

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
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"Formation in the Wilderness"
3^d in a series: From Scarcity to Abundance
Exodus 16
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The story of our world,
the story of our lives,
begins in abundance.

**God creates, day after day, calling forth life out of the seeming emptiness. "Let there be,"
"and there was," we hear again and again in Genesis 1.**

From the **very beginning**, God creates a world where life is bursting out of the ground.

And as the story goes on, God calls Father Abraham... and his many kids... *"And I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord! Right arm!"*

Abraham's children are called to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth... and a blessing is **"a force of well-being, active in the world,"** as we talked about last week. "Right arm, left arm, right foot, left foot." It involves all that we are... being an active force of well-being in the world.

But along the way, the children of Abraham end up in Egypt... And we felt the tension last week between Egypt's famine and Eden's creation... And we saw how Pharaoh's scarcity infected even Joseph... Because that's what the myth of scarcity does. It infects our hearts, and minds, and imaginations... and eventually... our actions. Even Joseph plays a part in enslaving the people of Egypt.

So, God sends Moses to tell Pharaoh that the God of Abundance has come to free the Israelites from this ideology of scarcity. And... it takes a little convincing of Pharaoh, doesn't it? But Yahweh won't accept no for an answer... and finally after 10 plagues, Pharaoh relents...

But before Pharaoh lets them go, he said to Moses, "First, lay your hands on me. Bless me... because I need some of that abundant life that is always flowing from your God!"

And eventually... the people march out of Egypt...

And if you know the story, you know there's a setback at the Red Sea. But once again, the waters of death and emptiness are parted, and dry land comes forth... just like it did at creation... and the people cross into a whole new life.

And on the banks of the other side of the Red Sea there is rejoicing and celebrating... and they go marching out into the wilderness and they are all excited...

But a funny thing happens out in the wilderness. In fact, a really normal thing happens. The celebration... of their salvation... quickly fades.

You know how it is. The initial excitement of your encounter with God... it carries you for a time... but then life has a way of pulling you back, doesn't it?

It's like the spiritual high of summer camp... It fades.

Or that deep love you felt when you walked an aisle somewhere, or you were baptized and said yes to God's deliverance. There is joy and celebration on the banks of that baptismal water. But when you start marching out into the rest of your life... well... the wilderness has a way of wearing on you, doesn't it?

It did for the children of Abraham.

It's not too long before the joy and excitement of salvation... is worn down by the grind of the wilderness. And when that happens, the old program that was operating your life... has a way of automatically taking over.

Maybe you're back at school... and you've got the same friend problems you had before... and the same temptations... and eventually they pull you back in. Don't they?

Or you're back at work... and you've got the same grind and the same pressures... and eventually... you start to feel like nothing has changed for you.

Or you're back home... and you've got the same wounds in your marriage... and the same problems with your family... and those same patterns in you kick back in.

Yes, you had a deep moment of salvation. Yes, the sea of death was parted for you, and you're deeply grateful. But before too long...

maybe a few days,

maybe a few months... maybe a few years, I don't know...

but before too long, you look back and think, **"Wait, has anything about my life really changed?"** [pause]

That's what happens for the Hebrew children... out there in the wilderness. After a while their stomachs start grumbling... and then... before too long, their mouths start grumbling.

They're looking back to Egypt. And they're remembering how good that lamb stew tasted after a long day's work in Pharaoh's slave-factories.

And they're looking around to the everyday grind in the wilderness... and it doesn't seem like much of anything has gotten better. In fact, it may just be worse. **"We should have stayed in Egypt,"** they say to Moses. **"At least there, we had something to eat. Out here, all we can see is emptiness!"**

And of course, that's all they can see. But for us to understand why, we have to recognize the pattern here.

They only see emptiness, not because they are in the wilderness,
but because for years and years now, their hearts, and minds, and imaginations were shaped by Egypt's myth of scarcity.

Sure, God “saved” them, and now maybe their *setting* looks different (they’re in the wilderness instead of Egypt). But the way they see the world hasn’t fundamentally changed. The way they interact with one another hasn’t changed. Because *who they are* hasn’t fundamentally changed.

