

The Litigation of Scarcity

Walter Brueggemann
Traverse City, Michigan

The biblical claim of “abundance” is a hard sell in a world that is frightened, insecure, prone to hoarding, and alarmed about running out. The fact that it is a hard sell requires us to think well about how we are now to factor out that claim in our practice and in our preaching.

I. The Deep Claim

The Bible makes the deep, pervasive, and defining claim that life in God’s creation is life that can be lived, a life that can be received and enjoyed in glad abundance. That claim, first, is rooted in the conviction that the God of the Gospel is the creator God who holds the whole world in God’s own hand and wills abundance for all creatures. That claim, second, is grounded in the derivative conviction that God has ordered it to be a gift that keeps on giving. The earth is watered, “giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater” (Isaiah 55:10).

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever. He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.” (II Cor. 9:8-10)

This deep claim stretches from its beginning in the initial authorization and empowerment of creation by the creator:

Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it. . . . Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth. . . . I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. (Genesis 1:22, 22, 29-30)

The claim reaches all the way to the identification of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sake of the sheep: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Thus we may consider the entire sweep of the gospel drama—from creation to the specificity of God in Jesus—to be a drama of generous, life-sustaining abundance.

More concretely we might recognize that this sweeping drama of abundance is given narrative specificity in *two great moments of abundance* that, in both instances, contradict the facts on the ground in an exhibit of the creator’s capacity to refuse the

killing scarcity that is so evident all around.

In the Old Testament, the great narrative of abundance is the manna story in Exodus 16. That narrative is remembered as having occurred in the “wilderness.” The wilderness is marked by two decisive features. On the one hand, the wilderness is beyond the reach and control of Pharaoh and his guarantee of food according to his storehouses of confiscation. On the other hand, the wilderness is marked by an absence of viable life support systems. There was no viable supply of bread! (We may take “bread” as the most elemental requirement for human sustenance as it is the most elemental gift given by the creator.)

In this quite remarkable circumstance—beyond Pharaoh and without viable life supports—Israel is surprised by gifts beyond explanation or imagination. First there were quail (Exodus 15:13). Third there was water from rock (Exodus 17:6)! But second, there was bread! I was just there in the morning after the dew (16:14). It just came (long before grits!). The narrative does not explain anything. The Israelites never expected it, as is evidenced by their wonderment, “What is it?” The Hebrew phrase of the question, *man-hu*, became the name of the bread! The bread is *man-hu-manna*—“*what is it?*”? They wondered when they got the bread. It turned out to be wonder bread! Moses’s response to their wonderment is terse: “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat” (16:15). It is as though Moses wanted to say, “Don’t ask for explanations; enjoy the surprise.” And they did! Moses instructs, “Gather as much as each of you needs.” And they did. Moses did not say, “Only two per customer.” Each gathered enough to be sated; the bread was administered in perfect abundance: “Some gathering more, some less.... Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed” (vv. 17-18).

There was enough; everyone ate to satisfaction:

He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deut. 8:15-18)

To be sure, the bread of abundance comes with a caveat against greed and hoarding that may be propelled by fear of scarcity. Some failed to heed the warning of Moses. Perhaps not unlike Pharaoh, the great hoarder, they hoarded the bread with the hope of enough for the next day. But of course, gift-bread cannot be stored up. They foolishly stored it up. And 1) it bred worms, 2) it smelled bad, and 3) it melted. The question “What is it” was foolishly answered, “Its mine!” That misunderstanding of wonder bread soured the gift. It did not, however, dim the force of the narrative, for that memory of abundance came to occupy the doxologies of Israel: “He rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Mortals ate the bread of angels; He sent them food in abundance” (Psalm 78:24-25). “They asked, and he brought quails, and gave them food in abundance. He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert leek a river” (Psalm 105:40-41; see Psalm

107:4-9). Eventually the manna memory became anticipatory for later poets for a good life in the land of free food (Isaiah 55:1-2).

