

“The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity”¹
Exodus 16:13-15, Matthew 6:25-33
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 11, 2007

“What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, not to be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.” (Matthew 6:30-32, The Message)

Once upon a time there was a God who was incredibly generous. All this God seemed to be able to do was to give of the love that so completely filled his heart. When this God looked around and saw that there was nothing but a big, dark, empty, chaotic void, he responded with a liturgy of abundance. The words that poured forth from his heart shattered the darkness and brought forth light. Then in the middle of all that light, this God used that same liturgy to create a world. It was a world that was filled with goodness and beauty aplenty. But a good world was simply not enough for this generous God. There was still such an abundance of love in his heart that he could do nothing but give. So the liturgy continued. This God covered the ground with plants and trees that were laden with vegetables and fruit. This God filled the seas and the sky with life, created creatures to roam all over the dry land, and then said to everything that had been created, “Be fruitful and multiply!” The earth was now teeming with life. But this God was not finished. This very generous God fashioned even more life, this time making human life in his very own image, male and female were they made, and then he said, “To you I give everything that I have created.” The earth was now filled with divine abundance. As a matter of fact, this God created so much that after six days he decided there was time for him to sit down and rest so that his creative juices could be renewed. And that is when this amazing God looked around and saw that everything was good, very good.

But as you can imagine, that would not be, that could not be, the end of the story, for the heart of this God was still filled with so much love. So he started looking for other

¹ The title of this sermon, as well as some of the terms and ideas expressed within, come from an article of the same name by Walter Brueggemann that appeared in The Christian Century, March 24-31, 1999

ways to pour out the divine abundance. After studying the situation for a while, this God decided to center the divine effort on an aging couple named Abraham and Sarah in a far off land known as Ur. In an outstanding display of generosity, the liturgy of abundance promised that their descendants would one day be as numerous as the sands on the seashore or the stars in the sky. This was quite amazing as this particular couple had spent the good part of their lives focusing all their energy on their careers in animal husbandry, and their biological clocks had stopped ticking long ago! But not even that little detail could stop this generous God from pouring out the divine abundance upon them. For the next several generations this family received an extra measure of the love that poured out of God's heart. Even when one of that couple's great grandsons tried to corner the market on that abundance and dole out things the way he saw fit, this generous God continued to give.

Now let me take a moment and tell you that there are some much wiser than me who believe that it is at this point that the myth of scarcity entered the story. This is a myth that is so incredibly dangerous. The myth of scarcity was fashioned by those God himself had created and, in opposition to their creator, says that there is never enough. It is a myth that encourages taking rather than giving, a myth that limits one's perception of the world, a myth that tends to make men and women greedy, self-centered, and downright unneighborly. It is the great rival of God's liturgy of abundance, one that this generous God constantly has to battle. Yet while it may keep some from sharing the abundance they were given so freely, it did not stop this most amazing God from doing the same. And it is with that in mind that we return to the story.

Pharaoh, you may remember, bought into the myth of scarcity and, along with Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson Joseph, monopolized much of what God had given. Yet this generous and resourceful God used that very monopoly to continue the liturgy of abundance. As a result, the children of the promise multiplied so quickly that a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph tried to control by making them captives. Yet as one has written, that particular Pharaoh soon discovered that "the power of the future is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources; it is in the

hands of those who trust God's abundance."² Those who were generous with all that they had been given were those who would be the frontrunners of life. When this miserly old Pharaoh finally discovered that he could no longer fight the generosity of God, he told Moses, "Take your people and get out of here!" And with the words they had been waiting to hear echoing in their hearts, the people set out for a place that was said to be absolutely flowing with milk and honey.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the Promised Land. With the people now wandering out and about in a very forbidding wilderness, they began to worry. They began to be anxious. The myth of scarcity had taken root among them. They asked one another, "Should we really have left the land in which we were slaves? Is there enough for us to survive on our own? What are we going to do? How are we going to live out here with so little?" These were troublesome questions. Yet in response to their worry, the liturgy of abundance continued. One morning they awoke to find the ground covered with something they had never seen. "*Man huh?*" they asked. "*What is it?*" What it was was exactly what they needed. It was another free gift from the God who had always and forever provided for the needs of those he loved. As a matter of fact, every morning they awoke to find that once again their daily bread had been given to them. They were afforded exactly what they needed to survive. But what happened? The myth of scarcity once again raised its ugly head. They tried to hoard their daily bread. They tried to collect more than they needed and save it for the next day. Yet every time they did so, every time they tried to take matters into their own hands, they failed. The bread they were given would rot, and would become a breeding ground for worms and maggots. It was almost as if their most gracious God was trying to say to them, "Trust me. Let me give you what you need." It was and it has always been a hard lesson to learn. As a matter of fact, it was not just the people of the promise who had trouble learning it. To this very day the struggle between the liturgy of abundance and the myth of scarcity continues all over and across this world that God has created.

