

Sermon for DEC 1-2024 at ABC
Scarcity and Abundance
1 Kings 17:8-16, Matthew 14:15-21

Purpose: Inspire ABC to live generously out of an abundance mindset

Message: When we are with Jesus we will always have enough

Sermon: Scarcity and Abundance

Good morning,

Our text today should be a familiar one, and Jesus and his disciples are in a familiar situation – which is that they are surrounded by a crowd of people who are queuing up to see Jesus, to listen to him teach and to be healed.

So turn with me to Matthew 14 starting in verse 15.

That evening the disciples came to [Jesus] and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.”

But Jesus said, “That isn’t necessary—you feed them.”

“But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!” they answered.

“Bring them here,” he said. Then he told the people to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he gave the bread to the disciples, who distributed it to the people.

They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. About 5,000 men were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children!

Now, I know what you might be thinking... “hmm, the feeding of the 5000, that’s not exactly an advent text. It’s December. Isn’t it time to talk about Mary and Joseph, or maybe Elizabeth and Zachariah? Isn’t advent supposed to be about the birth of Christ?” Were you thinking that? No, just me then...

No this isn't a traditional advent text. But it is an advent message, and here is why: the word advent means "coming". It's about the breaking in of Jesus and the kingdom of God to a world that desperately needs saving. Jesus demonstrated that "breaking in" through his ministry. What is it that he says to John's disciples when they ask if he "is the one to come"?

This is from Matthew 11:

John the Baptist, who was in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?"

Jesus told them, "Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor."

I think what we are supposed to take away from this is that Jesus sees his ministry – his miracles, his teaching, everything he's doing, as evidence that God is with us. Emmanuel means God with us. It means that Earth and heaven – separated by sin are overlapping once more. In the kingdom of God there is no sickness, no disability, no hunger. In God's kingdom everyone has everything they need. Or, to quote the pastor and author Skye Jethani: **"Where God and his kingdom** are present, where heaven and earth overlap, there is always enough." ...

Enough is an interesting word. There was a survey of some of America's richest people some years back. And one of the questions was "do you feel like you have enough money?" One responder – I forget who it was – said, "well, I wish I had about \$10,000 more." This is coming from a millionaire. But he didn't feel like he had enough.

We live in a society now that often struggles with this problem. Surrounded by convenience and security and prosperity we still feel vulnerable. We still feel lacking. This problem might best be described by saying far too many of us are living with a scarcity mindset. By that I mean we start to internalize the thought that there is only so much wealth, only so much power, or land or success, to go around. So if you, or perhaps, a certain group of people, seem to be getting more, then that must mean that there is less for me.

For an example of this you just have to look at some of the pictures of us Americans on black Friday.

Only in a country so prosperous would people practically kill one another for a 40% off toaster oven. The scarcity mindset can be summarized by the three words most sales teams love to use this time of year – any guesses? – “while supplies last” Are you with me? “You better get in line and elbow and push and shove to get that new TV folks, there isn’t enough of them for everyone.” That’s the scarcity mindset. And of course it shows up year round – not just at black Friday. It echoes through the news and the political jargon about benefits and taxes and immigration and security. There isn’t enough so we need to protect what is ours. Right?

The scarcity mindset poisons our human kingdoms, but not God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom looks different. It’s like the disciples coming up to Jesus and saying, “um, teacher... it’s getting kind of late. The people are hungry, you should send them into the towns to find supper.” What does Jesus say in response to this?

“That isn’t necessary—you feed them.” another translation says *“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”*

To which the disciples reply... *“But, we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!”* – you know, “that’s OUR dinner – that’s barely enough for the 12 of us – Does what sound familiar? Were you listening to Sheila earlier?

