

Mark 6:30–44

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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In a world of drought and shortage, abundance doesn't make any sense. In fact it is an offensive possibility. So the shepherds in Jeremiah 23, the Jews in Ephesians 2, and the disciples in Mark 6 were all out to protect their exposure. That is the wisdom of death. When you are exposed, when you are unprotected, when you are at risk, you cut your chances, you reduce your exposure, and you try to protect old number one. In a world of death that's logical: hunkering through life like Cain, able to feel an insult at a thousand yards, as it was once said.

In fact, looking out for old number one is the definitive characteristic of the old Adam. Death might come, and no one else will protect me, and therefore I must protect myself. So there have to be insiders who are deemed safe and outsiders who are a threat. There are friends who can be relied on for protection and enemies who always remain a threat, whether subtly or explicitly. There are, after all, only five loaves and two fish, and who in the world knows what is going to happen when they run out? Well, we all know what's going to happen when they run out: we're going to be hungry. That's the rule. Abundance doesn't make any sense at all.

When my mother told me this story as a little boy, the hero turned out to be the little boy whose mother packed him a lunch. He brought the five loaves and the two fish, his mother thinking that would be sufficient for him. She also packed his toothbrush, and some further instructions in case he got lost along the way. In a world of death you have to protect yourself, and in a world of death there can be no outside influences. And so, as my mother said, you should be like that little boy who brought the five loaves and the two fish. He, after all, made it possible for Jesus to feed the rest of them.

Here's another good example of the wisdom of death. When I was a student at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, one of my teachers was none other than the illustrious Marcus Borg, super-Episcopalian and leader of the liberation of Episcopalianism from its cultural context. I remember him talking with us about this text, and you can guess what he noticed. He noted that when the five thousand sat down, Jesus had them arranged in groups of hundreds and of fifties. He had picked this up from an English scholar, and on the basis of it

we have what? Battalions and companies and so on and so forth, all the apparatus of warfare, and the beginning of a revolution. When you rule out novelty, when you rule out the possibility of surprise, when you reduce everything to free will, death is what you get. Even this story turns into an insurrectionary tale meant to summon the culturally alienated to resist, rebel, and stand up to the man. Just crazy.

But if we begin with the assumption of the resurrection, that is, with the fact that Jesus was raised and shattered death's power, then everything changes. Then the presupposition is not shortage. The presupposition is not "You only go around once in life, so you've got to grab for all the gusto you can get." The presupposition, rather, is that in the midst of death we are in life. The resurrection as the presupposition of all this breaks the whole thing open. We are not in a closed system where death is the last victor. We are in an open-ended world, where Christ Jesus, raised from the dead, opens up a brand-new possibility: one in which five loaves and two fish are a little too much to work with. In fact he likes to create out of nothing; better still. So we get five thousand people at a picnic where there was absolutely nothing, abundance spreading, flowing over all, and out of those five loaves and two fish they pick up twelve baskets full, more than enough to feed everybody. Once he got it started, he couldn't shut it down. That's the way it goes: overflow, excessiveness, sheer wanton grace spreading over everything, as good as it can get.

So we'll take a look at the supporting texts. Ephesians, of course, fits right in with this. You remember that wonderful lesson last week, and we have another one this week that is just about its equal. Jeremiah 23 and Psalm 23 also go together in another way. So we'll start with Jeremiah 23:1–6, then take Psalm 23, go on to Ephesians, and then just fall into this great gospel and float there, watching the excessiveness well up around us and sustain us. Lots of fun.

The Shepherds Who Scatter: Jeremiah 23

Jeremiah 23 is addressed to the shepherds. This is one of several texts in which God takes on the ministry, the priesthood, and addresses it, and it comes, of course, from the prophets, who were the competitors of the priests, so the source shouldn't be surprising. But here is the indictment: God is indicting those who claim to be in charge of his excessiveness on his behalf. They are the ones who scatter the sheep.

How does this happen? You only have to watch what has been happening in the latest ecclesiastical enterprises to recognize it. All sorts of groups contend for what they regard as the power of the gospel, and once they have hold of that power, they want to bend it in their own direction, whether toward the currently fashionable social causes of the upper middle class or something else. Charles Dickens used to talk about telescopic philanthropy. This kind of operation usually likes a class that is far away and out of touch, somebody you can talk about hypothetically. So we love the ones in the distance and pinch those who are close. And of course those who are close scatter. We have seen this, and lots of us have experienced it personally. We've been pinched, and we've been scattered.

