

From the Pulpit

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“Scarcity or Abundance...Which Narrative Will We Follow?”

Dt. 30:15-20; I Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 5, February 16, 2014, dedicated to Logan Carter Kirker on his baptismal day, to the memory of Judge Donald E. Calhoun, Jr. who died February 8th, to all Olympians at the Sochi Winter Olympics and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When you pick up a book, how many of you read the end to see what happens in the climax of the story? Similarly, how many of you tell a story with the punch line as your opening line? Not many. But that is exactly what we are doing today with our texts. We do it all the time in church when we start a reading with the huge assumption that everyone in the room has seen the thousands of years of episodes that preceded the lesson of the day. No wonder we often struggle to say “Thanks be to God.” It would sort of be like entering “Breaking Bad” on the final show or seeing “Downton Abby” in season 4 without having any context whatsoever. Forget it. We wouldn’t do it. But, we do in church... O well. Now where was I???

That is exactly what we are doing with Deuteronomy 30 at the 15th verse. Moses is giving his final sermon. He is at the end of his life – all 120 years of it! His life included being saved as a baby discovered on the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter, being raised as Pharaoh’s son, killing an Egyptian soldier, fleeing for his life into Midian, herding sheep, marrying a shepherd’s daughter, seeing a burning bush which wasn’t burning while hearing God’s voice to liberate his people, returning to Egypt, liberating his people from slavery, leading them through the Sea of Reeds and all over the Sinai Peninsula (read “Mountain DESERT”), and of course, receiving the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai. He spent the first 80 years getting his people out of slavery in Egypt and the last 40 years getting Egypt out of his people.

Finally, Dt. 30 delivers the Chosen People to the edge of the Promised Land. He places all the important choices of life on the table. Most fundamentally – Moses places the choice for “*Life and Good and Death and Evil*” right in front of their faces.

He commands, warns and witnesses to them.

He **commands them** “*Love GOD, your God. Walk in his ways. Keep his commandments, regulations, and rules so that you will live, really live, live exuberantly, blessed by GOD, your God, in the land you are about to enter and possess.*” He **warns them**, “*If you have a change of heart, refuse to listen obediently, and willfully go off to serve and worship other gods, you will most certainly die. You won’t last long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.*” He **witnesses to them**: “*I call Heaven and Earth to witness against you today: I place before you Life and Death, Blessing and Curse. Choose life so that you and your children will live. And love GOD, your God, listening obediently to him, firmly embracing him. Oh yes, he is life itself, a long life settled on the soil that GOD, your God, promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*”

Unpacking this passage helps. In go all the way back to Abraham. In Abraham, we are introduced to the narrative that runs under the texts of scripture. The greatest struggle, the underlying choice faced in the Bible is the choice between Scarcity and Abundance. In Genesis 12:10 – right after we meet Abram, he goes down to Egypt because there is hunger in the land of Canaan. Scarcity hits the people of God. They turn in desperation to the first Pharaoh.

Scarcity is frightening. And the Narrative of Scarcity that runs through the Bible. It is the story of anxiety, deficit, violence and accumulation. Scarcity drives the people of God into Egypt and they become slaves to Pharaoh. (We never know the name of Pharaoh – the Bible believes if you have seen one Pharaoh you have seen all pharaohs. Pharaoh’s dream in Genesis 41 drives him ask his intelligence community what is going on. Like all intelligence communities they don’t know. He becomes anxious. They bring him a Jew from Pharaoh’s jails to interpret his dreams. Jewish philosophers and interpreters of texts were well known for going well beyond meaning to find true meaning. Long before Sigmund Freud, there was Joseph. With Joseph telling Pharaoh what his dreams mean, anxiety becomes the seedbed for domestic and foreign policy. Egypt stores grain. After all, they had been storing Pharaohs in tombs for thousands of years before this. They were good at storing things.

The narrative of scarcity drives Joseph's family – led by his father Jacob, to come begging to Egypt. They give livestock for food. They give land for food. Finally, they give themselves as slaves – for food. They thank the Pharaoh when he makes them slaves – a permanent underclass of people in debt forever to meet the accumulation needs of the few.

Speaking of which... I saw a statistic this week. 3.5 billion People of this earth have as much accumulated wealth at the 85 top money people on the planet. This is wrong. This is sinful! That is scarcity facing off with abundance, slavery and Pharoanic wealth played out in our times – times 100! In this way, we see that the Bible is not just history – it is a narrative script for how things really are among us.

The scarcity narrative only begins in Genesis. Once in the Promised Land, in Kings, we find Solomon (who is the son-in-law of a later Pharaoh) has become the great accumulator. While his people starve, he builds a Temple and gathers money and power for himself. He may be wise, but he is also an arms dealer and a collector of women (300 concubines, 700 princes). He believes everything - including wives – can be bought and sold.

Finally, in the face of Solomon and the kings that follow, another narrative begins to emerge as the prophets begin to raise questions about scarcity for the many and accumulation of the few. They see that children, widows and orphans are starving and dying. They see good people dying in the streets because the rich people don't care. The prophets replace the narrative of scarcity with a narrative of generous justice – a narrative of abundance.

