

The God of Abundance
Rev. Dennis Kelly

We gather together this Thanksgiving Eve to celebrate an event that took place long ago somewhere yet is part of nation's story and culture. We also gather together to give thanks for all the blessings that we have been granted throughout this past year. It is a time to remind ourselves how God remains faithful to all the people of his creation and provides for their every need both in times of abundance and in times of scarcity.

First let us remember the story. On August 5th, 1620, two small ships set sail from England on a journey to a new land. They carried inside of them a strange assortment of people. Most were considered social misfits and religious outcasts in their home land of England. They all left for different reasons but with similar dreams: to start a new life where they could be free to worship God in the way of their own choosing.

Many died during the journey at sea. Those who set foot on the Massachusetts shore in December of 1620 were unprepared and poorly suited to be settlers. They brought musical instruments but not a horse or a cow. Their numbers included a printer and two tailors, but almost no one with farming or hunting skills - not even a plow or a fishing line.

That first winter was extremely harsh. Of the 102 who landed, only 54 - almost half of them children - were left alive by April of 1621. Yet when the spring came, the group that remained began the difficult task of ensuring that they will survive the following winter. Fields were sown, homes built, and they began to learn from the local tribes how to hunt and find food on the land. When the fall arrived, the fields were harvested. Because of the abundance of that harvest they decide to set aside a time to give thanks for the bountiful blessing that God had given them. Thus the first thanksgiving celebration was born.

Our Thanksgiving celebrations tomorrow will look nothing like the experience of those pilgrims long ago. For most of us the food we eat is not the product of our own labors. We go to the supermarket and purchase everything we need: the turkey, the potatoes, the vegetables, the stuffing, and the desserts. But how many of us remember those whose labor made these things possible, those who raised those turkeys, planted and harvested the potatoes and the vegetables, those who prepared the stuffing and the dessert? How many of us will give thanks tomorrow for their effort and labor?

For many of us, our definition of *thanksgiving* is a response offered in gratitude for something that we have received. However, as we look at scriptures, we begin to see a completely different picture of what giving thanks is all about. It is not an occasional word or gesture. Rather it is a way of life that shaped by how we view the world. Key to this worldview are two questions. (1) Do you look at the world around you, and see a world of abundance? (2) Or do you look around and see a world of scarcity?

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, writing in “The Other Side” magazine, says that:

We live in a world where the gap between scarcity and abundance grows wider every day. Whether at the level of nations or neighbors, this widening gap is polarizing people, making each camp more and more suspicious and antagonistic toward the other. But a peculiar thing, at least from a biblical perspective, is that the rich – the ones with the abundance – rely on an ideology of scarcity, while the poor – the ones suffering from scarcity – rely on an ideology of abundance...

The issue involves whether there is enough to go around – enough food, water, shelter, space. And ideology of scarcity says no, there's not enough, so hold onto what you have. In fact, don't just hold on to it, hoard it. Put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, even if others must do without.

An affirmation of abundance says just the opposite: Appearances notwithstanding, there is enough to go around, so long as each of us takes only what we need. In fact, if we are willing to have but not hoard, there will even be more than enough left over.

From the very beginning of scriptures, we are told that ours is a God of abundance. Creation is a story of abundance. God initiates this abundance, not only by calling forth plants and fish and birds and animals, but also by commanding them to “increase and multiply.” God’s generosity reaches a climax on the sixth day, when God proclaims that there is a sufficiency for “everything that has the breath of life” and declares that all of this is “very good.” Having thus set in motion a world of abundance, God rests, - everything is in place, and the world will have enough.

The story of the Israelites in Egypt is also a story of scarcity and abundance. Jacob and his family travel to Egypt because of a drought in their homeland. In Egypt there is an abundance of food. But this abundance turns to scarcity as the Israelites trade their freedom for food. After years of slavery, God sends Moses to tell the Pharaoh that the God of abundance has come to free the Israelites from this oppression of scarcity. It takes some convincing, but Pharaoh finally agrees – at least long enough for the Israelites to gather their belongings and put a river between themselves and Egypt.

It isn't very long before what they have left behind has starts to look good compared to what they must face. They left the land of scarcity thinking that they would immediately arrive in the land of abundance. Instead they find themselves at risk in the wilderness, a desert with no visible life-support systems. Having experienced the continuing reality of scarcity throughout their lives, the Israelites wonder aloud if they would have been better of staying in Egypt, where at least there was bread.

Suddenly, their prayers and their cries are answered. A fine, flaky substance called Mannah is found, providing exactly what they need to make bread. This gift from God

overturns their complaints about scarcity and cancels their anxiety about hunger. The wilderness is transformed from a place of scarcity into a place of wondrous abundance. And at the end of the wilderness journey, they are assured that the land to which they are going is a “land flowing with milk and honey.”

Hundreds of years later, a similar transformation takes place. A crowd gathers to hear Jesus. But it seems that most of them have forgotten to bring food. So Jesus turns to his disciples and asks where they will get food to feed all of these people. The disciples look around and see only scarcity. They have little money to buy food for all of these people. And there are only five barley loaves and two fish, brought by one small boy. “We don’t have enough to feed the people,” the disciples reply, “so we shouldn’t even try to feed these people.”

But Jesus has abundance on his mind. So he tells the disciples to have the people sit down. He takes the bread, gives thanks for it, broke it up and gave it to those who were seated. He does the same thing with the fish. And surprisingly, all five thousand people are feed. There is, in fact, so much of an abundance of food, that the leftovers filled twelve baskets. And the people see clearly, that the God of abundance has taken care of his people once again. And in the words of today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus assures the people that he will give them more than what is necessary to quench their physical hunger and thirst; he will give them nothing less than the bread of life.

We live in a world, however, that does not always recognize or celebrate the abundance that is around us. As a whole, we are filled with an anxiety that keeps telling us that what we have is not enough; we need more, more, and more. These are the voices of scarcity that tell us to gather up all the resources around us, do not think about the needs of others, and the only measure of success is the amount of resources and wealth you accumulate. Yet it never seems to be enough.

However, there are some who view the world through the eyes of abundance and not scarcity, who trust that God has provided enough for all. In them, there is more trust in God’s generosity and less fear that there will not be enough. This attitude of abundance is reflected in the words of our psalm for today, Psalm 100:

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing...
Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
And his generosity and faithfulness is given to all generations.*

So this evening we gather together to give thanks. There are so many things for which we can be thankful. But the greatest gift of all, for which we must be thankful, is a God who surprises us with abundance every day. Let us give thanks to God and bless God’s holy name. AMEN.