So the priests who use the power of the gospel, the power of God, as though it were a personal endorsement and a motor for their particular causes, come under indictment here. They are the priests and the false prophets, and they are in turn the apostles of shortage, those who are convinced there's not enough, and that we therefore have to open the doors to other possibilities, and in opening the doors to other possibilities they shut out those who are standing there with plenty. It's just kind of crazy.

So God announces his intention to deal with these religious authorities, and he is going to deal with them by pushing them aside and caring for the sheep himself. This is a great promise. As they have scattered, God will do the gathering. And we have seen this eschatological gathering. This morning I had an email from a friend in Australia, another from a friend in Ethiopia, and another from a friend in Finland. I had barely gotten to breakfast, and already I had a gathering of people from all over the world following me around on my computer, wanting to join in some fun together. That's the gathering. Sinners from everywhere are being pulled together. God is doing the gathering, and he is gathering us by spilling over with abundance in the midst of all this shortage.

A Table in the Presence of Enemies: Psalm 23

That's really the theme of Psalm 23. I remember when I was in Tanzania some years ago, the students asked me to preach, and they wanted me to preach for at least an hour. So I preached on the first half of verse 5 of Psalm 23: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." This is luxury. This is lavish. This is the overflow. The enemies are still there, to be certain. We're not in heaven yet. There are enemies, real enemies: hunger, want, shortage, and death. They are still out there. But even when they're out there, he is preparing the table.

If he thought according to the logic of death, seeing enemies present, Jesus would withdraw and say, “That’s not safe. I might lose my lunch. There might not be enough. My enemies might take it.” But this is the Lord Jesus. He prepares the table before us in the presence of our enemies. And what does it say? “On the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread, broke it, and gave it to them.” To whom did he give it? To his enemies, those who betrayed him. If it had been me, I would have said, “You jerks, go away. I’ll find some other disciples. If betrayal is the cost of your attachment, give me a break; go find somebody else.” But on the night in which he was betrayed he took bread, broke it, and gave it to them, his very betrayers.

That’s luxury. That’s abundance. That’s plenty. That’s more than enough. You can only do that if, should your enemy take everything away, you still have more than enough, and plenty. So the logic here is different. It is the logic of abundance, the logic of power in the midst of weakness, the logic of sheer luxurious lavishness. And so Psalm 23 praises the God who provides in the midst of it all and gives of himself. He makes us lie down in green pastures, because if he didn’t, we’d eat ourselves to death. He leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls. This is the logic of the gospel, the logic of plenty.

The Wall Is Down: Ephesians 2

Ephesians 2:11–22, like the text from Ephesians last week, is overflowing with goodness. It embodies this logic, and it is so full of blessings that you can’t possibly run out of it, so it stands alone. As you know, we are doing a continuous reading of Ephesians through these Sundays, so we’ll get second lessons from Ephesians all the way through. But even standing alone, the text from Ephesians fits with the other texts because of its sheer abundance. It fills us with God’s good things.

The logic of death requires borders. So people mark themselves out to distinguish themselves from one another, and of course these markings become sacred. And so we have circumcision. There’s a wonderful scene in an old movie called *The Fixer*, where a Jew who has been circumcised is going in to take a shower, and he looks down and says, “Oh, a stool pigeon.” He is going to give himself away. That is the identifying mark of the Jew. It marks out the circumcised from the uncircumcised, and so the Jew from the Gentile in the New Testament community. So we get a big argument, as you remember, spelled out in Acts 15, between those who insist that all Christians have to be circumcised, like their older Jewish brothers, and those who insist that circumcision is not required of Christians. This is the mark.

And now what happens when God's grace starts to pour? The mark becomes irrelevant. Grace is like a great and mighty flood, welling up over the walls, over the sociological borders that traditionally mark out one people from another, and over the marks we use to distinguish ourselves. Now those marks are gone. And when those marks are gone, circumcision counts for nothing. The people have been gathered together, circumcised and uncircumcised, male and female. Those whom God has called have been joined. And as they have been joined, the distinguishing mark is no longer a mark on the body but the promise of the gospel: the washing, the dying and rising that take place in baptism, which, interestingly enough, cannot be observed by the naked eye. It's not a tattoo or a missing piece of flesh. Rather, it is the mark of faith, the mark of the sacrament in which we have been incorporated, a mark that marks the heart rather than the external member. So all the sociology, all the traditional marks, have been obviated by the power of the gospel. The logic of the resurrection shatters the whole apparatus.