With the miracles of Elijah and continuing on, the prophets simply refuse to conform to the narrative of scarcity. Amos is the one who points out that peasants don't kill animals for sport before they full grown (6:1ff). He says that those who do are going to hell in a hand basket. He proclaims that such a system cannot be sustained forever. They have the prophetic imagination to see a different world. They see the world as God sees it.

Prophetic imagination helps people experience the world differently.

Jeremiah doesn't mince words. In 5:15ff, God says in his voice, "I AM BRINGING YOU A NATION FROM FAR AWAY– they have massive weapons and mighty warriors – vs. 17 – they will devour you! They will devour your wealth, your infrastructure...they will consume you! They will do it at the behest of Yahweh. Ezekiel says in 16:49 – "this was the guilt of your sister Sodom – pride, excess of food and prosperous ease but did not take care of the poor and needy!" In the last written word of the Hebrew Scriptures, Daniel says in 5:1 -

Time is running out – your illusion of safety cannot be sustained. Daniel gets promoted for being so helpful and then oversees the death of the king. God has the last word on the scarcity narrative.

Scarcity is an ideology that keeps people down. It keeps people working to death. It is a form of leveraging people. The church buys into this narrative too - proving we are a wounding institution in our own right. We need to acknowledge that often our greatest terrorist threats come from within. It is the threat of believing we must hoard, hold, and have. We set up pyramid structures in which the few are at the top weighing down the many. Scarcity is scary. It certainly scares us!

We say “we don’t have enough money for that. We don’t have enough resources to do that!” Here at First Church, we are in mid-February looking at how we can manage a tighter budget. In seven weeks, Rev. Wilson will be leaving and we will not replace her full-time because we say we don’t have enough money to do it. The truth is all the money we need to run the church is in the pockets, wallets and purses we are holding in our hands in this room at this time. Having such conviction, one member stepped forward just last week with an increase of their pledge of \$8,000. Wow! (That person must have written this sermon in advance). With a narrative of abundance superseding the narrative of scarcity, we could overcome all things through God who gives us power and faith to do so!

What would happen if we flipped the script –in our church and in our lives? What if we put the community as the greatest unit of meaning (as opposed to the individual as the greatest unit of meaning)? It would mean that the beautiful fabric of connectedness would weave us together and nurture us as opposed to the single threads of individualism which are always pulling us apart. It would mean that the social gospel was alive and well in our church again. It would mean the ghost of Gladden would walk with us as opposed to the ghost of Pharaoh ruling our hearts.

People who believe in the narrative of abundance must out-imagine the narrative of scarcity.

To do this, we must learn and live with the three pillars in the narrative of abundance. They are:

1) The world is God’s Creation. Not nature, but creation....created, sustained and blessed by the God who has abundance to give...God blessed the plants and animals – God infused creation with fruitfulness and commands earth to continue to be fruitful. It is dazzling and God has made it so. As such we sing the **DOXOLOGY as if we really mean it. We give our** lives over to God in wonder,

praise and gratitude. We stop moaning and we start clapping. Is this letting go of self to God that marks our words and our ways? Sing the Psalms! Psalm 148 - give praise back from whence it came! Praise! Praise! Praise! Loving God back without reservation! Psalm 150 – the great love letter! Psalm 104 – the great doxology of creation! God becomes our great breathing machine – filled with the Holy Spirit.

2) **God creates SABBATH as our center.** God is not a workaholic. God had no anxiety about the world working without a day of rest. We become people who are refreshed and re-sabbathed. We will spend all of Lent become Sabbath people. You will be invited to small groups in homes and here at church to study a book entitled – 24/6. Unless you are better than God, you need to rest. You need to recuperate. The narrative of scarcity says work until you drop! The narrative of Abundance says, one day of rest. If it is good enough for God, it is good enough for everyone that God created. God rested on the seventh day because God was depleted. We are made in the image of that God and we get depleted, too. You see the narrative of scarcity want us to be depleted because it knows that fully recovered people are dangerous people. They can think, focus, fight, and change the world.

3) **God creates Jesus Christ as the fullest measure of the abundance narrative.** Out of his vision and presence for people, Jesus points the way – all the way – to the truth, the light, and the life of God. He heals rather than kills. He uplifts rather than tears down. He has the conviction that the world has enough for all, rather than too little for all. He leads us to believe that when we act generously all things work together for Good in God’s abundant love. Jesus walks away from the memo mentality – that is if I send out this memo of scarcity – all will cower and respond. Instead, he speaks in parables of grace in which people see themselves as the healed and healing agents in the stories. He feeds 5,000 with a few loaves and fishes – because people share with each other. People are so taken by his narrative of abundance that the next time he faces the same challenge, the people rise to the occasion and feed 4,000. Now it becomes a love feast! People know this guy. They want to share their limited food with each other.

We have a Lord of Life who believes in Abundance.

Let’s read Moses’ final words with Jesus in mind. As we stand on the edge of our promised land of possibilities, let us be people who choose the narrative of good, of blessings, of limitless possibilities, of hope, of love, of LIFE – yes of Abundant Life! Then we can abolish our frightening narratives of scarcity and

embrace –once and for all time – Christ’s everlasting, eternal narrative of abundant life! Amen.

The concepts of scarcity and abundance in scripture were inspired by Dr. Walter Brueggemann.

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