That paradigmatic Israelite memory of abundance has its counterpart in the gospel narrative that reiterates the story of abundance through the life of Jesus. Jesus was in a “deserted place” (wilderness!); he found there a hungry crowd with “no leisure even to eat” (Mark 6:31). He fed them in a place that was without any viable life support system. He performed his magisterial verbs whereby he provided abundance where there had been none. He voiced his four life-giving verbs: He took the loaves; he blessed the loaves; he broke the loaves; he gave the loaves! There is no explanation, only narrative memory—no generalizations—only the immediacy of the moment. But what a moment: all ate! All were filled! There were left-overs of twelve baskets of bread, enough for the twelve tribes of Israel. (Unlike Moses, Jesus seems not to have minded good left-overs!)

And then again in Mark 8, there was a crowd without enough to eat (Mark 8:2). Again he had compassion. Again he enacted his dominical verbs: He took the loaves; he thanked for the loaves; he broke the loaves; he gave the loaves. All ate! All were filled! There were seven baskets of bread left over, enough for the seven nations of the traditional roster of nations beyond Israel.

There was enough *for the twelve tribes*, enough for *the seven nations*. There was enough! Since that moment, the church has reiterated this drama of grateful abundance, uttering his lordly verbs: “He took, he blessed, he broke, he gave.” It is a dramatic act that defies the scarcity of the world. Divine compassion, in a sacramental way, refuses the evident scarcity of the wilderness! To paraphrase, on these two narratives hang all the law and the prophets, the gospels, and the epistles! “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (II Cor. 8:9).

I must add a note about the social context of “abundance” in the Bible. The world of the Bible is a small agrarian economy. It consists in peasant agriculture that supported and sustained a small urban population that clustered around the “urban elites” of king, priests, and scribes.¹ This economic reality suggests that abundance consists in agricultural produce, that is, the “grown produce” that sustains life in its most elemental needs.

Such a claim of abundance does not readily or easily transfer from the elemental prospects of a small agrarian economy to an industrial or technological economy that specializes in things manufactured. It is an illusion simply to transfer the assurance of abundance from *grown produce* to *things manufactured* that reach beyond elemental creaturely needs to mastering management. Wendell Berry astutely characterizes the difference between the “periphery” of agriculture and the “center” of industrial-technological order:

It is still true that the center is supported by the periphery. All human economy is still land-based. To the extent that we must eat and drink and be clothed, sheltered, and warmed, we live from the land. The idea that we have now progressed from a land-based economy to an economy based on information is a fantasy.

It is still true that the people of the center believe that the people of the periphery will always supply their needs from the land and will always

keep the land productive; there will always be an abundance of food, fiber, timber, and fuel. That too is a fantasy. It is not known, but is simply taken for granted.

As its power of attraction increases, the center becomes more ignorant of the periphery. And under the pervasive influence of the center, the economic landscapes of the periphery have fewer and fewer inhabitants who know them well and know how to care properly for them. Many rural areas are now occupied mostly by urban people.²

Thus we must honor the distinction between grown produce and things manufactured. Whereas grown produce evokes wonder, things manufactured invite control. It is not possible, then, to extend the claim of abundance to things manufactured as the news of the Bible focuses singularly on the abundance of grown produce (bread). The Bible pushes us back to the most elemental realities of creatureliness, just as the virus does as well.

II. The Ancient Anguish

Of course this assurance of abundance, attested to in two narratives of wondrous inexplicable food and reiterated in our recurring liturgical dramas, is too good to be true. It turns out, moreover, often not to be true. We may identify two freighted moments in Israel's memo when the claim of abundance was unmistakably contradicted by facts on the ground. (We may recognize that in Christian tradition, Good Friday and especially Holy Saturday are such moments when claims of abundance turned out to be, in the experience of faith, null and void).³

First there is no doubt that the wilderness narrative in the Books of Moses is the primary matrix of biblical crisis of scarcity. While the outcome of the narrative is magisterial abundance, the defining reality of wilderness is that there was no bread, meat, or water. The narrative pivots on the awareness that there is no evidence for or guarantee of abundance. That is why this narrative can be reread in many later circumstances of scarcity. When Israel departed the regime of Pharaoh, it came to scarcity!