So we get another passage similar to Romans 10:4, this one dealing with the apparatus of the law. In Romans 10:4 Paul says that Christ is the end of the law for all who believe. And here in Ephesians we hear that the law has been abolished. Now, this makes moralists real nervous, of course, because the law is their protection and their instrument for marking out their mission in the world. After all, who will be good if we don't have someone running around saying, "You shall, you shall not"? But when grace wells up like this, when grace overflows like this, the law loses its standing. It's washed away. It is abolished, as this text says.

The law being abolished is the law that enables us to say, "Well, I'm better than you are," or "I know what's really right, and I know you're really wrong." The law being abolished is the law the old Adam uses to set itself up. The law as God's instrument for controlling evil remains. But those who are friends, sustained by grace, don't really need it. You don't have to tell someone who is being carried along by grace that they should appreciate it, or that they'll really enjoy it when they get there. In all the weddings I've done, some of them happy, some of them sad, I've never had to follow the couple home after the wedding and say, "Now you should do something about this. You should consummate your marriage; if you don't, it doesn't count for anything." That's just nonsense. The law loses its standing. Grace overflows, joy spreads, the gift is given, and the blessing follows right out of it.

So circumcision, the law, everything that marks out a particular community, is erased. It is erased in the forgiveness of sins. It is erased by the grace that overflows, full of blessing. And

all the blessings of Ephesians 2 follow out of this. Grace has welled up. It has been lavished. It has been poured over us. And when it is poured over us, all the stuff of the old aeon, all the stuff of the old age in which we mark ourselves with this and that, in which we claim superiority by invoking the law, bang, it's gone. It's flushed away. It doesn't have any standing anymore, because grace has come. Life has come. You walk out into the sunrise expecting good. There you go.

Twelve Baskets Left Over: Mark 6

So we have supporting texts coming together around the sheer lavishness of God's goodness, and now we get an eruption of it in the gospel text, which is just overflowing with goodness. The story of the feeding of the five thousand is predicated on the resurrection. This is another of these resurrection texts that breaks out ahead of time.

One of my great teachers at Luther Seminary, Kent S. Knutson, died as a young man when he was president of the American Lutheran Church. I remember Dr. Knutson talking about the proleptic character of the resurrection. This is a proleptic story. It is told in anticipation of the resurrection, out of sequence in that way. It anticipates what is to come, but it is based on what is to come, and so it speaks of the power of what is to come invading the here and now. We get the resurrection let out ahead of time. Jesus is so full of the promise of the gospel that he can't contain himself, and because of that we get one of these marvelous stories in which the resurrection breaks out right in the middle of nowhere.

Everything in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, until the passing of the baskets, indicates the controlling power of shortage and death. Jesus is tired. We've seen this before. He's worn out, and of course he's worn out. You know what this is. He has been around people day in and day out, people expecting various things from him. If you want to watch how this works, you should follow Steve Paulson across the Luther Seminary campus some day. The students walk by the rest of the faculty without a moment's attention, but Steve can't get from one door to the next without a crowd gathering. Why is that? Because the gospel is there, that's why, and they can get it there when they can't find it anywhere else. When the gospel breaks loose, people want it, and they come for it, and look for it, and sing about it.

So the crowd is on Jesus like paint on a wall. They are after him all the time. And of course he is living under our rules now. He has let go of all his cosmic powers. He is incarnate, and because of that he is fagged out. He is desperate for a moment's rest, and he has been running

from the crowd for a couple of texts now, trying to find a place to hide. And his disciples aren't any better off. They are all eager to get away, to have some rest and some prayer, to recharge. So: shortage. They are running out of themselves. The disciples are as tired as Jesus is.

This is one of the great things in the Gospel of Mark: Jesus can do anything except keep a secret. He can do anything except find a place for a day off. I'm sure you've felt the same way sometimes. Sometimes I have dreams of taking a baseball bat and beating the telephone to death with it. You can't get away, and so you start looking for a place to hide. He has run out of himself. He's dog-tired, and he doesn't know what to do. And when they get out in the boondocks, where they are going to find a place to rest, where Jesus is finally going to be able to sleep, even if he has to use a stone for a pillow like old Jacob, he discovers that the crowd is out there too.

So what happens? Pressed by the crowd, he goes right back to work. What alternative do you have? They are taking every alternative away. They are pressing him. And even though he is running out of himself, so tired and out of sorts that he doesn't quite know what to do with himself, he continues to help these people.

