

### From Scarcity to Abundance

A go-to breakfast for my aunt and me is Kroger brand bite-sized shredded wheat – plain, not frosted – mixed with some peanut butter flavored toasted o’s. When I went to Dillons the night I returned to Kansas after ten days away, I picked up a box of each cereal along with milk, bananas, and a few other staples.

The next week, when I wanted to replace our nearly empty box of shredded wheat, the Dillons closest to my house was out of it. No problem, I’ll pick some up at another store. But over the course of the next few days, I discovered that none of the Dillons in town had any boxes – and, I could no longer find any boxes of the twice-as-expensive name brand cereal either.

Oh, I know, I could have bought the original big biscuits or some variety of frosted bite-sized ones, but now I was on a mission – only the plain, small biscuits would do.

So, I went online, to the big, bad Amazon site, and found my prize! Of course, it was the name brand ... and I had to buy a case containing six boxes, but money was no longer the issue. My aunt and I needed our cereal! Or at least, I did. She kept telling me it didn’t matter. We could eat a different kind. But I thought she deserved her favorite and I was determined to get it for us.

The order was coming from a third-party supplier, so the expected delivery date was 7 to 10 days away, not the usual 2 or 3. In the meantime, I purchased some frosted mini wheats at Aldi’s. They would have to do for now.

Eleven long days later I logged onto the Amazon site to track my cereal. I was shocked to learn that the US Postal Service had delivered my package two days earlier! Impossible! I never saw it. Had someone taken it from my porch? I put on my detective hat and got to work.

I’m signed up for informed delivery. This means I get an email from the postal service every day informing me what mail to expect. This package had not been part of the delivery list for supposed delivery day while another one that I did receive was on the list. According to the tracking reports, the package I received was delivered at 2:15 while the cereal was delivered at 3:22. Certainly the mail carrier wouldn’t deliver two packages to the same address at two different times on the same day, would they?

The clerk I consulted at the post office the next day referred me to the delivery manager. She was able to consult GPS to confirm where my package was delivered. “Have you moved recently?” she asked. “This package was delivered to a different address.”

She was then able to find a photo of the shipping label on what should have been my package. “You need to contact Amazon,” she said. “The package was delivered to the name and the address on the label. And it wasn’t your name or address. This could be a mistake or a scam.”

Before heading home, I stopped at Dillons. Out of habit I rolled my cart down the cereal aisle. Lo and behold, there was one box of Kroger brand bite-sized shredded wheat. Hallelujah! The next day I found two more boxes at a different Dillons store. We were set! At least for the next month or so. I hadn’t contacted Amazon yet about the miss-addressed order. I wasn’t looking forward to the possible hassle.

The day after that, as we walked home from the church office, I noticed something on my front porch. Could it be? Yes, it was! There were the six missing boxes of cereal. The person who received them in error must have left them at my door. Amazing!

I laughed. I almost cried. In the course of 72 hours, we’d gone from scarcity to abundance, from 0 boxes to 9 boxes of our treasured cereal!

You might be wondering why I haven’t brought some of our bounty to church to share with you. I considered it. But, we have only 8 boxes left, and I don’t want to run the risk of running out again.

Is that the message I was supposed to get from today’s scriptures? Maybe not. Let’s see.

The readings from Isaiah and Psalms evoke memories of and hopes for abundance in the midst of scarcity.<sup>1</sup> The overriding concern in Isaiah 43 is the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. They lost everything: their land, their homes, their livelihood, their families; and, to some extent, they felt they had lost God as well.

The words of God recorded in chapters 40-55 of Isaiah were spoken to desperate people in a desperate situation. The message given to them begins with the opening verse of Isaiah 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." From this verse, we know that Isaiah's message to God's people will be a word of encouragement, a word of consolation, and, most importantly, a word of hope.

Isaiah 43:16 identifies God as one "who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters."<sup>2</sup> This reference reminds the people of God's powerful actions that allowed the Israelites to cross the barrier of the Red Sea. The story of the escape from slavery through the sea, told in Exodus 14, was an essential part of the identity of both the Israelites and of their God.

Isaiah tells the captives living in Babylon that God is about to do a new thing. God will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Even the wild animals will be thanking God. The people will sing God's praise. Scarcity will give way to abundance.

Psalms 126 begins in happiness,<sup>3</sup> with the people of Israel looking back at the good old days, when it seemed that their dreams had finally come true. After years of loss and exile, God made a way for them to come back home. God restored them to the land they loved, to livelihoods and neighborhoods, to community. They remembered and laughed and shouted for joy. "God has done great things for us!"

Then the mood of the psalm shifts from remembered happiness to expressed sorrow in the present crisis.<sup>4</sup> The sorrow gives way to hope and then moves to an affirmation of faith that God has the ability and the will to restore God's people. God's way is amazing abundance in a wilderness place of scarcity.