We can identify at least three textual articulations of scarcity in this dramatic moment when Israel entered the wilderness away from Pharaoh. In Exodus 16:3, Israel is only two verses into the wilderness when the complaint begins: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Amid the scarcity that was life-threatening, they remembered the comfort of Egyptian food. They promptly forgot the pain and anguish of brutalizing slavery and yearned for their good old days. The point is reiterated in Numbers 14:2-4:

All the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?!" So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."

In their crisis of scarcity, they did not recall their glad dancing and singing about emancipation. Now Pharaoh's slave camps looked pretty good. Moses's response to those who rebelled against his leadership is remarkable, for he asserts that the present inhabitants of the good land of promise are not to be feared. Indeed they are only "bread for us" (v. 9). "Bread" is on Moses's mind as well, and he is confident that they will come to "bread" soon. While the narrative ends in forgiveness for some (v. 20), Moses is brutally judgmental toward those who yearn for a return to Egypt (vv. 22-23).

The third episode of scarcity is the most poignant. In Numbers 11:5, the culinary memory of Egypt is vivid and precise: "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Numbers 11:5). The Egyptian menu is contrasted with the anemic inadequate nourishment of manna...or so they say! This time even Moses loses patience with the scarcity and sides with the people against the great Lord of emancipation:

Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child," to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, "Give us meat to eat!" I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. (Numbers 11:11-14)

The scarcity is more than Moses can bear and more than he can resolve. We might expect an empathetic response from the Emancipator. God does take careful note of the lament over scarcity: "You have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt'" (v. 18). But then God responds with a vindictive promise of abundance that will be savage in causing respiratory problems: "Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" (vv. 18-20). It turns out that YHWH lacks empathy for those who gripe about scarcity. And then the Lord changes the subject from *Israel's scarcity* to a question concerning *God's own power*: "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not" (v. 23).

It is a rhetorical question. YHWH had no wonderment about YHWH's own capacity, nor did Israel. The crisis is resolved by the arrival of abundant quail: "Then a wind went from the Lord, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp...about two cubits deep on the ground. So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp" (vv. 31-32). But the outcome is an unhappy one, because the anger of the Lord was kindled. They got the food for which they had hoped, but with the abundance, they got wrath. They

were not careful about what they had asked for! The narrative ends in abundance as did Exodus 16. In the end, however, the real issue is not abundance. It is coming to terms with the rule of YHWH. Life will be on YHWH's terms that render the issue of scarcity/abundance of lesser urgency. As with so much of Israel's faith narrative, the matter is less than satisfactorily resolved.

The other great moment of scarcity is the exilic experience of Israel when its leadership was displaced from its assured security and power. The Book of Lamentations is a script for such loss of abundance. While the paradigmatic narrative of Moses receives some good resolve, the Book of Lamentations, like real life, characteristically awaits resolve. In Lamentations 2:12, the voicing of deep grief comes down to food. Even the babies go hungry! "They cry to their mothers, 'Where is bread and wine?' as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom" (Lamentations 2:12).

As elsewhere in these long songs of grief, there is no answer or resolve. The scarcity is left unaddressed. The crisis is reiterated in Lamentations 4:4-5: "The tongue the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives them anything. Those who feasted on delicacies perish in the streets; those who were brought up in purple cling to ash heaps" (Lamentations 4:4-5). Again it is the "infant" and "the children," the ultimate measure of misery. There is no response. There is no offer of deliverance. There is no sign of old promises of wellbeing or feed. The tone of the whole is one of guilt and punishment. This tone makes this scenario quite unlike the Moses narrative in which there are both bread and forgiveness. There is none of that here, because we have moved from a paradigmatic sketch to real life. And in real life, as the Bible knows, there is scarcity.

