



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – June 1, 2008

Abundance or Scarcity?

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Isaiah 9:1-4

1But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. 2The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. 3You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4:12-23

12Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—16the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” 17From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 18As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 19And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” 20Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. 23Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Try a little thought experiment with me. Imagine you have ten children over to your house. Walk into the playroom with a dish holding eight Hershey’s Kisses and set it before the ten kids. What’s going to happen? We know what’s going to happen! We know

they’re going to dash desperately to stake their greedy claim, clutch their prize tightly, and eye each other warily to see if anybody got two candies when they only got one. Why? Because a presumption of scarcity drives anxious, selfish, competitive behavior.

Now imagine you walk into the same playroom with the same children, neither better nor worse, neither more generous nor more selfish – but this time you are holding a bowl of 500 Hershey’s Kisses. What’s going to happen? We know what’s going to happen! At first they’re still going to plunge their little hands into the bowl for a fist full of Kisses because they are so inclined to fear scarcity. But as the awareness of abundance settles on them, they’ll laugh with delight as they loosen their grip, pass candy to their neighbors, and trustingly put all but the one they are eating down beside them. Why? Because a presumption of abundance drives joyful, loving, cooperative behavior.

Now you and I can afford to cluck condescendingly at children grasping for candy, but that’s just because we’re pretty sure we can arrange an abundance of chocolate whenever we want. Just watch how our calm sense of perspective leaks away when you raise the stakes.

For instance, haven’t you ever hungered to be loved, but felt that you were never loved enough? Haven’t you ever yearned to be accepted, but wondered whether you really were accepted by those around you – or wondered if they *would* really accept you if they ever fully knew you? Haven’t you ever had a nagging feeling that you were meant for something more in life, but felt imprisoned by the life you actually led? Haven’t you ever sagged at the thought that you and every person you will ever love will die and that your every accomplishment will be eroded by the sands of time?

Most of us have felt, at least occasionally, that the love, acceptance, meaning, and significance we most crave in life are scarce or threatened. And most of us can recall

at least a time when our fear of scarcity drove us to anxious, selfish, competitive behavior.

This is the experience of life Shakespeare had in mind when he had Macbeth say life is “but . . . a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more . . . a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”¹ This is the life Thomas Hobbes had in mind when he wrote that the natural life of man was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”² This is the experience Isaiah had in mind when he wrote of lives walked in darkness, imprisoned by gloom and anguish, burdened by an oppressive yoke.

Now, to be fair, haven't we also had moments when the world seemed to be our oyster? Haven't we experienced a time – perhaps in the thrall of love, or right after a hoped-for promotion, or while overcome by the sheer magnificence of nature – a time when we felt that the love, acceptance, meaning, and significance we most crave in life were abundantly assured? Haven't we also had moments when our sense of abundance inspired joyful, loving, cooperative behavior?

These are the experiences the psalmist had in mind when he wrote, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:4-5). These are the experiences St. Paul had in mind when he wrote in Galatians, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,” heirs to the promise of eternal life (Galatians 3:26). These are the experiences Isaiah prophesied when he foresaw a great light, God increasing our joy, and God breaking the yoke that burdens us.

Abundance or scarcity? So very much rides on that one simple presumption embedded deep in each soul. Do we live with a presumption that what we most crave in life is assured in abundance or do we live with a presumption that it is scarce and threatened?

So here's the easiest question of the morning: Where do you *want* to live? Do you want to live your life with a presumption of abundance and the consequent joyful, loving, cooperative behavior? Or do you want to live your life with a presumption of scarcity and the

consequent anxious, selfish, competitive behavior? It's the easiest question because we all know the answer: given the choice, we would all opt for a perception of abundance, we would all opt for joy, love and cooperation.

But here's the hardest question of the morning: where do you *actually* live? When you consider your most important human needs for love, acceptance, meaning and significance, do you perceive that your world is characterized by abundance or by scarcity? And it's the hardest question because it asks not about your external reality, not about whether you actually are loved and accepted, but about your perception, your presumption, your deep attitudinal orientation to that external reality. And it's the hardest question because it seems to be an all too human characteristic to perceive scarcity even in the midst of abundance, to magnify threats even in the midst of security, to presume rejection even in the midst of acceptance. And it's the hardest question because it's so difficult to do anything about deeply held attitudes even if you want to change them.