The widow that Elijah meets says *“I swear by the Lord your God that I don’t have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die.”* -1 Kings 17:12

Do you hear the common word? ... “Only.” I only have this, we only have that. It’s a focus on what we lack, on what we are missing out on, that defines the scarcity mindset. But in response Jesus gently says – bring what you have to me. And then he blesses it and breaks the bread and all eat and are full and, behold, there are 12 baskets full of leftovers. And, behold, the jar and the jug do not run out until the day rain returns to the earth. Where Jesus is present, there is always enough.

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Earlier I sat with the kiddos and all of us looked at some of the cultural symbols of this season of Christmas. The Christmas tree, the gifts, the lights – there are more of course – but one I did not mention yet is the feast. Christmas dinner is a deep tradition too, full of special dishes and spices, family and friends and neighbors coming together to eat and celebrate. Even non religions people will often have a Christmas dinner, a big feast.

And this is a feast – along with Thanksgiving – that we also have a long tradition of intentionally sharing with those who are needful. You could probably think of half a dozen community events aimed at raising funds or food supplies to take Christmas dinner to the shut ins, or the prisons, or to military bases around the world, or to the homeless?

Consider the classic Christmas story – A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. Is there anyone who hasn't read the book or watched one of the 78 adaptations? Personally I think the Muppet's Christmas Carol is the best – for the 3 of you that don't know the story go watch that one!

What was I saying? Oh yes, think about the Christmas Carol: for one thing there is a lot of feasting in it. But here, think about how Scrooge communicates his “bah humbug” attitude toward the whole season – refusing to donate to help the poor on Christmas eve. Scrooge is a perfect example of the scarcity mindset, is he not?

But then at the end – when he has been redeemed by his night of visions – how does he first demonstrate his change of heart? ... He tells a passing lad to go and buy the largest turkey and have it delivered to Bob Cratchit and his family. And he shows up himself to join in the merry feast. Thereafter he is described as both generous and supremely joyful because he has learned to focus on and enjoy the company of his neighbors and to look out for them.

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Christians throughout history have used the cycles of fasting and feasting to help us take the focus off of us and get it back on to God and others. We can (and have) gotten things out of order of course – but when we understand the history and meaning behind this feast – as with all of the symbols of the season – we can remind each other of the joy that comes when we practice the kind of abundant generosity and self-giving love that Jesus modeled for us.

Just last week Pastor Keith shared some of the many ways this congregation has shared our limited resources to great impact around this community and around the world. God bless you for your consistent willingness to give. My hope is that this Christmas season you will start to see all of the ways that you can give, and serve, and love people in this community – not just as a duty – but as a symbol of the season.

As we break bread to share with others around a table may we recognize the pattern of Jesus and his self-giving life.

As we stretch our finances thin this time of year – let's be real, nothing is getting cheaper – let us reject the scarcity mindset that threatens to keep our hands tightly clenched and instead embrace the abundant generosity of Jesus. Instead of focusing on what we don't have, or how little we might have, or how insignificant our contributions seem to be in the light of all the needs in this world, let us focus instead on trusting Jesus with the resources we do have, trusting him to bless our humble offerings and multiply them to his glory.

As we look to the year to come, let us plan intentionally to live sacrificially so that we can bless others. Let us begin to live here on earth as it is in heaven.

And finally, whether we find ourselves in plenty or in want, let us remember that when Jesus and his kingdom are present, where heaven and earth overlap, there will always be enough.

Benediction – as a reminder – we have an excellent opportunity to demonstrate an abundance mentality next Sunday. After the service we are having a simple fellowship meal, please come and invite many to join us. Additionally, bring cans of soup to donate – let’s fill up 12 boxes if we can! We worship a God of abundance, let’s go out and live like it!

Children’s message – “Symbols of the Season”

Visual aids: a large wrapped box, small Christmas tree, small snow globe or paper snowflake, battery powered candle, and a stocking with a lump of coal in it.

The evergreen as a symbol of God's everlasting covenant with humanity

Snow as a symbol of God's forgiveness

Light as a symbol of hope, God's presence in a dark world

Gifts as a symbol of God’s grace and mercy

The abundance of our holiday feasts as a symbol of God's provision and blessing