The real experienced problem of scarcity means that the voiced grief of the Book of Lamentations will remain unresolved and open-ended. This is unmistakably clear in the enigmatic conclusion of the final poem. Tod Linafelt renders the verse this way:⁴ "For if you truly have rejected us, bitterly raged against us..." (5:22). Linafelt judges that the ending is "left trailing off," "remains unanswered," "remains incomplete," and "is left opening out into the emptiness of God's nonresponse." This cold raw reality of scarcity mocks as a deep challenge to Israel's base-line assumption of abundance. A case can be made that the Book of Lamentations receives a response and assurance in II Isaiah, most prominently in Isaiah 55:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
Come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without
price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy? (Isaiah 55:1-2)

That however is not an adequate answer to the unbearable moment of scarcity that is voiced by Israel. We might wish for a more direct and immediate resolve of scarcity. But we do not get such resolve every time, not for sure, and not in this instance. Not every lived reality is well answered by faith, even by the wonder of wilderness manna. Thus the struggle of "The Deep Claim" and the "Ancient Anguish" is a defining biblical reality and task of faith as it pertains to the real life of the world. The hard

work of faith is to adjudicate, in a variety of unyielding circumstances, between the deep claim of faith and the quotidian reality of the world. It is in this clash that we live. That hard work requires that we be, at the same time, *fully trusting in the claim* and that we be *fully honest about the anguish*. It is in such circumstance of scarcity that we find out if we are able to trust, when we know that the reality of our life in the world is not readily overcome by our best mantras of faith.

III. Our Contemporary Doubt

We have inherited the task of adjudicating between the claim of abundance and the anguish of scarcity. The task of adjudicating between grown produce and things manufactured does not aim at an exclusionary either/or. But it also does not seek a “middle way” of finding “balance” between the two. The intent, rather, is to ask about the deepest gifts that come from God and sources of our most elemental satisfactions as God’s creatures. While we work at the task, moreover, we have ringing in our ears the verdict of Jesus, “You cannot serve God and wealth (Mammon)” (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13). The matter is urgent among us because we now face, amid the virus, an acute reality of scarcity: “The pandemic has challenged this view of abundance. We don’t have enough tests, masks, ICU beds, ventilators. In the coming months we face shortages of jobs, money, food and basic supplies. Scarcity may not be our theology, but it is our reality. How should we think—and—preach about God’s overflowing providence in a time of scarcity?”⁵ Perhaps that reality should not surprise us. Moses had already declared, “There will never cease to be some in need on the earth” (Deut. 16:11). Or more familiarly, “The poor will always be with you” (see Matthew 26:11, Mark 14:7, John 12:8).

The poor of course are the desperate carriers of scarcity. They always have scarcity first. And even now amid the virus, there are those who experience no scarcity of masks, ventilators, or any other requirement (see David Geffen on his yacht! Or note that professional athletes can get tested any time they want). The matter of scarcity is so ordinary and now so glaring that we may conclude that the arithmetic of Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo is decisive, namely, that the earth cannot sustain abundance and expansive population. There is not enough to go around. Perhaps so, and if true, then our usual theology of abundance (that is the basis of “stewardship” in the church) needs to be radically revised. I am not ready to accept that fatalistic judgment. Here are three thoughts that I have had about the present “pandemic of scarcity.”