In other words, what we have here in the wilderness is one of the most profound examples of how essential spiritual formation is.

I’ve talked a lot about spiritual formation this year. But what I haven’t told you is that the journey of the Hebrew children through the wilderness is one of the classic paradigms for spiritual formation in the Bible.

In fact, it’s the story that is talked about and explored throughout Christian history... It’s a picture of how our life with God is more a journey, than a one-time decision. It’s more about our formation, than just crossing the Sea.

Yes, it’s important to cross the Red Sea,
or to walk through the waters of baptism.
We all have to get started,
to say yes to God’s invitation to salvation and new life.
And it’s good to celebrate on the banks of the river of salvation.

But, by itself, it is not enough... The Hebrew children have to be *re-formed* in order to live into their salvation. Their imaginations have to be reprogrammed from the limiting myth of scarcity in order to begin to see and live into the expansive story of God’s abundance.

Otherwise, they might as well go back to Egypt because they will still be living like they are in Egypt.
And that’s true for us as well.

If we are not living into the ongoing journey of becoming like Christ, the ongoing journey of being transformed into who God created us to be... then chances are, we’re still living under Egypt’s power over us... even if we’re out of Egypt, wandering in the wilderness.

The Children of Abraham need to be reshaped. Their hearts and minds need some deep spiritual formation. And so that’s what God sets out to do... in the most creative ways. That’s what the manna is all about.

It’s easy for us to misunderstand the manna. This isn’t just another showy miracle. If that were the aim, God would have provided a huge feast. But God isn’t just interested in flashy antics or even just filling their bellies, as important as that is. Certainly, God wants to take care of them, as any loving parent would.

**But what God seems really interested in
is re-shaping their hearts.
What God is really interested in
is *your* deep formation as a human being.**

So, God sets out to help them begin to see... ever so slowly...
that the world they live in
is a world that was created with Eden’s abundance.

And that the story of Egypt's scarcity... is a lie, infecting their souls.

Now, it's not easy to do this. Apparently, ten miraculous plagues and parting the Red Sea... while exciting... don't actually re-shape how you see the everyday kind of stuff. And it's in the everyday living that God is most interested. Not just the flashy moments, but in the faithful grind of life.

So, God sends them manna... but there's a beautiful catch. They are only supposed to gather enough manna for that one day.

And think about that for a moment.

Imagine telling people who have been hungry and have been running out of food: I'm going to set out a field full of grain for you... and I'm going to do it every day. Trust me. But you can't take any more than what you need.... just for today.

Imagine telling people who have been poor slaves their whole life... I'm going to set out riches for you, but don't take anything for tomorrow. Only take what you need for today.

Fat chance, right? Of course, they grab all they can! And the fastest and the strongest go out and take more... even though it means their neighbor might have less.

But two beautiful miracles happen, and it's not the manna showing up in the first place, but what happens after.

First, verses 17 & 18 say, **"Some gathered more, and some gathered less, but when they measured it out, those who had thought they were getting ahead, grabbing up the extra... didn't end up with a drop more. And those who thought they had gathered less and couldn't find enough... had as much as they needed."**

Now contrast that to last week. Remember? Pharaoh and Joseph were grabbing up all the people's money, and livestock, and land...and the gap between the 1 and the 99 kept growing. Not anymore. Not with God's people.

Well, here out in the wilderness... it didn't matter how hard you tried... or how much you grabbed up... God wasn't going to let that gap shape God's people... because God didn't want them defined by the myth of scarcity.

No matter how much they grabbed up,
or how little was left for the next guy...

Everyone ended up with the same daily bread.

That's the first miracle of the manna. Because you and I know that's not how things normally work, is it?

Everyone had enough. Everyone had the same. That's miraculous.

Now, the second thing that happened was a little less beautiful but reinforced the first. Moses told them, don't try to hoard God's abundance. **"Don't try to store it up until tomorrow."**

But again... they were too shaped by the myth of scarcity to do otherwise.

Of course, people tried to take extra and hide it under their pillows.

Let's be honest, that's what you and I would have done, too.

Only... it turned into worms overnight... and that's just gross!

Worms wiggling their way out from their kitchens and from under their beds...

and every other place they tried to hoard God's abundance.