We could all go home from church resolved to be more confident and trusting, but just how would we *do* that? How do you opt for a perception, decide for a presumption, choose for a deeply ingrained attitude towards life?

It turns out that it's exceptionally hard for the self to force a change in its own attitudes because the problem is within the self to begin with. Perhaps you recall the Russell Crowe movie, *A Beautiful Mind*. Mathematician John Forbes Nash, Jr. tells his psychiatrist that his schizophrenia is just a problem to be solved and he will work out a solution to his illness the way he works out solutions to mathematic equations. But as Nash's psychiatrist tells him: “The mind cannot work out the solution when the illness is in the mind itself.”

And if that were the end of our story we would have well and truly hit the wall. Yearning for light we would nevertheless be trapped in darkness. Yearning for life, we would nevertheless be shadowed by death. Yearning for rest we would nevertheless be burdened by the yoke.

But that is most assuredly not the end of our story. The good news, my friends, is that God came amongst us in Jesus saying “I came that they may have life and have it

abundantly” (John 10:10). Life. Abundantly. God came amongst us in Jesus to heal the distortions deep in our habits of thought. God came amongst us in Jesus to fulfill Isaiah’s ancient prophecy. Jesus is the great light for all of us who sit in darkness. Jesus is the dawning light for all who sit in the shadow of death. And Jesus is the rest for all who have been heavy laden.

When Jesus announces that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near, he means that he has come to establish his Kingdom where God’s love, acceptance, and approval are abundant, unlimited, unconditional and never scarce. And when Jesus calls upon us to repent, he means literally to have a change of mind, to change our default presumption from the illusion of scarcity to the reality of abundance.

But if all Jesus did was inform, if all he did was appeal to our intellects, if all he did was make demands on our will, we would be no better off than before. We would still lack the ability to cure ourselves by strength of will.

So Jesus does more than simply inform or make demand on Simon and Andrew and James and John. And he does more for you and me. Much more. Jesus appeared before the disciples in the flesh, and Jesus appears before us in Spirit. And when Jesus appears he invites us; and when he invites us he empowers us. He empowers us to follow him, to walk with him, to learn from him.

Notice in this morning’s reading that Jesus didn’t ask for a profession of faith, he didn’t ask for the courage of martyrs, he didn’t even ask for a lifetime commitment – not at first. At first, Jesus just asks us to follow. Follow with whatever faith he has inspired. Follow with whatever light he has provided. Follow with whatever grace he has enabled. The rest will get worked out on the way.

Perhaps you think Jesus has never been present to you in Spirit. You think he has never bid you to follow. You think you have never been empowered by grace to respond. Then I ask you again to search your own life’s experience. Remember that nagging feeling that you were meant for something more in life? That’s the Spirit stirring your desire to seek, to ask, to knock for more. Remember that sense,

however fleeting, that the world was your oyster? That the love, acceptance, meaning and significance you craved were assured in abundance? That’s the Spirit nudging your perception, even if just for a moment, from the illusion of scarcity to the reality of abundance

What can you do? Pray for more such experiences. Wait for them. Watch for them. Be open to them when they come. Find your way to those places where others have been touched as well. I mean, if you want to be hit by lightning you ought to go outside in a storm. You can’t control the electrons, but you sure are more likely to get hit outside than in. So go to church where Jesus’ word is preached and prayed and sung. To prayer groups where His presence is sought. To Bible Study where Jesus’ word sometimes leaps right off the page and straight into your heart. To mission work where His love makes a bridge between the one serving and the one served.

And when you recognize Christ’s presence, when you feel him calling you forward. Take one step closer and follow. That’s all – just follow. He promises that the rest will get worked out on the way. **Amen.**

1 *Macbeth*, V, v, ll. 24-8.

2 *Leviathan*, Part 1, ch. 13.