

October 29, 2023
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Psalm 65
Faith in God's Abundance
Michael Stanfield

Using beautiful poetic language, Psalm 65 lifts up God as the ultimate giver to his own –from a bounty that positively overflows. Listen.

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come. When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.

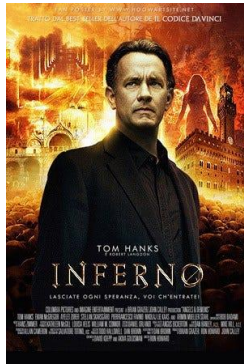
Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain; they shout and sing together for joy.

Psalm 65 is more than clear: God is the generous giver. We therefore have all we need and more. And it follows that we thus have nothing to fear when it comes to sharing from that bounty.



Dan Brown is an American author best known for his thriller novels, especially his Robert Langdon novels *Angels & Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and *Inferno*, which have all been made into blockbuster films starring Tom Hanks.



Each in their own way are basically treasure hunts that usually take place over a period of 24 hours. In *Inferno* the Hanks character of Robert Langdon follows clues in Dante's *Divine Comedy* as he attempts to stop an evil mastermind from unleashing a doomsday weapon.



The mastermind is a scientist, Bertrand Zobrist, played by Ben Foster, who threatens to halt the growth of the human population by use of a bio-weapon. He believes so firmly in the *scarcity* of the Earth's resources, that he creates a disease to infect and kill off a large portion of the world's population. For Langdon, the imperative goal is to locate the bio-weapon before it is unleashed.

Belief in scarcity is, in fact, at the heart of *Inferno*. The character of Zobrist says at one point: "Our current path is a pretty simple formula for destruction. Population growth is an exponential progression occurring within a system of finite space and limited resources."

In less technical language: We are nothing more than consumers and right now there too many consumers. There is not enough to go around, so the solution is clear: get rid of as many consumers on the planet as possible and all will be well. In other words, the fear of scarcity is driving everything, and Dante's nine levels of hell is what we can expect.

Thus, the film raises the question: How much does the fear of scarcity play a role in our lives directly or indirectly? How much, indeed.

These days, conducting research for sermons is a kind of treasure hunt all to itself – one that I have really come to enjoy. I have discovered a number of online sites that I would never have even heard of had it not been for the topical background searches I engage in on a weekly basis as I scour for new material related to the themes of my sermons.

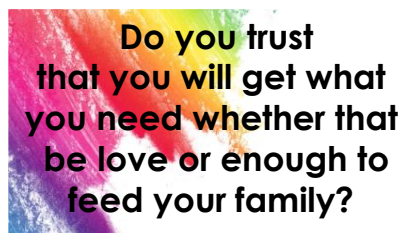
UNWRAP YOUR MIND

Personal Development



One of those sites is called “Unwrap Your Mind.” It is full of essays on everything from, whether fear is a bane or a blessing, to how the world is evolving.

In one article entitled “Release your Fear of Scarcity,” the blogger known only as Patrick, attempts to assess the level of our trust. He says if we can answer “no” to more than one of the following questions, we may be living a life based on mistrust rather than trust. He asks:



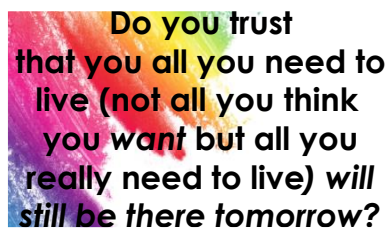
**Do you trust
that you will get what
you need whether that
be love or enough to
feed your family?**

Do you trust that you will get what you need whether that be love or enough to feed your family?



**Do you trust
that you will be taken
care of?**

Do you trust that you will be taken care of?



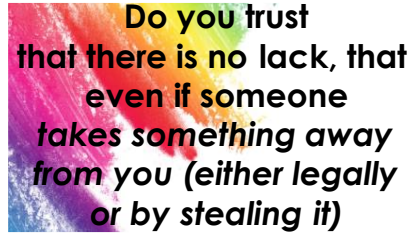
**Do you trust
that you all you need to
live (not all you think
you want but all you
really need to live) will
still be there tomorrow?**

Do you trust that all you need to live (not all you think you want, but all you really *need* to live) will still be there tomorrow?



**Do you trust
that there is enough for
everyone?**

Do you trust that there is enough for everyone? So far so good? How about this one:



**Do you trust
that there is no lack, that
even if someone
takes something away
from you (either legally
or by stealing it)**

Do you trust that there is no lack? - that, even if someone takes something away from you (legally or by stealing it),



**This will not harm you
because God will take
care of it?**

this will not harm you, because God will take care of it?

