

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Politics of Scarcity”
2nd in a series: From Scarcity to Abundance
Genesis 47:13-21
September 16, 2018

We left off last week at the end of Genesis, 1 with a world teeming with life and energy. In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of emptiness, the waters of chaos, and began to call out new life... calling out a world full of abundance...

And to this creation God spoke again and again and said, “Be fruitful and multiply” and more and more life came exploding forth. ***The energies of God came spilling out of the Trinitarian dance of love...*** the ancients would say, and now it is pulsing in all things,
in rivers and mountains,
in hawks and horses,
in stars and sea,
in men and women...

The energies of God came spilling out of the Trinitarian dance of love and it’s now pulsing through your very body.

God did not create a world of scarcity. God created a world teeming with life!

This is how our scriptures begin.
This is how our sacred story begins.

And as the story goes on God calls a man named Abraham and his wife to become God’s great blessing in the world. In Genesis 12 God tells Abraham that life will flow from his and Sara’s loins... And God will bless them, and they are to go and become a blessing to all the people of the earth.

Abraham’s calling is the beginning of God creating a family, a tribe, a church, a community of people to be a blessing to the world. In other words, we are to become the very blessing of God flowing to the world.

Brueggemann, that great Old Testament scholar, writes, “**Blessing is the force of well-being, active in the world.**” **The “force of well-being.”** That’s a powerful image.

Think of the force of a mighty river flowing down the mountainside... flowing through the hills and across the valley, creating beauty, and watering the earth, and providing a home and a source of life for so much wildlife. **The river is a blessing, a “force of well-being”.**

With the abundance of God’s life flowing into us, we are to become that kind of blessing in the world. A force of well-being active in the world.

That’s Abraham’s calling.
That’s the people of God’s calling.

Well, then Abraham and Sara have a son, Isaac.

And Isaac grows up and marries Rebecca,
and they have twin sons, Jacob and Esau.
And Jacob grows up and marries Leah and Rachel,
and he has 12 sons and one of them is named Joseph...
who gets an **Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat** and learns to dance and sing on stage.

If you know Joseph's story, you know Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. He becomes a slave in Egypt, thrown into prison, and interpreted Pharaoh's disturbing dreams by telling Pharaoh there would be seven years of bountiful crops followed by seven years of famine.

Miraculously, Joseph is put second in command in all of Egypt to manage the food supplies, and the power, and the security of Egypt's great empire.

To make a long story short, Joseph ends up reconciling with his brothers. And all his family and dear old dad move to Egypt. And now the descendants of Abraham are all in Egypt.

Joseph is in command of great power and the storehouses of Egypt.
And the famine continues.

That's where our story picks up today.

Last week, there was abundance and life was bursting out of the ground.
This week, there is famine.

And the struggle between two visions of reality comes into sharp focus by the end of Genesis. Two visions of reality that we are exploring this month.

***Is this world that we live in, a world of scarcity or abundance?
How will we see it?***

That's the deep soul question we're trying to explore this month. And I say "soul question" because this isn't just an intellectual curiosity. I'm not asking what your mind believes. I'm asking you to explore what your soul believes.

Because how your soul answers that question fundamentally shapes
your life,
your relationships,
and your ability to live God's calling to be a blessing,
to be the "force of well-being active in the world," that you were created to be.

Does your soul see this world primarily as a place of scarcity or abundance?
As Egyptian famine or Eden creation?

Joseph had been given the wisdom and insight to recognize that there was going to be a pattern. The bounty of 7 years wasn't an invitation to gluttony. It was a prelude to a famine. And so, they prepared. They stored up extra every year.

And there were a lot of good reasons for that right? That's what God was inviting them to do by giving them the wisdom they had.

If you know you're going to have some expenses coming, it's a good idea to save up for them. If you know you have a little extra, it doesn't mean you go on a spending spree. Joseph is using his head.

There is a fundamental difference between using wisdom
and using fear.

Wisdom says, "Don't be gluttonous with what you're given. There are ups and downs."

Wisdom says, "You really don't need bigger, better, and more. What you have will do. So, use the extra to be a blessing..."

The myth of scarcity, on the other hand, thrives off fear.

It says, "There is not enough to go around."

It says, "You'd better cling to what you have, and take all you can get."

For the first seven years that Joseph is in charge, Pharaoh and his right-hand man tell the people, "There's not going to be enough."

For seven years they tell them, "You're going to have to hand over everything extra," because pretty soon, you'll come begging."

