

One of the things I love about Scripture is that it opens up for us over time as we become open to it. The words on the page remain the same. The stories remain the same. Yet somehow different things catch our attention at different moments in our lives.

Lately, we've been spending time in Genesis during our Brown Bag Bible Study. We've talked about creation, blessing, covenant, family, and promise. We've followed Abraham and Sarah on their journey. We've wrestled with their faithfulness and their failures.

Yet somehow, I missed something. The altars.

Altars, like the one mentioned in today's scripture passage. They were there all along. They are tucked between the larger stories, easy to pass on by. Abraham arrives somewhere. God speaks. Abraham builds an altar. Later, another altar. Then another. But until this week, I hadn't paid much attention to them.

Now I can't stop seeing them. It's like when you buy a new car. All of a sudden you see that model everywhere!

So, I started wondering why Abraham kept piling up stones throughout his journey. Maybe he understood something about the human heart. Our memories are fragile, and we tend to forget over time what once seemed clear. We need reminders of who we are and where we've been. Perhaps Abraham knew he'd need to look back and remember where he encountered God.

After all, we do much the same thing, don't we? We place monuments in historical places. We save photographs. We keep old letters. We celebrate anniversaries. We visit the final resting places of our loved ones. We tell family stories that everyone already knows by heart. Sometimes we drive past a place where we once lived, a school we attended, or a church where we worshiped years ago, and suddenly we are gifted with a memory. And we hold onto these things because they help us remember. They become markers in the landscape of our lives. They remind us of moments we do not want to lose, moments that shaped us, challenged us, sustained us, or changed us.

Abraham's altars served a similar purpose. I wonder if years later, passing by one of those piles of stones, he would stop and remember. "Ah, yes. That was the place." The place where fear gave way to trust. The place where a promise seemed possible. The place where he knew, if only for a moment, that he was not walking alone.

Our psalm tells us, *"The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord."*

The Hebrew word is *hesed* – steadfast love, faithful love, covenantal love. *Hesed* is the love that keeps showing up. The love that refuses to let go.

What strikes me is that the psalm does not say that a few special places are filled with God's love. It says the earth is full of it. Not just temples. Not just churches. Not just mountaintops and holy places. *"The earth is full of the steadfast love of God."*

The earth is full of God's faithful love. Full of it. The real challenge we face is not that God is absent from our world, but that we often forget or fail to notice this ever-present love. These markers—in our stories and our memories—help us remember God's love along our journey of faith.

So I think it's a good thing that we're going to spend quite a bit of time in Matthew over these weeks after Pentecost. This Gospel returns over and over to questions of discipleship, community, and what it means to live as citizens of God's Kingdom. The author seems especially interested in the ways God's presence shows up in ordinary lives and unexpected places. In short, Matthew teaches us how to notice.

That brings us to the tax booth.

We know how tax collectors were viewed in Jesus' day: collaborators with the empire, outsiders to their kin, people whose work put them at odds with their community. Beneath that is a simple reality: Matthew sits alone at his booth—a place of transactions, accounting, systems and surety. It is also a place of separation.

Then Jesus sees him.

What fascinates me about this story is how little Matthew tells us. He offers no explanation or dramatic conversion—just: *"Jesus saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him."*

Clearly, for Jesus, this is not about Matthew having to explain himself. Jesus already knows. For us though, maybe this tax collector's story is about what happens when someone realizes they have been seen. Seen not as a profession. Not as a reputation. Not as a category. But seen as one of God's beloved.

I find myself wondering if Jesus is not simply calling Matthew away from something. It feels like Jesus is calling him back toward something. Back toward community. Back toward relationship. Back toward the person God created him to be.

And then something takes place that we might overlook: Matthew's first response is to set a table and gather people for a meal.

The more we think about this, the more beautiful it becomes. Abraham encounters God's *hesed* and leaves stones as markers. Matthew encounters God's *hesed* and leaves a table—a gathering, a place of belonging and restored relationships. This table is a new kind of marker: not a monument on the landscape, but a relationship to enter—a marker on the landscape of the heart.

Once I started seeing those markers in the landscape, I saw them everywhere in the Gospel.

A woman who has suffered for twelve years reaches out and touches the fringe of Jesus' cloak. A father comes pleading for his daughter. A child is restored to life. At first glance, these

are stories about healing, and they are. But perhaps they are also stories about what God's faithful love leaves behind.

The woman's restoration to herself as a daughter of her community becomes a marker in the landscape of suffering. The father's faith becomes a marker in the landscape of grief. A child's life becomes a marker in the landscape of despair. Their lives bear witness to God's restoring love. Their lives point beyond themselves to something larger. They are remembered because they encountered God's *hesed*, and they were changed.

And, for us, there are seasons in our lives when markers matter. Seasons when we need reminders. Seasons when we need to remember where we have encountered God's faithful love. Moments when, looking back across the landscape of our lives, we can say, "Ah, yes. That was the place."

The place where you found courage.

The place where forgiveness became possible.

The place where you realized you were not alone.

*"The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord."*

The psalmist does not say it once was or will be someday. The psalmist says it is true right now.

The earth is full of God's *hesed* right now.

So perhaps this week, before rushing on to whatever comes next, why not take a moment to look back across the landscape of your life? Notice the stones. Notice the gathering tables. Notice the stories. Notice the places where something holy happened, even if you did not recognize it at the time. And if you look carefully, you may find what Abraham found, what Matthew found, and what generations of faithful people have found before us: *the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord*.

Amen.