

“Surrounded by Abundance”
October 24, 2021

I Kings 17:8-16
Philippians 4:4-9

In late August *The New York Times* article stated: “The World Is Still Short of Everything—Get Used to It.”

In late September we were told: “Pandemic shortages return: Costco limiting purchases.”

And just this past week I read: “Empty Store Shelves Spell Danger for Biden.” I don’t know if he’s looking for something in particular, but it sounds like a problem.

During the pandemic we’ve seen shortages of toilet paper, yeast, dumbbells, used cars, and Grape-Nuts. According to the manufacturer, the process of making Grape Nuts is “complicated”—which makes sense as they are neither grapes nor nuts.

With all of this, is it any surprised that there have also been reported shortages of liquor?

We are, I think, starting to take the advice of the *Times* and getting used to these shortages, bearing them with some good-natured humor or just recognizing this is yet another part of our new normal.

We’re also left worrying in these days that the roof will fall in—and there won’t be any shingles available.

We’re left wondering—will we have enough?

And how much is *enough*?

Jackie Mason once said: “I have enough money to last me the rest of my life—unless I buy something.”

Gandhi told us that “Earth provides enough to satisfy every person’s need but not one person’s greed.”

I once had the experience of talking with a group of fairly wealthy people. I don’t mean to put down anybody here, but I think they were doing much better than all of you. They were doing very well indeed. What I discovered as they spoke was not only were they very rich, they were also some of the neediest people I’d ever met. Affluence begets its own sense of scarcity.

Let me ask a few questions that might be helpful:

Can you recall times when fear of not having enough of something, while understandable, proved unfounded? Times when, although you thought the roof would fall in, it never did? Or times when the roof did fall in, but this was not the end after all—times when serious trouble proved not to have the last word?

Most of us from time to time worry about whether we have “enough.” There are probably times when you’ve worried about having enough patience, or enough support, enough understanding, or maybe even enough faith. The Hebrew word for “salvation” comes from a root that connotes “space and freedom and security that are gained by the removal of constriction.” The good news of salvation is deliverance from what “constricts” us.

If I can speak personally, I am constricted by a sense that there is never enough time. And yet I have the same hours in a day that each of you have.

What constricts you?

How might we open our eyes and our hearts to the signs of God’s open-handed abundance? How might we yet be set free from the grip of the sense of scarcity in which so many of us live? That is, how might we yet find “salvation”—space and freedom and security?

Sometimes it helps for us to remember those stories of scarcity in scripture.

The story of the prophet Elijah that we heard this morning is a tale of not having enough. Drought dominates the entire chapter. Water is scarce, for God had said, “There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

Feel the heat. Look at the parched riverbeds. Search for food.

What’s your fear? Not enough money, not enough patience, not enough support, not enough understanding, not enough time? What do you worry about drying up?

The drought is so severe that it has brought death near even for a woman well-off enough to own a house with a second story. Using words that Elijah himself had used, the widow swears “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing...”

This well-off but desperate woman, God tells Elijah, will feed him.

When Elijah asks for food and water, the woman tells him that she is going to prepare a meager meal for herself and her son, so that they “may eat it, and die.”

Elijah’s response? “Do not be afraid.”

You know how those words keep echoing through the stories of the Bible. They are the words of Joseph to his brothers in Genesis. They are the message at the empty tomb. They are the words spoken over and over to us at those times when the roof *has* fallen in, when we *don’t* have enough, when *death* seems to have had the final word. When scarcity lurks around the corner, we hear: “Do not be afraid.”

“Do not worry about anything...”

That’s what Paul wrote to the early Christians in Philippi. This was a congregation, many of whom were enslaved and most of whom were poor. Paul himself was in prison facing a capital charge when he wrote to them.

We might think that everyone involved would have *everything* to worry about.

“Don’t worry,” he tells them. “Let your requests be made known to God.”

To pray as Paul suggests—to pray with thanksgiving—is to recognize that there is a power in the universe that is immeasurably superior to us. When we pray, we put ourselves and our lives in God’s hands.

Elijah doesn’t try to dissuade the woman from her plan. “Go and do as you have said,” he tells her, adding only, “First make me a little cake and bring it to me and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.”

It’s like the sign on a pump out in the desert. Attached to the pump is a canteen filled with water. The sign advises that there is enough water in the canteen to prime the pump and then there will be all the water needed. And please, refill the canteen when you are finished.

Those words call for faith. And they come with the promise that there is enough—and more—if what is there is used properly and shared. Hoarding will not help even in the most desperate of circumstances, perhaps *especially* in the most desperate of circumstances

The brief story of Elijah ends with good news: “She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail.”

When Paul encourages the Philippians to pray and not worry, he does not promise that they will have all that they want—or even all that they need. He tells them simply that the “peace of God” will guard their hearts and their minds.

And maybe that peace is what we seek, what we desire, what we really *need*, especially in these days.

One Old Testament scholar tells us that the wonder of the story of Elijah and the widow resides beyond its supernatural character. God is free to act beyond all boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and even religious affiliation, providing not only for Elijah but also for a woman and her family who were not part of Elijah’s people.

Life—and not death—has the final word.

God has the final word—and that word is “Yes.”

In part there is “enough” in this story and in our lives because there is human interaction and relationship. Elijah had only what he received from someone else. In sharing what she had, the woman found there was enough for her and her family.

Generosity is not learned in isolation. By opening our eyes and our hearts to the abundance of God we discover how much we have received and grow in our ability to share with others.

So the United Church of Christ minister, William Green, tells us: “Abundance is a fact of life, not just an article of faith. But it must be discerned to be learned, seen to be believed, experienced to be credible. Conditioned as most of us are by some sense of scarcity and not having enough, it is not immediately natural to shift our point of view. But generosity cannot take root and grow in any soil. The ground of generosity’s inspiration is abundance.”

The strange thing is, when we share, when we give, the roof usually doesn't collapse. It generally seems to stay in the same place. And we keep discovering that the God of surprising abundance puts a fresh heart within us.

Rather than the roof falling in, "sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world"—as Marge Piercy puts it. We experience love, we receive gift upon gift, and we are able to see the abundance of this world, the abundance of our lives, the abundance of God. Our generosity grows out of that abundance and joy.

In these days, then, consider:

Are there enough stars in the heavens at night? There are billions more that we can't even see, billions that we can only imagine.

Are there enough animals? There are hundreds, if not thousands, in the deep seas and the deep forests that have never been catalogued.

We are given more than enough—more than enough air and water if we would keep them clean, more than enough food if we would distribute it equally.

Beyond those material necessities, our spirits are fed as well—fed by the creativity of artists, fed by the grace of friends and family, fed by the wonderful gift of forgiveness.

This is what it starts to look like to me—even in these days of scarcity: God holds nothing back. The God known to the Jewish people, the God shown to us in Jesus Christ, is the One who loves with abandon, forgives to overflowing, and feeds us daily with all good things. God invites us to participate in the abundance of life.

Abundant love, forgiveness, and welcome can still surprise those who encounter them. Perhaps even *we* are able to be astonished as we open our lives to the abundance of God.