

“Building an Altar to the Lord”

Imagine if you will that you have just moved to a new house. All the preparations of selling the old house, the packing up of possessions, the parting of those possessions which were part of the ‘downsizing’ mode, and the painting and cleaning of preparing the new house for habitation have been completed. You have all the kitchen cupboards and drawers all organized. The TV room has all the wires connected to make the entertainment center really perform at its best, and all the video games are neatly shelved along the DVDs. Your computer has its own place, rather than sharing a spot on the dining room table, and the family pet has its own pad. Life is good. Sit back and enjoy living in your new house.

Then, you come face to face with the Lord, who tells you, “Get up and leave this place. Pack up and start traveling. I’ll tell you where you are going once you get there.”

Does that sound a little unnerving? After all, you have just moved into your new home, surrounded by family and friends, and have all your possessions neatly put in their proper place, including the shop tools in your workroom, your arts and crafts in the spare room, and all you Legos sorted and organized, then then Lord comes and tells you to pack it all up and move. Today!

“But I just got here! And now you want me to move again?”

It’s not the first time that the moving truck unloaded its cargo and was parked by the same dwelling a few days later, ready to haul its owner’s possessions to a new place. Abram had just moved from Ur of the Chaldees and settled in Haran, a city where his relatives were also living.

Now, God tells Abram, “Pack up! Move! Now! Leave your country, and your people, and the house of your father, and go to that land that I will show you.” Notice how the circle of closeness shrinks: from country to people to family. Leave all these.

God had moved Abram to of Ur of the Chaldees because that country was idolatrous. They worshipped idols. Recall that in the previous chapter, there was the story of the Tower of Babel, and people wanted to make a name for themselves by building a tower into heaven. God viewed their feeble attempt, made judgment, and scrambled their language. That's in Genesis 11. The second half of that chapter describes Abram's family tree. Chapter 12 begins the personal account of Abram and how God literally changed his life.

God could see the danger to Abram and his faith should he remain in this pagan country of Ur of the Chaldees. Abram had gotten as far as Haran, but that wasn't far enough from that pagan land. It was on the wrong side of the Euphrates River—or, as we would say, on the wrong side of the tracks! God would move him farther away.

Leave your country, your people, your father's house. Haran was not the destination where God wanted Abram to live. His people would only surround him with the influences of idolatry, and his own family, especially his nephew Lot, would cause Abram all sorts of grief. Leave them all, God said, and "I'll show you later where you will be. If I told you where you were going now, it would only give your relatives a forwarding address and they'll come and visit you and make your life unpleasant. Trust me!"

God knew that Abram needed more. In the second verse of our text, God blesses Abram sevenfold. Typical of the way God communicates His blessings, and in the style of the Hebrew poetic form, the most important blessing is the center one.

1. I will make you into a great nation.
2. I will bless you.
3. I will make your name great (notice the contrast from the Tower of Babel incident!)
4. Here, is the central blessing, an imperative: Be a blessing!
5. I, the Lord, will bless the ones blessing you,
6. I, the Lord, will curse the ones cursing you.
7. Through you all the people of the earth will be blessed.

That's the sevenfold blessing given Abram as he is told to set out and leave his land, his people, and his family.

And Abram did. As the book of Hebrews recounts, **“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land”** (Hebrews 11:8-9).

Joshua 24:2-3: **“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many.’”**

It was by the promise God personally made to Abram that he started walking. Imagine being given the promise of God today. Would you be able and willing to start walking where God would lead you? Consider where you are in this stage of life. Consider where this Congregation, St. John's Lutheran Church and School, is as we look into the future. We have no clue as to how this year will turn out, much less the next month. We live by faith, trusting that God would provide for His Church, knowing that He sees our future as a congregation, as well as individuals. Will God bless us as He did Abram?

We may not have flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle as Abram did. We measure wealth in a different way than the days of the patriarchs. We measure our worth in dollars, but our wealth in people. But it takes dollars to keep our operations going. Our congregation meets for our Voters meeting on Tuesday, March 21. At that meeting we will hear the status of our membership and the accounting of our finances. It's a tough job, but as we tend to the work and ministry of St. John's, we use these tools to assess our being a Church that is called to make disciples of all nations. If we spend more money than we take in, somewhere along the line something will cave in. We have made drastic cuts in the past year, and we have made gradual decreases which have hampered our operations as what we had 10-15 years ago.

Abram had to look at how he was prospering and at the same time move according to what God was telling him. Could he prosper where the Lord was leading him? He could only trust that God would deliver on His promises to bless him sevenfold.