² Ibid.

Many people, maybe even some of those in this room this morning, have accepted the myth of scarcity as fact. As a result they constantly want more, not necessarily because they are bad people, but simply because they don't ever want to be caught without "enough." And while that is completely understandable, especially in this economy, there is one basic problem. No one has ever actually defined what "enough" really is. As a matter of fact, "enough" seems to be a very elusive figure, an amount that no one ever seems to reach no matter how much they acquire, and which causes those who chase after it to become worried, anxious, and fearful. The myth of scarcity has overwhelmed them, touching everything that they do. And when that happens they find themselves far removed from the very basics of life, basics that were woven into the very fabric of God's good creation.

And that is why our amazingly generous God refused to let "Once upon a time" be the end of the story. The liturgy of abundance continued in a very personal way, and this time it was enfolded in a manner that everyone could understand. The liturgy came first to the descendants of old Abraham and Sarah, the children of those who had quite literally been given their daily bread, the people of the promise. The word walked around and about the countryside, teaching and preaching with such presence and authority that great crowds gathered that were eager to hear what he had to say. One day he sat on a hill and began to teach. He laid out a "new" way of living, one that had actually been around since the very beginning but had long since been forgotten, one that said that it was better to give than to receive, one that said that the true measure of life is not decided by the accumulation of stuff, and one that proclaimed that the abundance of God's love could change the world as everyone knew it. The people, eager for good news, hung on his every word.

As he neared the end of this particular time of teaching, he turned his attention to the fallacy of the myth of scarcity. "Don't fret over your life," he said, "constantly worrying over whether or not you'll have enough of this or that to get by. Haven't you looked up in the sky and seen the birds? They don't work themselves into a frenzy trying to save up enough to be get by—whatever "enough" might be. Yet they always seem to

have enough to eat, don't they? Also please notice how good they look. Robin Redbreast and his family don't run around to the stores looking for all the latest fashions. Neither do all of the beautiful flowers out in the fields. Yet they have found that God's abundance has always been enough, and they're more beautiful than King Solomon in all of his pomp and circumstance ever hoped to be. And what about you? You're the crowning achievement of our Father's good creation, you know: the top of the line, the best of the best, those who were fashioned in the very image of our gracious Creator. Don't you know that you are far more valuable than the birds or the flowers? Don't you think that the liturgy of abundance is for you?" The crowd let those words roll around their collective soul and smiled.

Then the very embodiment of the liturgy of abundance continued. "Listen, you of little faith. Don't you remember why I like to refer to you as 'those of little faith,' how with it in your possession mountains can be moved and trees uprooted, how the great storms of life can be calmed, how just 'a little dab'll do ya?' The God of all creation, who knit you together in your mother's womb, loves you with a love that is far beyond measure. So don't worry about what you should eat or drink or wear. That's the myth of scarcity talking, that's the myth the children of the darkness believe, that's the myth that was discredited so very long ago. Oh, work hard, do your job, but remember that our gracious God is already at work in and for you. Here's what I want you to do: put all of your trust, place all of your confidence, bet the entire house, on the generosity of God, and when you do, everything else will take care of itself."

Of course, that's easier said and done. It is difficult not just for those people who were sitting on that hill, but also for those people who are sitting in this room. It is hard to trust, especially when the world around you is shouting, "You don't have enough!" Yet the God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Gideon and Deborah, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who lavished his riches upon us, even going so far as allowing his only Son to be nailed upon that old rugged cross to prove the abundance of love that filled his heart, has more than enough to spare. And when we place our confidence in love, we become a part of the liturgy of abundance. As

you come forward this morning to lay your 2008 pledge card on the altar in an act of faith and dedication, I do hope that you will remember that “seeking first the kingdom of God” is the best investment that you can ever make.