

The Invitation to Abundant Life: Denying the Myth of Scarcity

Genesis 41:15-36, 47-49, 53-57; Exodus 1:8-22; John 10:7-10

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

Sunday, June 17

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Ebola arrived in of America on September 20, 2014, when United Airlines Flight 822 touched down at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. Unbeknownst to him, a Liberian man named Thomas Eric Duncan was carrying the disease. Thomas had flown to DFW via Brussels and Washington, D.C., with plans to marry a Dallas woman named Louise Troh, the mother of Duncan's son.

Five days after being in Dallas and reunited with his family, Thomas began to feel sick. He finally went to the emergency room at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital with a severe headache and nausea. A doctor, failing to notice that he was also running a fever that spiked at 103 degrees, and that he had recently traveled from Africa, never imagined that Thomas might have Ebola. The doctor gave him a prescription for antibiotics and sent him home.

Over the next two days, Thomas began to sweat profusely and his fever continued to rise, so much so that he returned to the hospital by ambulance Sunday afternoon. This time, a nurse started to put the pieces together and made the call that there was a possible Ebola patient at the hospital. When the public got wind of the report, it suddenly sent the city of Dallas, and soon the rest of the country, spiraling in fear. Despite treatment, Thomas Duncan passed away from the disease while being under quarantine on October 8. Two of his nurses, Nina Pham and Amber Vinson, also contracted the disease while taking care of him but were later cured.¹

An article in the *Dallas Morning News* says, “[In the midst of the Ebola crisis], we learned a lot about the chaotic, reason-eroding effects of pure, unharnessed panic. For a few dicey days last October, it sometimes seemed that Dallas was ground zero for the unhinging of our entire nation. [In] hindsight, it's easy to minimize how intensely frightened people were at the first and, to date, only Ebola outbreak in the United States. Dallas' toll was one death and two infections — a tiny statistic compared with the annual ravages of cancer and murder.

“[And yet,] a Hazmat crew was dispatched after a woman spat on the platform at the Dallas train station one day. An elementary school teacher in Maine was actually placed on three weeks' leave after she attended a conference 10 miles from Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital, where [Thomas Duncan] was confined. A junior college in Corsicana began rejecting applicants from Nigeria [for fear that they might carry Ebola]. And port authorities in Mexico refused to allow a cruise ship to dock after learning that it carried a vacationing lab supervisor who worked at Presbyterian.

¹ Resources consulted include: <https://www.cnn.com/2014/04/11/health/ebola-fast-facts/index.html>, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/02/ebola-us-dallas-epidemic>

Blockades were set up and traffic halted after a carsick passenger threw up on a bus near the Pentagon. And parents at a Mississippi middle school pulled their kids out of class after learning that the principal had been to a funeral in Zambia — which was about the same distance from Africa’s Ebola hot zone as Dallas is from Seattle.”²

I certainly don’t want to make light of the seriousness of Ebola — but I do want point out that we do not make the best decisions when we’re operating out of a place of fear.

Which is exactly what I think we find Pharaoh doing in today’s text in Genesis 41. For the first time in Scripture, Pharaoh begins to express a fear of scarcity — that there is not enough, and that something must be done to ensure that he always has enough — or really more than enough — even at the grave expense of others.

But this fear of scarcity is completely counter to all that we have read thus far in Genesis. As we have discussed the last few weeks in worship, the Bible starts out with this beautiful “liturgy of abundance” as scholar Walter Brueggemann calls it. We see over and over again throughout the first chapter of Genesis, that God created. God brought forth life in creative and generous and abundant ways. And over and over again, we hear the words that “it was good,” “it was good,” and finally after the creation of humankind, “it was very good.”

Later, in Genesis 12, God continues to bring abundance through blessing Abraham, Sarah, and their family, then telling them to “be” a blessing - to continue to carry out God’s creative and generous work in order that “all the people on the earth” might be blessed through them.

We don’t see a smidge of scarcity in this litany of blessing and abundance that we find throughout the book of Genesis until Pharaoh comes on the scene, dreams about the potential of famine, and suddenly becomes afraid that there won’t be enough food to go around.

There’s a famous story about Martin Niemoller, the German pastor who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler, when he was part of a delegation of leaders from the Evangelical Lutheran Church who met with Hitler in 1933. It’s said that Martin stood at the back of the room and quietly observed; he didn’t say a word in the meeting. When he went home, his wife asked him how it went and he replied, “I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man.”³

Much like Hitler, I believe Pharaoh was a terribly frightened man. And operating from a place of fear, he enlists Joseph to work out a plan to respond to the famine — but it’s a plan that will only help Pharaoh.

² <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/news/2015/09/26/looking-back-dallas-ebola-crisis-showed-cost-of-fear-value-of-leadership>

³ Brueggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity,” in *Christian Century*, 1999. <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/>

As Brueggemann explains, “For the very first time in the Bible, someone says, ‘There’s not enough. Let’s get everything.’ [And so] Pharaoh sets forth the systems to control and monopolize the food supply. In the first year of the famine, the people give up their land for food. In the second year they give up their cattle. And in the third, they give up all they have left – their children. When they have nothing else left to give but themselves, they ultimately give that up, too, which is how Israel ultimately becomes slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt.”⁴

Despite all that Pharaoh does to them and takes from them, if we continue to read into the beginning of the book of Exodus, we notice that even after the Israelites are in slavery, God continues to provide in abundance for them. This time, that abundance comes in the form of babies.

