visit them they leave little tokens. I’m talking about the memorials alongside the road that people create at the place someone has died in an accident. They become sacred ground for those who have lost loved ones there and so crosses and flowers mark the locations in which those loved ones moved from this life to the next. For those who create them they are reminders of someone loved. Maybe you or someone you know has created one.

In the same way, the Bible mentions over and over again that people marked encounters with God by building an altar. When the flood subsides, Noah builds an altar to God and offers sacrifices in honor of God. It’s then that God makes the promise:

“I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, . . . nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease” (Genesis 8:20-22).

When Abram leaves his home town and travels in response to God’s call and he comes to Canaan, the land God promises, he builds an altar to remember where he experienced the presence of God. He moves on from there to the east of Bethel and he builds an altar there, again as a place of prayer in which he remembers an encounter with God. All along the way, Abram builds altars as places of worship, places to remember the loved One (Genesis 12, 13, 22). After Jacob had his dream of angels moving up and down the ladder to heaven and heard the voice of God, he set up a stone in that place—an altar—to remember that encounter (Genesis 28:18).

Moses, too, as he led the Hebrew people in the wilderness, erected an altar after he delivered the 10 commandments to the people at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 24:4). Altars are places to remember an experience of God and places to which to return to experience the presence of God all over again.

Because places of encountering God are important in the spiritual lives of the people, the psalmist longs to live in God’s house where even the birds of the air lay their eggs and raise their

young at God's altars. It's a place in which the vulnerable are protected and raised. It's a place to sing along with the birds, a place in which to be happy because God lives there. I imagine the psalmist feeling somewhat like a child going to her grandmother's home, a place of love and protection and joy! It's a place he can't wait to get to, a place if he can't get to, he desperately wants to be there.

2 My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
4 Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

Psalm 112, too, claims that those who hold God in awe, reverence and profound respect are happy. They also

...rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
7 They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.
8 Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

There is something different about those who have a genuine encounter with the Lord. Such people know for a fact that the Lord can be trusted as a result of those encounters and that leaves them with a profound sense of gratitude and a desire to be with God again, to live with God in God's proverbial house.

I love the way children in their concrete thinking stage describe God's house:

An 8 year old named Ethan said, "God doesn't have a house. He doesn't need one except on Sundays 'cause that's the day he likes to rest."

A boy named Larry prayed, "Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel wouldn't kill each other if they each had their own rooms. That works with me and my brother."

While a girl named Barbara prayed, "Dear God, if you watch in Church on Sunday I'll show you my new shoes."

I'll never forget going to one of God's houses in Israel. Everywhere you go in Israel, it seems one Christian group or another has erected a church to remember an encounter with Jesus. The one I remember most, though, is just a short bus ride from Jerusalem through the Kidron Valley to the foot of the Mt. of Olives where you come to the Garden of Gethsemane. In the fenced outer garden there are 8 olive trees which some botanists claim are 3,000 years old. Others think if they are not contemporaries of Jesus, they have at least grown from the shoots of the trees under which Jesus prayed that night.

The Church of the Agony stands there. The fenced garden surrounds the building that was constructed during the years 1919-24 with the contributions of sixteen nations and so it's also known as The Church of All Nations. Just in front of the altar in the sanctuary lies the rock on which tradition claims Jesus prayed the night he was to be arrested.

The church was built with the vision of providing a sense of nightfall. The sanctuary, colored by the sun faintly filtering through thick, midnight-blue glass, gives any pilgrim a sense of night. A series of cupolas, painted bluish purple and spattered with stars create the illusion of a wonderful, clear night. The rock before the altar is dimly lit as if by moonlight. Kneeling pads are on the floor in front of a short rail built around the rock and provide a place to spend time on one's knees as if kneeling beside Jesus.

Entering this sanctuary through the heavy wooden doors from the light of day, it takes a few moments to adjust not only the eyes but the spirit. It's quiet there. There are people all around. But still, it's quiet. People sitting in the pews. Some with heads bowed in the darkness. Others staring at the rock. A nun in traditional dress of a habit kneeled at the altar rail, hands folded, head down. Others kneeled too with the casual wear of tourists: windbreakers, tennis shoes, some with their hats removed as they kneeled there.

I did not feel compelled to kneel at the altar rail, nor sit in a pew, but of all the holy sites in Israel, this one alone moved me to tears. Not the overflowing, running-down-the-cheeks kind of weeping, but the kind which fills the eyes because of some deeply felt gratitude. From observing people in the room, it is safe to say that others shared my experience of this place. We were standing on holy ground, whether or not this was the precise location of Jesus' wrestling that night.