Unless we learn to trust in God that much, says Patrick, we are driven by fear. And some signs of that fear are:



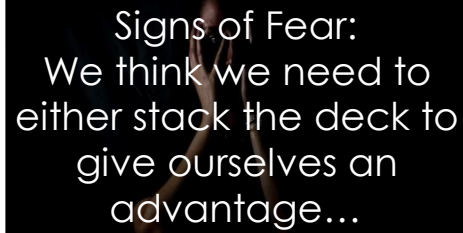
Signs of Fear:
We think there is not
enough for everyone.

- We think that there is *not* enough for everyone;



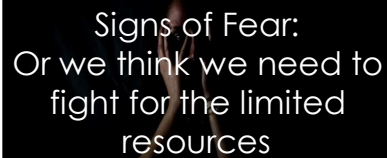
Signs of Fear:
We think we need to be
tricky to get an
advantage in life.

- We think we need to be tricky to get an advantage in life;



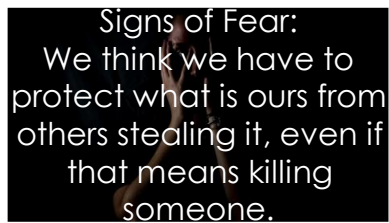
Signs of Fear:
We think we need to
either stack the deck to
give ourselves an
advantage...

- We think that since there is not enough, we need to either stack the deck to give ourselves an advantage



Signs of Fear:
Or we think we need to
fight for the limited
resources

or fight for the limited resources;



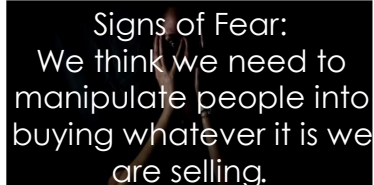
Signs of Fear:
We think we have to
protect what is ours from
others stealing it, even if
that means killing
someone.

- We think we have to protect what is ours from others stealing it – even if that could mean killing someone;



Signs of Fear:
We think we need to
take from others what is
most certainly scarce.

- We think we need to take from others to get what is most certainly scarce;



Signs of Fear:
We think we need to
manipulate people into
buying whatever it is we
are selling.

- We think we need to manipulate potential customers into buying what we are selling.
 -"Release your fear of scarcity," posted by "Patrick," unwrapyourmind.com. Retrieved April 23, 2016.

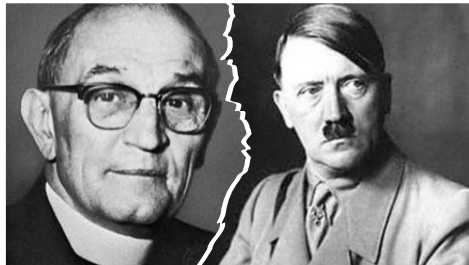
The principle of scarcity: You know, it is an alien concept to God's created order. All of Genesis 1 and 2 extoll the abundance that is a natural product of God's creative goodness. Psalm 65, our morning text hearkens back to that, reminding the reader in rich poetic language that we have all we need and more:

"You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain; they shout and sing together for joy."

In Genesis, it is not until chapter 41 that Pharaoh dreams that there will be a famine in the land. So, Pharaoh gets organized to administer, control and monopolize the food supply.



Biblical Scholar, Walter Bruggemann tells us that it is thus Pharaoh who introduces the alien principle of scarcity into God's abundant world economy. For the first time in the Bible, someone in power *who is fearful* 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, stood at the back of the room and looked and listened. He didn't say anything. Then 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, and Hitler after him, and many of our current politicians are afraid that there aren't enough good things to go around, they must try to have them all. That is dangerous, because *their* fearfulness creates the climate in which ruthlessness becomes the norm.

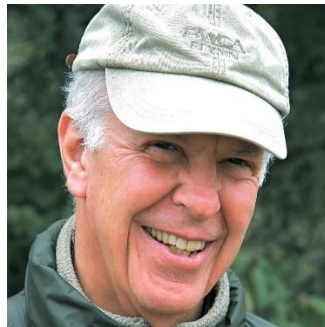
Walter Brueggemann, "The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity," *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, religion-online.org.

But it seems to be an axiom that during times of profound change in society, the economics of fear tend to reach a high place of prominence.



Take Thomas Malthus. Malthus was an English economist and also an Anglican priest who lived in the latter part of the 18th century. He predicted in 1798 that the world would be out of food by 1890, due to population growth. So, his recommendation? Killing off the have-nots who were not producing much or contributing much to society anyway to ensure there was enough food for those in society with more abilities and gifts for contributing to the overall well-being of everyone.