1. It is important to recognize that for many of us, this is the first time that it is our scarcity. We have known by the hearing of the ear about scarcity for a long time, but it was not ours. It was always “some orphan in India” or some “disadvantaged” nation or some “less fortunate” neighborhood remote from us. That remote scarcity has long required our attention, but it has not theretofore been experienced by “us” as a theological crisis. Now, however, the scarcity is very close to “us,” and cannot be disregarded. Now it is a *white scarcity* while we have been content with scarcity among poor Blacks. The indexes of the pandemic suggest no factoring out by race, no privilege for whites. Now we are at *American scarcity*. We have long judged the US as God’s chosen people, or more “patriotically” made a claim of exceptionalism. Thus scarcity ought to be elsewhere because we are without doubt “the richest nation in the world.” Now the scarcity is enough to shake some of our confidence in our

ready claim of exceptionalism. I suppose, moreover, that one could even say that this now is *male scarcity*, because the virus is without gender distinction while heretofore it may have been that women were generally more vulnerable.

We now recognize that we face *white scarcity*, *American scarcity*, and perhaps unusual *male scarcity*. Thus I propose it is not scarcity that evokes a theological crisis. It is rather that it is *our* scarcity, and we can no longer assume privilege and exemption. If this is a correct analysis, then the theological crisis is not the loss of abundance (that always occurs somewhere!) but rather our new circumstance in solidarity with others who have long faced scarcity. Thus the problem is not theological; it is sociological and economic, with the inescapable wonderment, “Who gets what?” and “Who decides who gets what?” We are, as *white Americans*, placed in a situation that is wholly unfamiliar to us, so that we may ask, “How do we speak of abundance and scarcity when we find ourselves now in the company of those who have lived forever in scarcity?” Our loss of privileged exemption may now cause us to embrace Malthus, who in like manner was informed by social advantage that he found under challenge and threat. This means, I take it, not that abundance is not on offer, but that it is not peculiarly on offer to us, thus exposing an assumed privilege that came with vast and expansive consumer comfort.

2. The matter of abundance and scarcity, claim and anguish, is made more complex by the interplay of *things manufactured* and *growth produced*. As long as we have remained focused on produce grown, we have stayed close to the granular quality of creation and have, perforce, remained close to local neighborly reality. As produce grown has become a salable commodity via agribusiness, we have confused produced growth with things manufactured. As a result, even crop produce, gardening, chickens, and cattle have come to be mass produced commodities that have been loosened from the felt rhythms of creation that in turn have slackened the link to the local. As we have made the move to regard *the gifts of creation* as *commodities*, it has been an easy step to conclude that our wellbeing consists in an accumulation of commodities, that is, in things manufactured. The marketers have knowingly recognized that growth produced is not a very marketable item; we see very little advertising for grown produce. What we see, rather, is marketeering for things manufactured, especially the Big Three of drugs, computers, and cars. Thus we are readily seduced into imagining that the promised abundance of gospel faith consists in things manufactured such as drugs, computers, cars, and masks and ventilators. According to the ideology of commodity, we can only conclude that we face a season of acute scarcity.

If, however, the true abundance of human life, or more largely creaturely life, is in relational reality and organic connection to produce grown, we might judge that our God-given abundance is not in things manufactured but in growth produced. Grown produce has intrinsic to it a neighborly component, whereas things manufactured tend toward private ownership, use, and accumulation. Grown produce, moreover, draws us closer to local intentionality that tells against excessive mobility. It is likely the case that in time to come we will not have an abundance of things manufactured that depends on fossil fuel. Things manufactured of course add to our creaturely comfort and convenience but do not in a commensurate way contribute to happiness, even while they damage and deplete the resources of creation to be needed in coming generations. We may end up, in the familiar words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Rich in things and poor in soul.”⁷ It is perhaps not a given that being “rich in things” need

result in “poor in soul,” but we know enough and have seen enough that excessive reliance on commodities does indeed diminish our functioning in “the image of God” as responsible overseers of the creation. We may think again about the seductions of an imagined abundance of commodities that invite us away from our creaturely vocation. (Even ventilators, it may turn out, may rob us of the dignity and wellbeing of living toward our deaths embedded in serious companionship. It is entirely likely, dear reader, that in a like circumstance, this writer would also want a ventilator.)