So, out there in the wilderness of formation, they could not save up to get ahead of the next guy and protect the future. They had to trust in God's daily bread.

Now, just to be clear, I don't think this story is saying that it's bad or wrong to save up along the way or be wise with our resources. That kind of literal connection is missing the point. But what I do think this story is telling us, is that...if we try to hide what we save from God, if we forget that all of that is God's abundance... then there's a good chance it'll turn to worms, too.

Remember how Jesus put it in that great Sermon on the Mount? **"Do not store up your treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume... but store up your treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is.... there your heart will be also."** (Matthew 6:19-20)

God is concerned about what's going on with your heart. And God doesn't want to see your heart get all eaten up with worms...or turn to rust.

And so, I'd say the worms were the second great miracle of the manna... precisely because it was slowly setting their hearts free.

Slowly they were beginning to realize that

they can work all they want.

They can try to store up all they can.

They can live shaped by Egypt's narrative of more is better than less...

But when the morning comes... it's all going to turn to worms anyway.

When the morning comes... it's just you and God's provision anyway.

And learning that... is a profound miracle.

In fact, I think this is one of the hardest lessons of our lives.

And I say that's one of the hardest lessons, because we are deeply programed by the myth of scarcity... just like the children of Abraham.

I mean, I don't know about you, but on a good day, I might read the story of God's abundance in the Bible... but every day I see an ad that tells me I need to upgrade my phone, and an Apple watch would sure make my life easier.

On a good week, I hear the story of God's abundance on Sunday.

But every week, all week long, I hear the myth of scarcity on social media that tells me everyone else is having more fun than I am... so what I have, or what I do, or who I am... It really isn't enough.

Bruggemann says that even as the world's resources pour into the United States, and our nation grows more and more wealthy, money has become a kind of narcotic for us. We're addicted to

it more and more. We have a love affair with it. In fact, he goes so far as to say consumerism, as it is practiced in our society, **“is not simply a marketing strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us.”**

In other words, our hearts and minds have become enslaved by it, and we don't even recognize it.

And so of course, trusting in God's abundance has become one of the hardest spiritual lessons of our lives.

I can only imagine how hard it would have been for the children of Abraham, out in the wilderness, to only collect enough for one day...

But that's what their souls needed to do...

Day after day, after day, after day, they had to practice waking up in the morning to God's great abundance... and going to bed at night... hoping, trusting, it would be true again for them tomorrow.

You see, learning to recognize God's abundance doesn't just happen by being told, **“Don't worry, there will be enough for tomorrow.”** You only really learn it when you begin to practice it. And so, out of deep love for the children of Abraham, that's what God makes them do.

[smile at the absurdity]

Day after day... for 40 years in the wilderness... they practice only taking their daily bread. I can hardly fathom it. They practice trusting that God's abundance... will meet them in the morning. It's a forty year daily spiritual formation practice.

And I think that's an important invitation for us all.

There are some things, some deep soul truths, that we never get to stop practicing. There are some practices that we need to learn when we're children, and learn again as teenagers, and learn again as parents, and learn again as grandparents, and learn again in the last stages of life. And I think this is one of them.

It's why we practice it every week by bringing our offerings to God and singing.

We practice it by ***disciplined generosity and gratitude.***

Yes, partly we give because we care about the ministry of this church and we know that the church cannot operate, and our ministries cannot operate, without our financial commitments.

But there really is something deeper going on here.

We give because our parents and grandparents taught us,
because the disciples and Jesus taught us,

giving our money... is a practice... that frees our souls.

And helps us discover God's abundance.

And after a long, long time... of all that practice... and all that daily bread,
we eventually discover that we have been walking
to the Promised Land,

the land of abundance.
That daily practice was guiding us to the land flowing with milk and honey.

Pray with me.

Prayer

*O God, we ask that you would take us there.
Help us to practice trusting in you in every sphere of our lives.*

*Free us from the chains of fear that want to pull us back to Egypt's scarcity.
Help us learn to trust that this world is full of your life...*

Grant us hearts and imaginations large enough to see the manna, coming from heaven, all around us.

We ask these things in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying... Our Father...

Hymn of Response, 634 "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"