But now it's getting late. Here is more shortage: we are running out of daylight. And running out of daylight, the disciples realize they have a crisis on their hands, because they can't feed all these people. I've just been reading a wonderful history of World War II, one of the great books I've ever read, by David Kennedy of Stanford University, his Oxford history of the Depression and the Second World War. He describes what happened after D-Day, when they finally broke through the German containment. It looked bad for a while; it looked as if it could have been Gallipoli, pinned down on the beaches. But pretty soon General Patton broke loose and went all the way to Paris, and once they broke through some resistance there, they went all the way to the German border, bang, bang, bang, that fast. And when they got there, their supply lines couldn't keep up with them, and they were out of food.

That is exactly the kind of crisis the disciples have run into here. The crowd is pushing, following, harassing, demanding. And now it's getting to be suppertime, and the daylight is starting to fade, as it does in the Middle East. The sun doesn't set the way it does in North Dakota, a little at a time. It sets dramatically quickly, at pretty close to seven or seven-thirty. You're far enough north to get a little evening light, but nothing like what we're used to. It's more like Africa, where the sun comes up like a tired man getting out of bed, and goes down the same way. Bang, it's gone.

So they are getting toward nightfall with all these hungry people, and they are out of everything. They go to Jesus, which is exactly the right thing to do. How are we going to feed all these people? And he says, “How many loaves have you?” And here are the five loaves and two fish.

Now, my mother made this story up: it was a little boy who brought the five loaves and two fish. She probably learned it in Sunday school, from her mother, or from Jesse Lyman Hurlbut or some other moralist always intent on turning Scripture into something for us to do. You should be the boy with the five loaves and the two fish; that’s your job, to make Jesus look good. Well, I make him look good by being a good sinner. He has plenty to do with me. He can show off all he wants in front of me, because I need it.

So you’ve got Jesus out here with this whole hungry crowd, and the disciples don’t know where to turn. They go to him and say, “What the heck are we going to do?” “What have you got?” “Five loaves and two fish.” OK. Jesus takes those five loaves and two fish, and somehow this group gets organized in companies of fifties and hundreds; that is the curiosity. I suppose some hyperthyroid or anal-retentive type went through and organized them all and told them to sit in rows so they could be fed. Well, what are we going to eat? There isn’t much. But as soon as Jesus starts feeding, as soon as the disciples start serving, they can’t keep up with him. They can’t keep up with him. This is the one who sets the table in the presence of his enemies. This is the one who raises the dead and creates out of nothing. He is the host of this meal, and the disciples are the waiters, and he nearly runs them ragged, and still they can’t keep up.

So they feed all five thousand of these hungry people, and every one of them has had their fill. They are belching and leaning back contentedly, and still there are twelve baskets left over. Can you imagine? This is the outbreak of sheer, luxurious lavishness in the midst of utter emptiness. They are in the desert. They have nothing except a crowd, nothing except this little basket of loaves and fish that would hardly feed a kid. And by the time they’re done, the overflow takes up far more than they originally had.

Well, this is Jesus. This is Jesus of Nazareth, crucified under the sign of shortage, risen from the dead in a miracle of abundance that death cannot contain, not for a second. So if we look at this text from a little way back, in terms of what has happened here, we can say that it is a proleptic story of the resurrection. It anticipates the resurrection, even under the sign of the cross.

Want Is Real, but Not Ultimate

So we have to recognize that we live in a world of want, a world of shortage. Some of us, of course, are candidates for Weight Watchers. Some of us can't take it off and have to have help with that problem. We have so blamed much we can't deal with it. But some people have so little that they never get to eat.

This past winter, when we were in Ethiopia, Carolyn, my wife, was teaching English classes while I was teaching theology classes, and even a philosophy class, of all things. One of the people she was teaching English was a very fine young pastor. He was not a member of the Mekane Yesus Church, the Lutheran church in Ethiopia, but of another Protestant group working there, a prince of a man whom we both really liked. He had four kids. Carolyn talked with him about whether he had a computer, and he said that was his deepest hope and joy, to obtain a computer. But in order to do that, his children would have to continue to eat garbage. It turned out that was one of the major sources of their diet. He was serving a congregation, an educated man, with four kids to feed, and oftentimes he found food for them in the garbage pits.

That is not an uncommon story in many parts of the world, where hunger is the reality. And that reality has to be honored, because it is simply a fact of life. But the reality of want is not ultimate. The resurrection is ultimate. The resurrection is the last word, and because the resurrection is the last word, you never know where it is going to break out.