3. A third interpretive thought has occurred to me. Our excessive embrace of things manufactured is perhaps propelled by “the desires of the flesh.” Paul’s primary catalogue of “the desires of the flesh” is augmented by two subsequent catalogues:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. (Gal. 5:19-21)

They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.... But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you... no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Ephesians 4:19, 5:3-5)

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed (which is idolatry)... anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. (Col. 3:3-8)

These several banned behaviors portray an individual who is completely autonomous without any answerability to God or to neighbor (see Luke 18:4). Brigitte Kahl shows, moreover, that such desires of the flesh are not an innate part of the human person, as much of the Augustinian tradition has insisted, but are rather facets of “the law of Rome,” “The combat order of Caesar’s empire.”⁸

In an up-front attack on the competitive of system of euergetism/benefactions, which, as we have seen, is a key feature of imperial order in a Roman province like Galatia, “works” are declared to be no longer the showcase of the self in the public race for status.... The “new” law of Christ (5:6,6:2) does not abandon Jewish law as such but rather the competitive and combative hierarchy of self and other that is at the core of Roman imperial *nomos*.⁹

It is an easy and obvious move from the “combat order” of Caesar to the iron law of the market in competitive economics that has been so frankly formulated by Milton Friedman.¹⁰ That “law of the market,” as in the “order of Caesar,” has presented individual competitiveness as the proper ordering and administration of life resources. It is the self under such a mandate who can ignore the neighbor, and who has no limit on self-possession, self-serving, self-sufficiency, or self-indulgence. We are able to see the “desires of the flesh” at work among us that slots the neighbor as a competitor for scarce goods. Once the insatiable self is made the measure of all

things, the satisfaction of appetites becomes defining, the accumulation of goods is irresistible, and the hoarding of surplus goods is inevitable.

In the midst of the virus, we can see this destructive urge at work wherein the states that must compete for needed equipment only to learn that in the end, FEMA has “stolen” masks and ventilators away from the states. And even before that, it was a greedy concern to escalate the market that led to the nullification of federal planning for a coming pandemic. It is not difficult to trace the route from such “desires” to policy outcomes that are disastrous. It may be that there are not enough to go around. But we need not draw a conclusion about cosmic scarcity. We need only look at the ideology that propels the desires of the flesh to understand how scarcity appears among us. It may well be that the declaration of Moses concerning “the poor always” is true. It may well be that Malthus and Ricardo are correct. I think not. I think rather that our society is addicted to a fearful greediness that causes scarcity where it need not be. It is unnerving that Paul could declare that those who live by the desires of the flesh “will not inherit the kingdom of God,” that is, such anti-neighbor action precludes participation in a coming future of generous wellbeing (Gal. 5:21). Such practice assures that there will not be twelve baskets of abundance left over—not even seven!

IV. Our Alternative Prospect

In the midst of a predatory economy that means to devour all resources and all vulnerable neighbors, the people gathered around Jesus are committed to the practice of abundance that is characteristically demanding, inconvenient, and decisively counter-cultural.

1. We are participants in a contest between *bean-counters* and *story-tellers*. If we rely on the bean-counters, it is easy enough to see that we live in an economy of scarcity. As a result, many economists, following Friedman, can define economics as a study of “the distribution of scarce resources.” We, however, do not permit the bean-counters to have the final say about scarcity and abundance. It turns out that abundance is not arithmetic. It is rather episodic and is sustained by story-tellers who remember for us one-off happenings when abundance inexplicably arrived. Thus:

- abundance is the day bread arrived inexplicably in the wilderness;
- abundance is the tale of five loaves and two fish, twice performed;
- abundance is free lunches fixed by a single mom of six in our town who has turned her hamburger joint into free food for needy children;
- abundance is an insurance company that waived premiums in order to protect the unemployed;
- abundance is a government action to provide adequate income for those who cannot pay their rent;
- abundance is a bank that defers or cancels student debt;
- abundance is double-shift nurses and doctors who give themselves over to the virus infected.