We find this surprising abundance again in Paul's words to the Philippians. Everything else is like trash next to knowing Christ, the source of abundance. Paul isn't saying that the practices of his past were worthless. He doesn't deny that God was present in the events and rites and associations that sustained him through the years before he encountered Jesus. However, in the light of the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ, that observant past is relegated to the past. God has done a new thing, and for Paul "whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss... because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the things we value—our skills, our wealth, our situation, whatever we think makes us useful and valuable to God—may be considered worthless when compared to the value of our relationships with God and with each other. Grace isn't scarce. Love isn't scarce. Oneness in Christ transforms us to be generous and compassionate, to humbly receive grace and share it with all.

In the story of the anointing at Bethany, Mary appears to understand – or at least is beginning to understand – the new thing that God is doing among God's people. Judas and probably other guests at the table continue to see the world in its older form. Jesus reminds the disciples that the poor were here yesterday, regrettably, and the poor will be here tomorrow, sadly. There will always be the opportunity to serve the poor – in fact, it's a requirement for those who want to follow God's ways – but right now, right here, in this moment, God is doing a new thing. That new thing is the incarnation, proclamation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Mary does right to leave aside the old ways for now and serve the new.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon draws from "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2022," *Leader: Winter 2021-2022*, MennoMedia, pp. 45-46; Kristin Johnston Largen, "Theological Perspective;" Michael E. Williams, "Pastoral Perspective;" and David L. Bartlett, "Homiletical Perspective;" Fifth Sunday in Lent, Exodus 43:16-21, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*. Westminster John Knox Press; Lee H. Butler Jr., "Theological Perspective," Kimberly L. Clayton, "Pastoral Perspective" Fifth Sunday in Lent, Psalm 126, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*. Westminster John Knox Press, and Pulpit Fiction podcast, [Lent 5C — Pulpit Fiction](#).

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 43:16, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 126:1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 126:4-6

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 3:7-8

Mary's anointing of Jesus embodies the abundant way of God. She gave everything she had without expecting anything in return. She was criticized for using expensive oil in this way by those who viewed it from a scarcity mindset. Her critics weren't thinking, "This is Jesus! Nothing else matters!" They wanted to hold on to what they thought was important and necessary. It can be scary to share what we have when we view the world from a scarcity rather than an abundant mindset.

During this season of Lent, I've been talking about the resolutions that will be presented at the special assembly of Mennonite Church USA in May.<sup>6</sup> The one I bring today is titled "For Justice in the U.S. Criminal Legal System."<sup>7</sup> Unlike the other three resolutions, this one has been designated as a study resolution. It will be presented for discussion only, not for a vote. The resolution begins with a five-paragraph summary. I'll share that with you this morning and then talk a bit more about the rest of the resolution next Sunday.

Here's how it begins.

*As a historic peace church, Mennonite Church USA is called to resist "injustice in all forms, and in all places." Many aspects of the current United States' criminal legal system cause pain and suffering for many, especially poor people and people of color.*

*The U.S. criminal legal system, at its core, promotes violence and punishment, not reconciliation and peace. We hear this from the voices of those currently and formerly incarcerated, calling for justice; from their families, who yearn to be made whole; and from people of color, who are discriminated against and hurt by this system. The violence of the U.S. criminal legal system will not, and cannot, bear the fruits of justice and peace.*

This reminds me of the words from Isaiah and Psalms – people held captive, crying out for justice, looking for signs of hope in their present crisis. Even the prophets who said God allowed calamity to happen because of the people's wrongdoing, also promised a way out and restoration when the people admitted their fault and turned back to God. There are many factors to consider, but it seems that overall, the U.S. criminal legal system contains a scarcity of justice rather than the abundance promised in the pledge of allegiance.

Continuing on:

*A just world will only come through following the life and teachings of Jesus. For too long, we have ignored the teachings of Jesus as they apply to the criminal legal system. Jesus calls us to help the poor, the sick and the oppressed. "I was in prison and you visited me," Jesus tells the righteous in Matthew 25:36. We confess that too often, we have ignored that call.*

*At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then, Jesus declares, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:18-21*

*As Christians, we are called to look to Jesus and the prophetic tradition of the Bible for our vision of justice. We, like every generation of the church before us, are called to do our part, empowered by the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, to advance God's all-encompassing shalom, on earth as it is in heaven.*

God's vision of justice is a continuation of the new thing that Isaiah and the psalmist and John and Mary and Paul recognized and talked about. And we need to do our part too. Advancing God's all-encompassing shalom. Finding God's amazing abundance in the wilderness of scarcity. Being generous and compassionate. Receiving and sharing grace and love and maybe even our precious bite-sized shredded wheat. Could anyone use a box? We have it in abundance at our house.

As we continue to seek God's way, may we move from the fear that there is not enough to the freedom of living within God's abundance. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Delegate Resources: Special Session May 2022 | Mennonite Church USA ([mennoniteusa.org](http://mennoniteusa.org))

<sup>7</sup> MC-USA-For-Justice-Resolution-FINAL.pdf ([mennoniteusa.org](http://mennoniteusa.org))