

The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

The majority of the world's resources pour into the United States. And as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our own prosperity or the poverty of so many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more money and less and less generosity-less and less public money for the needy, less charity for the neighbor.

Robert Wuthnow, sociologist of religion at Princeton University, has studied stewardship in the church and discovered that preachers do a good job of promoting stewardship. They study it, think about it, explain it well. But folks don't get it. Though many of us are well intentioned, we have invested our lives in consumerism. We have a love affair with "more"-and we will never have enough. Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us, and the theological question facing us is whether the gospel has the power to help us withstand it.

The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis I is a song of praise for God's generosity. It tells how well the world is ordered. It keeps saying, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." It declares that God blesses-that is, endows with vitality-the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind. And it pictures the creator as saying, "Be fruitful and multiply." In an orgy of fruitfulness, everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness that pours from God's creator spirit. And as you know, the creation ends in Sabbath. God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says, "I've got to take a break from all this. I've got to get out of the office."

And Israel celebrates God's abundance. Psalm 104, the longest creation poem, is a commentary on Genesis I. The psalmist surveys creation and names it all: the heavens and the earth, the waters and springs and streams and trees and birds and goats and wine and oil and bread and people and lions. This goes on for 23 verses and ends in the 24th with the psalmist's expression of awe and praise for God and God's creation. Verses 27 and 28 are something like a table prayer. They proclaim, "You give them all food in due season, you feed everybody." The psalm ends by

picturing God as a great respirator. It says, "If you give your breath the world will live; if you ever stop breathing, the world will die." But the psalm makes clear that we don't need to worry. God is utterly, utterly reliable. The fruitfulness of the world is guaranteed.

Psalm 150, the last psalm in the book, is an exuberant expression of amazement at God's goodness. It just says, "Praise Yahweh, praise Yahweh with lute, praise Yahweh with trumpet, praise, praise, praise." Together, these three scriptures proclaim that God's force of life is loose in the world. Genesis 1 affirms generosity and denies scarcity. Psalm 104 celebrates the buoyancy of creation and rejects anxiety. Psalm 150 enacts abandoning oneself to God and letting go of the need to have anything under control.

Later in Genesis God blesses Abraham, Sarah and their family. God tells them to be a blessing, to bless the people of all nations. Blessing is the force of well-being active in the world, and faith is the awareness that creation is the gift that keeps on giving. That awareness dominates Genesis until its 47th chapter. In that chapter Pharaoh dreams that there will be a famine in the land. So Pharaoh gets organized to administer, control and monopolize the food supply. Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy. For the first time in the Bible, someone says, "There's not enough. Let's get everything."

Martin Niemöller, the German pastor who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler, was a young man when, as part of a delegation of leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, he met with Hitler in 1933. Niemöller stood at the back of the room and looked and listened. He didn't say anything. When he went home, his wife asked him what he had learned that day. Niemöller replied, "I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man."

Because Pharaoh, like Hitler after him, is afraid that there aren't enough good things to go around, he must try to have them all. Because he is fearful, he is ruthless. Pharaoh hires Joseph to manage the monopoly. When the crops fail and the peasants run out of food, they come to Joseph. And on behalf of Pharaoh, Joseph says, "What's your collateral?" They give up their land for food, and then, the next year, they give up their cattle. By the third year of the famine they have no collateral but themselves. And that's how the children of Israel become slaves-through an economic transaction.

By the end of Genesis 47 Pharaoh has all the land except that belonging to the priests, which he never touches because he needs somebody to bless him. The notion of scarcity has been introduced into biblical faith. The Book of Exodus records the contest between the liturgy of generosity and the myth of scarcity-a contest that still tears us apart today.

The promises of the creation story continue to operate in the lives of the children of Israel. Even in captivity, the people multiply. By the end of Exodus 1 Pharaoh decides that they have become so numerous that he doesn't want any more Hebrew babies to be born. He tells the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (though we don't know Pharaoh's name, we know theirs), to kill all the newborn boys. But they don't, and the Hebrew babies just keep popping out.

By the end of Exodus, Pharaoh has been as mean, brutal and ugly as he knows how to be-and as the myth of scarcity tends to be. Finally, he becomes so exasperated by his inability to control the people of Israel that he calls Moses and Aaron to come to him. Pharaoh tells them, "Take your people and leave. Take your flocks and herds and just get out of here!" And then the great king of Egypt, who presides over a monopoly of the region's resources, asks Moses and Aaron to bless him. The powers of scarcity admit to this little community of abundance, "It is clear that you are the wave of the future. So before you leave, lay your powerful hands upon us and give us energy." The text shows that the power of the future is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources; it is in the hands of those who trust God's abundance.