Abundance is action that defies the bean-counters and insists that in the deepest part of our common life, we are not competitors. We are rather generous sharers who risk resources on behalf of neighbors.

Perhaps story-tellers can rarely defeat bean-counters. That, however, is our common vocation in the gospel. We believe that most of the time, the bean-counters are not only giving us data but are exercising control. And we refuse, at our best, to

remain in such a calculus. That leaves us with the worrisome wonderment, “Are such stories true?” And we do not know. We only risk retelling them because we “love to tell the story.” So here is a bottom-line story of the conflict of a bean-counter and an alternative actor. In II Kings 6:8-23, the King of Syria (Aram) is deployed as a threat to Israel. The King of Syria pursues Elisha, the source of intelligence leaks. His army surrounds Elisha’s house. Elisha’s servant sees the assemblage of horses and chariots outside the house and is frightened. He can count! He sees how many there are. But Elisha, who regularly defies the bean-counters by appeal to alternative resources, assures his servant: “Do not be afraid, for there are more of us than there are with them” (v. 16).

The servant is bewildered. He can count *only two of “us,”* Elisha and himself! But then the servant has his eyes opened. He saw! The mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (v. 17).

Who knew? Well, Elisha knew and then his servant knew, and then the King of Syria came to know. And then the story is kept for us, and we get to decide if the story is reliable enough for us to act alternatively. The truth of the gospel depends on such tales of abundance. Such tales rarely persuade a bean-counter. But it did in the case of the servant, and it might again sometime soon; we never know. And when we are persuaded out of our bean-counting mode, all kinds of astonishingly abundant things happen!

2. What may happen is that we come to see that *growth produced* is a more reliable resource than *things manufactured*. In the Elisha story, the things manufactured are chariots, armor, swords, and all kinds of “might.” But the tale culminates with the offer of growth produced, that is, “a great festival” reconciliation, of wine and meat and vegetables that overcame the hostility that had evoked the weapons.

In the midst of the virus, we are coming to recognize, here and there, that our wellbeing is not defined principally by things manufactured. They make our life more convenient, to be sure, and sometimes more secure, but they do not bring the kinds of satisfaction we most deeply crave. Thus on one page one day in the *New York Times*, we get this remarkable testimony to otherwise:¹¹

-Sarah Lyall: “The other day we had a (non-Covid-related) health scare at my house, and the great outpouring of sympathy and kindness and practical help that flowed over my phone late into the night and through the next day—I will never forget it. With everything going on, our little group is such a small thing, but it feels like a gig thing. It feels like life-line. It feels like love.”

-Katherine Rosman: “That was the sole purpose of the get-together, to belt out that song off-key and at the top of our lungs. It was cathartic, it was funny, it was energizing. Then we each returned to the new realities of our homes, families, and jobs, clinging to the boost that being unfiltered with your friends can give and which goes on and on and on and on.”

-John Branch: “It’s my heightened sense, especially at night. The stars are brighter than ever, the Big Dipper tipped as if pouring out unfamiliar stars looking to be notice....Critters rustling in the ivy, light rain dripping into the gutters, late-night whispers of my teenage daughter....I noticed a

spot of grass riffling amid the calm sea of blades. It was an unseen mole, chewing on roots. I am numbed to the outside world but a quarantined superhero of the senses.”

-Manny Fernandez: “Mrs. Burdock told the [second grade] class she wanted to play a game. She would say a word, and then everyone had to find an object that began with the last letter of that word....My daughter tore through rooms....Things fall apart. Second grade carries on.”