A new king comes to power, and this king, also operating from a place of fear and scarcity, looks around and says, “There are more Hebrews than there are Egyptians, and they’re stronger than we are. We must do something about this, or they will continue to increase – and they could ultimately join our enemies and fight against us, and they would win.”

So Pharaoh devises a plan to oppress them with even more forced labor, but the harder he pushes against them, the more the Hebrew people seem to strengthen and multiply. So then Pharaoh comes up with another plan. He tells the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill any of the baby boys who are born.

But Pharaoh definitely underestimates one thing: the power of women. There was no way these women were going to do this – their allegiance was to God and not Pharaoh. As pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber said at an event in Ft. Worth a few weeks ago, “Sometimes, like Shiphrah and Puah, the most holy thing we can say to those in power is, ‘No – not on my watch.’”⁵

Like many of you, I have been gut-wrenchingly sick hearing story after story about children being brutally and traumatically ripped from their parents while seeking asylum at our borders. According to the Department of Homeland Security, at least 2000 children have been separated from their parents...since mid-April.⁶ And all of this is in response to our own government’s inhumane and abusive policy?

Friends, when our own government operates from a place of fear and scarcity at the expense and trauma of others – and when you and I are hearing the cries of children in facilities who have been separated from their parents, I believe the most holy thing we can do is to stand up to power in bold, biblical acts of defiance like our sisters Shiphrah and Puah and to say, “No – not on my watch.”

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Stop Saying the Church is Dying!” at Arborlawn United Methodist Church, Tuesday, May 15, 2018.

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/15/politics/dhs-family-separation-numbers/index.html>

My friend, and former Calvary member Jaime McGlothlin, who is now serving as the Pastor of First United Methodist Church of Valley Mills is organizing a peaceful protest of faith and community leaders downtown at Heritage Square on Tuesday at 2 PM called "Waco Stands for Children." Jaime writes, "Our laws are to be obeyed when they are righteous and in-line with God's law. A policy which disregards the welfare of children, does violence to the family unit, and causes suffering of innocents is not in line with the way of God. It is against God's law. We ask that the Justice Department immediately cease separating children from their families as part of the zero-tolerance policy. We implore that legislation be created, and broadly supported and passed, that eliminates such discrimination, violence, and abuse of children."

Calvary, I hope we can stand together – stand up to fear – stand up to power - and say, "No, not on our watch."

I started off today by sharing about the Ebola crisis in Dallas several years ago. The reason it's on my mind this week is that I heard friends from Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas present this week at CBF General Assembly about their church's response in the midst of this crisis. Because Louise Troh, the wife of Thomas Dunan, and her children, are members at Wilshire. And in the midst of the fear and panic in Dallas, Wilshire was all of the sudden thrust into the national spotlight when they discovered that their own church members had for over a week been living with a carrier of the infectious disease. Louise and her family had to go under mandatory quarantine immediately. Reporters filled the balcony of the sanctuary during worship the next Sunday to see how the church was going to respond.

Looking back on the experience, Pastor George Mason repeatedly told the church during this time of anxiety, "Love moves toward people. And fear moves away." He says, "We did everything we could [during that time] to move toward."

George visited Louise and her children when they were under quarantine, almost daily. Because of the Ebola infection risk, crews had removed all of the furniture in the apartment and stripped it down to the carpeting, and they also weren't allowed to leave this shell of place they once called home. Meanwhile, media were outside their apartment 24/7. Ultimately, George and a local Catholic priest worked with government officials to move the family in the middle of the night to an off-site camp grounds where they would have more space and privacy, and the media wouldn't even know where they were.

After their mandatory quarantine was over, Louise and her family were grieving all that had happened to them and all that had been taken away from them. No one in town would rent to Louise and her family, so several people from Wilshire stepped up to buy them a condo that they could ultimately rent once they got on their feet again. But they had nothing. Officials who decontaminated it burned all their possessions, saving only a few personal documents, some photographs, and a Bible. This faith community was ushered into a daily work of love – and of

moving toward and not away from people, even in the midst of a community continuing to live in fear.⁷

And I believe our calling is the same. Scarcity causes us to hoard. To grasp. To hold on tighter. To hide. To be afraid. To move away.

But Love – love calls us to give. To open up. To let go. To stand up. To be brave. TO be bold. To walk toward.

Love stands up to power and says, “No- not on my watch.”

Love does not delight in evil – but rejoices in the truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love refuses to believe the myths of scarcity and fear and anxiety – even when the world says otherwise. Love invites a different way. A more abundant way.

Love is the way of Jesus – who was an immigrant child himself, seeking refuge and safety with his family in a foreign land.

And so, my beloved Calvary – may we be brave enough to walk in the way of Jesus and may we be bold enough to live in the way of God’s abundant Love.

⁷ Resources consulted include: “Eye on the Storm: Strategies and Self-Care for Facing the Media,” Workshop at CBF General Assembly, Thursday June 14, 2018, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/news/2015/04/24/as-it-embraced-member-in-dallas-ebola-crisis-church-found-its-own-redemption>, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/texas/pastor-reminds-dallas-leaders-of-challenges-faced-by-fiancee-of-ebola-fatality/>,