And so, Pharaoh takes.

And Pharaoh stores up.

And Pharaoh grabs all he can get.

For seven years of abundance Pharaoh feeds his own fears,
and the fears of the people...

and ***the narrative of scarcity shapes the soul of the empire.***

That's what happens when you hear it over and over again. After a while the narrative of scarcity shapes the soul of the people. So, that by the time the famine actually comes, the narrative of scarcity has already begun to define the politics of the empire.

You may not have thought about this before, but what we have here at the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus is, in many ways, a political story. This story is about the growing power of Egypt.

And Egypt, like most empires then and now, thrives off the politics of fear.

And the more the politics of fear control the people, (the more the politics of fear control us) the more we lose any memory of our ancient calling to "be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth."

Remember, it was the calling passed on from Joseph's great grandpa and great grandma down to him,

but Joseph is caught between the fading echoes of that ancient call to Abraham...

and the pressing desire of the empire to which he has pledged his allegiance.

So, now there is a famine in the land. And Egypt has been saving... but they have no vision of God's abundance shaping their lives or their politics.

So, once the famine actually hits,
rather than helping the vulnerable in the land,
rather than feeding the hungry, or providing for the foreigners,
they politic in fear to gain more power.

And each year it gets worse. Did you notice that?

The first year, Joseph does a little price gouging... It's the free market of supply and demand. The demand has peaked, and the Pharaoh is the only one with the supply.

So, Joseph collects **all** the money in Egypt... and not just Egypt, but also their neighboring lands like Canaan. He figures out how much money they have, and whatever that is, that's what he charges them for one year of food.

Even though he knows, remember, this famine is going to last seven years.

One year in, and everyone has food, but no more money... except for Pharaoh, that is. Pharaoh has more than enough food... and now more money than he can possibly spend. But he takes it anyway. And the gap between the 1 and the 99 grows. (It's an ancient pattern.)

Year two of the famine, and all the hungry people come back begging for more. They have no money to pay for food, but still, "Why should we starve?" they ask.

It's a good question.

A troubling question...

It's troubling for any of us that have food to spare,
money in the bank,
and investments like Pharaoh's storehouses
that are producing record profits...
while people in the neighborhood over,
or the country next door have nothing.
They ask us, "Why should we starve?" [pause]

"Well, you don't have to," Joseph says. "Just give me...ummm.... let's see, what do you have left? How about all your livestock. Your horses, your flocks, your herds, your donkeys. That will do."

"After all, Pharaoh says we can't just give this stuff out. Nothing in life is free, you know. We can share a little, but we've got to protect our investments."

And what choice do they have? So, they trade all of their livestock for food to survive another year. It leaves the people economically devastated. And the gap between the 1 and the 99 grows.

But at least they survive. So, no need to complain, right?

Except...the famine...goes on.

Year 3. They come back to Joseph... with nothing to offer, but their lives.

"You know that you have all our money," they say.

"You know that you have all our livestock," they say.

"There is nothing left... but our bodies," they say in verse 18.

And thus begins the systematic enslavement of the people in the Egyptian Empire.

Brueggemann says, "That's how the children of Israel become slaves—through an economic transaction."

It's hard to believe that Joseph, who knew what it was like to be a slave, would participate in such dealings. I imagine he didn't set out to be ruthless... It's just what the power of "The myth of scarcity" does to us over time. It's how the politics of Pharaoh, the politics of scarcity, re-shapes our souls.

Martin Niemoller was a German pastor who famously opposed Adolf Hitler as he rose to power. Early on, in 1933, Martin was part of a delegation of Lutheran Church leaders who went and met with Hitler. During that meeting Martin stood in the back and just listened. He didn't say anything. He just took in what was being said and what was happening.

When he came home, his wife asked him what he had learned.

Pastor Martin looked at her and said, "I discovered the Herr Hitler... is a terribly frightened man."

Pharaoh, like Hitler after him, was afraid there wasn't going to be enough to go around. And so, Pharaoh thought he had to have it all. Fear made him ruthless... and it infected those around him, like Joseph.

This is what the politics of scarcity always does. It is infectious. You see, this isn't some ancient problem. It's alive and well in our public and political discourse today. We hear it all the time.

It has many different faces. And it comes up in many different topics:

Healthcare, immigration, tax policy, national security, gun rights, foreign aid, I could go on.