-Taffy Brodesser-Akner: “I’ve seen beautiful things: people coming together, the healthy checking on the sick, the able grocery shopping for the stricken, applause for medical workers, but the thing that has stayed with me the most was two weeks ago, when the bat mitzvah of my dear friends’ daughter Rose was cancelled....A few of the women who are part of the women-only theater group...recorded...the extremely melodic introduction to the ceremony of calling her up to Torah. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen....The story of a girl’s cancelled bat mitzvah became the story of much everyone loved her.”

There is no need to be romantic about it; we still use our phones and screens. We still require masks and ventilators. In the midst of that, however, we are drawn to another register of reality that is marked by generous specificities we had not noticed. Our pursuit of things manufactured had caused us not to notice. When we notice, we see gift-giving generosity that comes toward us, even in spite of our obduracy.

3. Paul voices an alternative to “the desires of the flesh.” He terms them “the fruit of the Spirit”: “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Gal. 5:22-23). These are not self-willed virtues. They are gifts that rush upon us by the work of God’s Spirit who refuses to be contained within our fearful ideologies. The bet that Paul makes is that the rush of God’s Spirit can override the claims of “the flesh.” Or to put it otherwise, the urge of abundance will overcome the fearful drive toward scarcity.

It is quite remarkable that Paul’s two catalogues of “the desires of the flesh” (5:19-21) and “the fruit of the Spirit” (5:22-23) are sandwiched by his two symmetrical articulations of what is at stake. Before the catalogues he asserts: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14). And after the catalogues, Paul urges: “Bear one another’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). The self is deeply and wholly bound to the neighbor; there is no other viable existence.

It is the alternative claim of the gospel (as of the Torah!) that connection to the neighbor is a channel for abundance. It turns out that abundance is not simply a gift or a guarantee. It is at the same time a practice. It is the day-to-day exercise of mobilization of resources and energy for the wellbeing of the neighborhood. That sustained engagement, moreover, generates even more resources. Indeed, even the land is more willing to produce more growth when it is regarded as a creaturely mate according to the fruit of the spirit. Or conversely, the land is more grudging when it is treated by commodity-based agribusiness. Creaturely response is more positive and life-sustaining in all its parts of God’s world when treated according to the generous intent of the creator.

In this season of scarcity, the gospel claim of abundance stands as a powerful counter-cultural insistence. That insistence does not dispute the reality of serious scarcity. It insists only that scarcity is not the deep truth of our life, and that the practice of abundance is an effective mode of resistance to that scarcity. The gospel thus is an invitation:

- to choose grown produce rather than things manufactured;
- to receive the fruit of the Spirit as an alternative to the desires of the flesh;
- to love and tell the stories well.

It is true that Moses declared, “There will never cease to be those in need on the earth” (Deut. 15: 11). That verdict is most often taken as a statement of resignation and a relief from any obligation to care about those carriers of scarcity. But that is because it is not often enough noticed that in the same instruction Moses also asserted: “There will be on one in need among you” (v. 4). The move from “never cease on earth” to “no one in need” is accomplished, for Moses, through the practice of debt cancellation, that is, the practice of generous neighborly abundance. There is no doubt that the leverage of debt sustains an economy of scarcity.¹² But it need not be so. Jews and Christians are mandated to otherwise. The defeat of the power of scarcity is not an act of magic from above. It is rather an act of neighborliness from below. It is the sum of the gospel ethic. It is a mandate that is sustained by credible story-tellers who love to tell the story.

Notes

1. See Roland Boer, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).
2. Wendell Berry, “Local Knowledge in an Age of Information,” *The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays* (Washington DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005).
3. See Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).
4. Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 60-61.
5. A Prospectus for the future planning of *Journal for Preachers*.
6. James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017) has traced the way in which the storage and transport of grain, in contrast to more fragile crops, made possible the wealth and power that permitted the formation of early empires.
7. Harry Emerson Fosdick, “God of Grace and God of Glory,” *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 307.
8. Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Reimagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 270.
9. Ibid, 271-272.
10. See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
11. *The New York Times* (April 21, 2020) A15.
12. See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York; Melville House, 2011).