When the children of Israel are in the wilderness, beyond the reach of Egypt, they still look back and think, "Should we really go? All the world's glory is in Egypt and with Pharaoh." But when they finally turn around and look into the wilderness, where there are no monopolies, they see the glory of Yahweh.

In answer to the people's fears and complaints, something extraordinary happens. God's love comes trickling down in the form of bread. They say, "*Manhue?*"-Hebrew for "What is it?"-and the word "manna" is born. They had never before received bread as a free gift that they couldn't control, predict, plan for or own. The meaning of this strange narrative is that the gifts of life are indeed given by a generous God. It's a wonder, it's a miracle, it's an embarrassment, it's irrational, but God's abundance transcends the market economy.

Three things happened to this bread in Exodus 16. First, everybody had enough. But because Israel had learned to believe in scarcity in Egypt, people started to hoard the bread. When they tried to bank it, to invest it, it turned sour and rotted, because you cannot store up God's generosity. Finally, Moses said, "You know what we ought to do? We ought to do what God did in Genesis 1. We ought to have a Sabbath." Sabbath means that there's enough bread, that we don't have to hustle every day of our lives. There's no record that Pharaoh ever took a day off. People who think their lives consist of struggling to get more and more can never slow down because they won't ever have enough.

When the people of Israel cross the Jordan River into the promised land the manna stops coming. Now they can and will have to grow their food. Very soon Israel suffers a terrible defeat in battle and Joshua conducts an investigation to find out who or what undermined the war effort. He finally traces their defeat to a man called Achan, who stole some of the spoils of battle and withheld them from the community. Possessing land, property and wealth makes people covetous, the Bible warns.

We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.

The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us at the turn of the millennium. The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. The baptismal service declares that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things—nothing can separate us from God.

What we know about our beginnings and our endings, then, creates a different kind of present tense for us. We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home

and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for.

But if you are like me, while you read the Bible you keep looking over at the screen to see how the market is doing. If you are like me, you read the Bible on a good day, but you watch Nike ads every day. And the Nike story says that our beginnings are in our achievements, and that we must create ourselves. My wife and I have some young friends who have a four-year-old son. Recently the mother told us that she was about to make a crucial decision. She had to get her son into the right kindergarten because if she didn't, then he wouldn't get into the right prep school. And that would mean not being able to get into Davidson College. And if he didn't go to school there he wouldn't be connected to the bankers in Charlotte and be able to get the kind of job where he would make a lot of money. Our friends' story is a kind of a parable of our notion that we must position ourselves because we must achieve, and build our own lives.

According to the Nike story, whoever has the most shoes when he dies wins. The Nike story says there are no gifts to be given because there's no giver. We end up only with whatever we manage to get for ourselves. This story ends in despair. It gives us a present tense of anxiety, fear, greed and brutality. It produces child and wife abuse, indifference to the poor, the buildup of armaments, divisions between people, and environmental racism. It tells us not to care about anyone but ourselves-and it is the prevailing creed of American society.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if liberal and conservative churchpeople, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity? What we know in the secret recesses of our hearts is that the story of scarcity is a tale of death. And the people of God counter this tale by witnessing to the manna. There is a more excellent bread than crass materialism. It is the bread of life and you don't have to bake it. As we walk into the new millennium, we must decide where our trust is placed.

The great question now facing the church is whether our faith allows us to live in a new way. If we choose the story of death, we will lose the land to excessive chemical fertilizer, or by pumping out the water table for irrigation, perhaps. Or maybe we'll only lose it at night, as going out after dark becomes more and more dangerous.

Joshua 24 puts the choice before us. Joshua begins by reciting the story of God's generosity, and he concludes by saying, "I don't know about you, but I and my house will choose the Lord." This is not a church-growth text. Joshua warns the people that this choice will bring them a bunch of trouble. If they want to be in on the story of abundance, they must put away their foreign gods-I would identify them as the gods of scarcity.

Jesus said it more succinctly. You cannot serve God and mammon. You cannot serve God and do what you please with your money or your sex or your land. And then he says, "Don't be anxious, because everything you need will be given to you." But you must decide. Christians have a long history of trying to squeeze Jesus out of public life and reduce him to a private little Savior. But to do this is to ignore what the Bible really says. Jesus talks a great deal about the kingdom of God-and what he means by that is a public life reorganized toward neighborliness.