I have since wondered to myself and with others what it was about that place that moved me so. Why did my eyes fill and my heart swell there and not on the Sea of Galilee as the story of the calming of the storm was read. Why not at the Holy Sepulcher, the place tradition says is the location of the tomb? Why not at the Mt. of Beatitudes at which the Sermon on the Mount is remembered? Why not other altars built to remember encounters with the Spirit? Why here?

I suppose it is a subjective experience. For some who have traveled to the Holy Land, other places have brought a deeply felt movement of the Spirit. A friend of mine said for him it was the Church of the Nativity. Still others mentioned the Garden Tomb as the location of a notable moment for them in which the Spirit overwhelmed them.

It struck me, though, as I stood there in the darkness that the event memorialized here was the apex of Jesus' ministry. His wrestling in the Garden was a final wilderness temptation in which he struggled with a decision, the decision between self-preservation on the one hand and suffering an excruciating death on the other, the decision between following his own instinctual urge to avoid suffering and his understanding of what he needed to do. So great was the struggle for him that Mark says he told his disciples, "I am grieved unto death". Some scholars suggest this phrase could be translated, "I am grieved so great that it almost crushes me", or "I am grieved so that I would rather be dead." The Agony seems an appropriate name for the memorial of Jesus' struggle.

In 1988 a book entitled, The Power of Myth, was published. The book is basically a transcript of a dialogue televised on PBS between Joseph Campbell, a well-known authority and professor of comparative mythology at Sarah Lawrence College, and Bill Moyers, a journalist and Baptist pastor who also served the Johnson administration as press secretary for 2 years. At some point in their conversation, Moyers asked Campbell about the phenomenon of a parent

giving his or her life for a child. I'd like to share a part of the conversation.

Campbell: There is a magnificent essay by Schopenhauer in which he asks, how is it that a human being can so participate in the peril or pain of another that without thought, . . . he sacrifices his own life to the other? How can it happen that what we normally think of as the first law of nature and self-preservation is suddenly dissolved?

In Hawaii. . . one day, two policemen were driving up the Pali road, [a place to which many go to jump off the mountain ridge and commit suicide], when they saw-- just beyond the railing that keeps the cars from rolling over-- a young man preparing to jump. The police car stopped, and the policeman on the right jumped out to grab the man but caught him just as he jumped, and he was himself being pulled over when the second cop arrived in time and pulled the two of them back.

Do you realize what had suddenly happened to that policeman who had given himself to death with that unknown youth? Everything else in his life had dropped off--his duty to his family, . . .to his job, . . .to his own life--all of his wishes and hopes for his lifetime had just disappeared. He was about to die.

Later, a newspaper reporter asked him, "Why didn't you let go? You would have been killed." And his reported answer was, "I couldn't let go. If I had let that young man go, I couldn't have lived another day of my life." How come?

Schopenhauer's answer is that such a psychological crisis represents a breakthrough of a . . .[deeper] realization, which is that you and that other are one, . . .Our true reality is in our identity and unity with all of life.

. . .[And] The concept of love your neighbor is to put you in tune with this fact. But whether you love your neighbor or not, when the realization grabs you, you may risk your life. That Hawaiian policeman didn't know who the young man was to whom he had given himself. Schopenhauer declares that in small ways you can see this happening every day, all the time, moving life in the world, people doing selfless things to and for each other.

Moyer: So when Jesus says, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," he is saying in effect, "Love thy neighbor because he is yourself."

(The Power of Myth, pp. 110-111)

The moment in the Church of the Agony moved me because here the moment was remembered, the moment in which Jesus made the agonizing decision to give his life as an expression of the truth Campbell articulates: that is, that you and the other are one. We are all at the deepest level connected to one another. Maybe that's why we find ourselves tearing up at movies like "It's a wonderful life," in which people willingly sacrifice for another, or maybe it comes when an unexpected, unsolicited act of kindness is expressed.

Standing there in the darkness with the bowed nun and the pew sitters, staring at the dimly lit rock which was now an altar, somehow I was more deeply aware that Christ did die out of love for me, for you, for all humankind.

Your Spiritual Homework this week is an invitation to create an altar space in your home. You'll find some suggestions there for identifying a place that you and your family can mark as a place of prayer, a place to spend intentional time with God, a place to remember that you are God's loved child.