We also have to look at how we have been prospering and at the same time move according what God is telling us. Can we prosper where the Lord is leading us? We can only trust that God would deliver on His promises to His Church as He would bless His church seventy times seven fold.

How have we been prospering? Can we count the sheep and goats and cattle as Abram did? While our worth is calculated in how much was received in dollars and cents, we look more at the worth of souls that come to worship. We look at those who assist with the work and ministry of making disciples and telling them the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. We recognize the faithful work of Christ's servants who work daily, weekly, and regularly in carrying out the tasks and mission of baptizing and teaching all nations, beginning with the nation at the corner of Kingsbury and Monroe.

Jesus and Nicodemus met in the shadows of night. Jesus would share with him the blessings of being born from above. God would deliver Abram from a pagan land and bring him to the Promised Land. The Apostle Paul was converted from persecutor to proclaimer on the road to Damascus, and after his personal time of instruction with our Lord, would see how Jesus had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. This is the content of the Old Testament which Paul had known so well but failed to see the key to understanding the Scripture in Jesus. Now he sees that key that unlocks the mysteries of God in a saving way, pointing to faith in Christ and how that faith brings the righteousness of God.

How much money would you spend to gain the righteousness of God? How much of your bank account and stock portfolio would you need to cash in to have peace with God? How much does God require? How many of your sheep and goats and cattle would you have to sell in order to make full payment for what you owe God for His salvation? Sadly, we don't have enough animals to sell in order to make any payment for

the debt we owe. There's not enough money in the bank or gold in Ft. Knox to pay the debt of our sins.

But God took care of the payment. How did He do it? Like Abram, God built an altar. Abram built an altar and called on the name of the Lord. Instead of pagan worship in the Ur of the Chaldees, Abram feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things. God would build the altar of the Cross upon which the payment for our sins would be made. And He would lift up His only Son on that cross, so that those who believe in Him would not perish and die eternally, but would be saved and have eternal life.

Nicodemus needed answers. Jesus came to him in his darkness and he was filled with grace and knowledge in what God would offer through Jesus. Abram needed deliverance. God came to him in his need, showed him the path, the escape, from the idolatrous ways of his life, and brought him not only to a promised land, but gave him promises that continue to be fulfilled today.

You, also, need answers. You also need deliverance. In Christ, you receive that deliverance. You are blessed with answers that give direction to your life. The Church, this congregation, needs answers and deliverance. God blesses us with Word and Sacrament to deliver and guide us into righteous living. God built the altar where He meets you with His love, His forgiveness, His faithfulness, and gives you the deliverance, peace, and blessings He knows you need to be a blessing to others.

When we think of our stewardship, including what we would bring to God in our offerings, it's not a question of how much of my money do I bring back to God. Rather, it's how much of God's money do I dare keep for myself. When needs of the Church are before us, and we cringe to think that our percentage of giving is far less than the tithe that Abram offered God, we are struck with fear. Satan loves that. But like Nicodemus who gathered his courage and like Abram who faithfully followed God, we would be blessed, blessed in ways that cannot be counted by sheep and goats and cattle and money. We would be blessed in knowing that others would come to faith by believing in Jesus Christ.

It's more than just money. It's time. It's abilities. It's our talents and skills. Pray about how you can leave your country, your family, and your home and make disciples of all nations. Oh, it's not a physical move of packing up your belongings and selling your house. It's walking in the path of righteousness as did Abram and telling others of the joy of knowing Jesus as Nicodemus.

God challenges us to get up and follow Him. We leave the simple things on earth which only entrap us, and use His gifts, His blessings, to be a blessing to others. That central blessing given Abram is applied to us also. **“Be a blessing.”** Walk as a steward, a caretaker, of the things God has given you.

As we continue our Lenten journey, we are mindful of the great sacrifice which God made for you and me. It cost God the life of His one and only Son, that those who believe in Him for deliverance will not perish but will have eternal life. Our response to God's great love is seen in what we do with His greatest gift, the gift of the Gospel.

We also count the cost of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ in the Church today, and as a member here at St. John's. **“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.”** Leave the old ways and habits that entrap and chain you to your false gods. Walk in faith to where God leads you as a faithful disciple. Receive the faith as Abram did. Be granted wisdom as you manage all of God's gifts in faithful stewardship.

As Abram did, so may we. May we build an altar and offer to God our sacrifices of love for those who need God's love so they may believe in Jesus Christ and not perish but have eternal life. Amen.