As a little child, Jesus must often have heard his mother, Mary, singing. And as we know, she sang a revolutionary song, the Magnificat-the anthem of Luke's Gospel. She sang about neighborliness; about how God brings down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; about how God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. Mary did not make up this dangerous song. She took it from another mother, Hannah, who sang it much earlier to little Samuel, who became one of ancient Israel's great revolutionaries. Hannah, Mary and their little boys imagined a great social transformation. Jesus enacted his mother's song well. Everywhere he went he broke the vicious cycles of poverty, bondage, fear and death; he healed, transformed, empowered, and brought new life. Jesus' example gives us the mandate to transform our public life.

Telling parables was one of Jesus' revolutionary activities, for parables are subversive re-imaginings of reality. The ideology devoted to encouraging consumption wants to shrivel our imaginations so that we cannot conceive of living in any way that would be less profitable for the dominant corporate structures. But Jesus tells us that we can change the world. The Christian community performs a vital service by keeping the parables alive. These stories haunt us and push us in directions we never thought we would go.

Performing what the Bible calls "wonders and signs" was another way in which Jesus enacted his mother's song. These signs-or miracles-may seem odd to us, but in fact they are the typical gifts we receive when the world gets reorganized and placed

under the sovereignty of God. Everywhere Jesus goes the world is rearranged: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are freed from debt. The forgiveness of debts is listed last because it's the hardest thing to do-harder even than raising the dead to life. Jesus left ordinary people dazzled, amazed and grateful; he left powerful people angry and upset, because every time he performed a wonder, they lost a little of their clout. The wonders of the new age of the coming of God's kingdom may scandalize and upset us. They dazzle us, but they also make us nervous. The people of God need pastoral help in processing this ambivalent sense of both deeply yearning for God's new creation and deeply fearing it.

The feeding of the multitudes, recorded in Mark's Gospel, is an example of the new world coming into being through God. When the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry crowd, found a child with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus *took, blessed, broke* and *gave* the bread. These are the four decisive verbs of our sacramental existence. Jesus conducted a Eucharist, a gratitude. He demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. Jesus is engaged in the sacramental, subversive reordering of public reality.

The profane is the opposite of the sacramental. "Profane" means flat, empty, one-dimensional, exhausted. The market ideology wants us to believe that the world is profane-life consists of buying and selling, weighing, measuring and trading, and then finally sinking into death and nothingness. But Jesus presents an entirely different kind of economy, one infused with the mystery of abundance and a cruciform kind of generosity. Five thousand are fed and 12 baskets of food are left over-one for every tribe of Israel. Jesus transforms the economy by blessing it and breaking it beyond self-interest. From broken Friday bread comes Sunday abundance. In this and in the following account of a miraculous feeding in Mark, people do not grasp, hoard, resent, or act selfishly; they watch as the juices of heaven multiply the bread of earth. Jesus reaffirms Genesis 1.

When people forget that Jesus is the bread of the world, they start eating junk food-the food of the Pharisees and of Herod, the bread of moralism and of power. Too often the church forgets the true bread and is tempted by the junk food. Our faith is not just about spiritual matters; it is about the transformation of the world. The closer we stay to Jesus, the more we will bring a new economy of abundance to the world. The disciples often don't get what Jesus is about because they keep trying to

fit him into old patterns-and to do so is to make him innocuous, irrelevant and boring. But Paul gets it.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul directs a stewardship campaign for the early church and presents Jesus as the new economist. Though Jesus was rich, Paul says, "yet for your sakes he became poor, that by his poverty you might become rich." We say it takes money to make money; Paul says it takes poverty to produce abundance. Jesus gave himself to enrich others, and we should do the same. Our abundance and the poverty of others need to be brought into a new balance. Paul ends his stewardship letter by quoting Exodus 16: "And the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." The citation is from the story of the manna that transformed the wilderness into abundance.

It is, of course, easier to talk about these things than to live them. Many people both inside and outside of the church haven't a clue that Jesus is talking about the economy. We haven't taught them that he is. But we must begin to do so now, no matter how economically compromised we may feel. Our world absolutely requires this news. It has nothing to do with being Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives, socialists or capitalists. It is much more elemental: the creation is infused with the Creator's generosity, and we can find practices, procedures and institutions that allow that generosity to work. Like the rich young man in Mark 10, we all have many possessions. Sharing our abundance may, as Jesus says, be impossible for mortals, but nothing is impossible for God. None of us knows what risks God's spirit may empower us to take. Our faith, ministry and hope at the turn of the millennium are that the Creator will empower us to trust his generosity, so that bread may abound.