There are times of hunger. This morning I woke up to the news again, which announced that the drought that has set in is spreading. We haven't had any experience of it this far north and west, back here in Oregon. It rained too much this spring, and now we've had a week and a half of sunshine, and everybody is rejoicing in it. But drought is a reality and a growing threat, something we have to take seriously. It can't simply be dismissed in this life. But the fact that it can't be dismissed in this life does not make it the ultimate reality of this life. There is something even more real than shortage. What is more real than shortage is the announcement, "He is not here; he is risen."

He is risen. And because he is risen, when he turns on situations of want and need, when he turns to face hunger, you can anticipate that he is going to address it not simply with rhetorical flourishes but with food and drink, just as he did here: five loaves, two fish, five thousand people, and twelve baskets full left over, everybody leaning back with their

toothpicks, patting their tummies and saying, “Wow, was that delicious.” You can’t imagine. The only possible source of such good news in a world of shortage and death is the Risen One. And because he is the Risen One, you never know what he is going to do next.

So this text is a little bit of Easter tucked into the middle of July. It is a little bit of the future breaking out in the present. It is the promise of the God of plenty, who sets us down at table in the presence of our enemies, like shortage and want, and, setting us down at table in the presence of our enemies, feeds us lavishly. How about that?

I think this time I’ve finished in time for some questions. We have Vacation Bible School going on in the basement here, Lutherans and Methodists together. I’m up on the second floor, and the kids are running rampant downstairs. I hope you can’t hear them; or maybe it would be good if you did. There’s a little luxury in the basement. Carolyn has been working day and night to make it go. When you see these kids running loose all over the church, it’s just fabulous. Sometimes there is such a thing as too much order.

Questions and Answers

A question about holding together the reality of want and the promise of abundance.

There are always two realities that have to be stated. One is the reality of want, and the other is the reality of abundance. The cheapest way to deal with this is to deny one of them: in the name of abundance to deny the reality of want, which is a theology of glory, or in the name of want to deny the reality of abundance, which is another form of the theology of glory, practiced very commonly by people of the class that produces theology professors and New Testament scholars. One of the most interesting things about it is that people who live with luxury regard want as falsifying the promise, whereas people who live with want believe emphatically that there is going to be plenty. Nobody is better at it than those Africans who, in the middle of sheer want, will start talking about the utter goodness of God.

You want to acknowledge both. There is want, and there is famine, and there is drought. In a summer like this, when you get twenty straight days over ninety degrees, it’s just going to bake the earth hard, and the crops are going to grow slowly, if they grow at all. I remember when I was a kid we had eight straight years with hardly any crop at all. That’s the way it goes. The famine is real, but it is not ultimate. It is real, but it is not the last word. The last word is always spoken by the one who can show you the wounds in his hands, who can say, “Put your hand in my side.” He is the one who is plenty in the midst of want. I have learned

more about this from African people, and from poor people in this country, than I ever learned from anybody else.

A comment on those who presume to define who suffers.

One of my favorite memories at Luther is of a great student who had two daughters and a son. One of the daughters and the son were severely disabled, and the daughter had not been expected to live past her birth, because she was so seriously malformed. It was just incredible. One day he came walking into my office and told me what had happened in class. There was a woman from down in Edina, the great suburb of Minneapolis, and they had been sitting in class talking, and she had turned to him and said, “Well, you’re a male. You don’t really know anything about suffering.” When he told me that story I got mad, and he laughed at me and said, “What are you mad about? That’s just the way it is.” No understanding whatsoever. This whole argument goes bad, of course, when it is used to deny the reality of suffering.

A comment on the farmer’s rhythm of life after a lost cherry crop.

Early warmth and a late freeze: that’s the way it works. I was worried about that with the apples this spring when we were back in the Cities. When you get those early springs with a lot of heat, I get as nervous as a cat. My wife says it’s because I’m too much of a Norwegian, but a lot of times that’s exactly what happens. We have a cherry orchard right below our house. We live on the side of a mountain, and when we come driving down and hit the highway and turn right, there all of a sudden are these cherries. They opened yesterday, and I went over, and the man who runs it was just singing. Cherries everywhere. It’s a different rhythm of life from the city, that’s for sure, and an instructive one. You get a deep sense of the biblical rhythm of life from your farmers.

Well, God’s peace to you. I’ll see you next week. You know that you are in my prayers as you go to these texts. God’s peace to each of you.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98rd2PnNMcE>

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