Although we here may view these ideas as appallingly and foolish, many of Malthus' writings underpinned the theories of the eugenicists of the early 20th century which gained power in a variety of countries and was used to enforced marriage restrictions, segregation (both racial segregation and segregation of the mentally ill from the rest of the population), compulsory sterilization, forced abortion and even genocide. Laurence O'Bryan, "The dangerous lie in Dan Brown's *Inferno*," *Laurence O'Bryan Website*, February 21, 2014, lpobryan.com.



That great Quaker Activist Parker Palmer writes, Today we ... "seem to regard perpetual scarcity as the law of life. Daily I am astonished at how readily I believe that something I need is in short supply..."

"If I hoard possessions, it is because I believe that there are not enough to go around. If I struggle with others over power, it is because I believe that power is limited. If I become jealous in relationships, it is because I believe that when *you* get too much love, *I* will be shortchanged."

"The irony, often tragic, is that by embracing the scarcity assumption, we create the very scarcities we fear. ... We create scarcity by fearfully accepting it as law, and by competing with

others for resources as if we were stranded on the Sahara at the last oasis.” Parker Palmer, “There Is a Season,” in Paul Loeb, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times* (Basic Books, 2014), 157.

However, over and against this tendency stands the witness of scripture which is that God provides the world with more than enough.

And Palmer tells a most beautiful story based on this abundance principle that I have ever heard. He was a passenger on a plane that pulled away from the gate, taxied to a remote corner of the field and stopped. You know the feeling: The plane stops and you look out the window and see that you’re not on the runway and the engines wind down and your heart sinks.

The pilot came on the intercom and said, “I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is there’s a storm front in the West, Denver is socked in and shut down. We’ve looked at the alternatives and there are none. So we’ll be staying here for a few hours. That’s the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it’s lunch time.” Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to complain, some became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants did something amazing.

She stood up and took the intercom mike and said, “We’re really sorry, folks. We didn’t plan it this way and we really can’t do much about it. And I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. I have a couple of breadbaskets up here and we’re going to pass them around and I’m asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along — something to tide you over — just in case something like this happened, some peanut butter crackers, candy bars. And some of you have a few LifeSavers or chewing gum or Roloids. And if you don’t have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark or a business card. Everybody put something in and then we’ll reverse the process. We’ll pass the baskets around again and everybody can take out what he/she needs.

“Well,” Palmer said, “what happened next was amazing. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags, some got up and opened their suitcases stored in the overhead luggage racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. She had transformed a group of people who were focused on need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration. She had transformed scarcity into a kind of abundance.”

After the flight, which eventually did proceed, Palmer stopped on his way off the plane and said to her, “Do you know there’s a story in the Bible about what you did back there? It’s about Jesus feeding a lot of people with very little food.”

“Yes,” she said. “I know that story. That’s why I did what I did.” John Buchanan, “Abundance,” March 26, 2000, *The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago Web Site*, fourthchurch.org. WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WERE GIVEN?

We all know that story too. The real story – the story of God’s abundance.

Today, we sit stranded on the runway of life together. And today *you* are being asked to respond in the same way as that stewardess asked everyone on that plane to respond – with faith, sharing from what you are confident is the abundance that is most assuredly already there. As the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Church at Thessalonica, sharing not just what we have but sharing our very selves...

You have been asked, beginning two weeks ago to consider what God is calling you to give in 2024 from your abundance. I want to thank you in advance for your faith and your generosity as, in a moment we join together at the table and in the fellowship hall afterwards in celebrating God's abundance.

But for now, let us pray. Gracious God, the abundant wealth you heap upon us is humbling. Help us never to forget *that* in the coming year. When politicians gain traction by playing on the fears that there is not enough, give us your assurance of the plenty you provide that was meant to be shared – not only as a blessing to others but as life giving to us. Amen. Please join me in the litany of commitment.

Leader: Gracious God, creator of the world, giver of all that is good,
People: bless the gifts and the pledges we bring to you today.
Leader: These pledges represent our work, our hopes, and our dreams.
People: We offer them in thanksgiving for all we have received.
Leader: May they be the first fruits of all we have,
People: and not what we have left over.
Leader: May we see these pledges as a sacred offering,
People: and not a gift of obligation or exchange.
Leader: May we use them wisely for your service,
People: to reflect your love for this community and the world.
Leader: May they move us to be more faithful disciples,
People: and energize us for lives of generosity.
Leader: In gratitude for the grace of God,
People: in the warmth of God's hospitality,
Leader: and in the spirit of generosity embodied in Christ,
People: we dedicate these pledges to the work of God.
Leader: Thanks be to God!
People: Alleluia! Amen.