Driving these debates, underneath them, is an infectious fear, ***the myth of scarcity.***

Now, let me be clear, I don't say that to advocate for one particular party over the other. There are politicians on both sides of the aisle peddling in fear and the myth of scarcity in different ways. **And there are politicians on both sides of the aisle who call us to our better nature.**

But, there are loud voices today whose power thrives on fear.... And I'm not just talking about one person in particular. There are many – on Capitol Hill and on cable channels. Watch out for them.

And again, I say that not to advocate for one particular policy or election, but ***I am advocating for a biblical imagination to intersect with our whole lives... personal, and political, and professional. Your private and your social life.***

Because these stories are not just about Joseph and Pharaoh.

They are about us. They are about our life, here and now.

That's why the Bible matters so much.

So, watch out for Pharaoh's fear of scarcity... echoing today.

Because if Pharaoh's voice begins to infect you, like it did Joseph, it will begin to shape your imagination. It will shape your actions, and your life, and your soul in ways that fundamentally contradict God's calling in your life.

And as you watch for those voices, listen also for the echoes of God's abundance. Listen for the echoes of God's voice that says,

"Let there be light."

God's voice that says, "It is good."

God's voice that says, "Be fruitful and multiply."

"Be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth."

Allow the echoes of God's voice to shape your imagination... and your heart... and your soul... and you will become more and more a ***force of well-being, active in the world.***

Pharaoh could have been that kind of blessing, you know.

As afraid as he was, he had more than enough...

more than enough to sustain him and his household... and all the people of Egypt... and the people of Canaan. God had provided.

Remember, Pharaoh's insight into the feast and famine was not his own doing. They were a gift from God, just like our insights and abilities are not our own doing.

First and foremost, our ability to work and make a living, our ability to save and provide for the future, the resources we have by living in our neighborhoods and going to our schools. ***None of them are ultimately our doing.*** All of it comes from God.

Paul warns us in Philippians 2. "Do not think more of yourselves than you ought." "Don't just look out for your own interests, but to the interests of others."

So that makes me wonder, what might have happened if Pharaoh had done just that?

What if Pharaoh had trusted in God's abundance?

How would this story have been different if he had remembered that the dream and the interpretation were gifts from God to begin with? They were expressions of God's abundance that is always more powerful than the famines of our life.

If Pharaoh had understood that,

would he have warned other regions, so they could provide for themselves?

Or even if they did not,

what if he had given out his grain for pennies on the dollar, instead of price gouging?

I don't know what the right policy would have been back then... Just like I don't know the perfect policy answers for all of our problems today... What I do know is that it's not just about one policy.

What I do know is that the myth of scarcity led to enslavement in the Biblical story... just like it does in our stories.

And that slavery doesn't come out well for Egypt and Pharaoh in the end.

Remember what happens?

Turn a few pages and the power of God's abundance is multiplying the Hebrew slaves, even under oppression. The power of life is pulsing through them and they are popping out babies like nothing.

The power of life is so strong, that Pharaoh gets nervous and tries to start killing their babies. But it doesn't work. Hebrew babies just keep comin'.

By the end of Exodus 1, Pharaoh is as mean and as ruthless as the myth of scarcity can be... but he can't stop the abundance of God.

More and more life... keeps bubbling up... even out of the sea of enslavement.
They are still fruitful and multiplying.

And before too long, God sends Moses to free all the people from that myth of scarcity.
And 10 plagues later, the most surprising thing happens. Pharaoh tells Moses they can all go, all the slaves and their livestock, they can all go,
but first, Pharaoh says, "Bring a blessing on me!"

Look it up. Exodus 12:32. Pharaoh recognizes that forceful river, "the force of well-being, that's active" flowing through Moses and Aaron and the people of God. And Pharaoh says, before you leave, lay your hands on me and allow some of that abundant life to flow to us as well.

That's where we'll pick up next week.

We'll see what happens when the people cross the Red Sea and begin to re-learn how to trust in God's abundance.

But for now, remember this:

Even in the midst of famine... God's abundance is active in our world...

The voices that tell us to protect me and mine, are almost always voices of fear... and those voices will lead you to death, not life.

God's life, God's abundance, is coming to you in all kinds of ways.

There are so many gifts...

But they are not for you to hold. "Your life is not your own." It says in Corinthians.

You are God's.

**So, allow your life to flow like a river down the mountain,
blessing all the landscapes of your week,
blessing all the people you touch,
blessing all the world.**

Amen.

Reflection

"Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord... and bring a blessing on me!" ~Pharaoh to Moses, Ex. 12:32.

Hymn of Response: "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing"