

# A Gospel of Hope

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## Preface

There is a certain audaciousness in gathering up one’s words from former times and presenting them again. As I reread my words from former times, it strikes me that there is some audaciousness in their first utterance. In them I have said things well beyond my understanding. But then it occurs to me that my words (and my ministry) belong to a long chain of audaciousness that in turn is rooted in the audaciousness of the biblical witnesses themselves. (I have in mind a parallel to André Brink’s *Rumors of Rain: A Novel of Corruption and Redemption*.) It is amazing to ponder what it was like when Moses (or “J”) or Amos or “Job” or Paul or Mark had their say the first time. In their very utterances they generated worlds that did not exist prior to their utterances. Such utterances have indeed called “into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). It is indeed, as the hymn “Morning Has Broken” proclaims, all “fresh from the word.” And that is why we utter and keep uttering and reutter and listen for more.

Without such utterance and reutterance, our lives regress to what is safe, conventional, and routine. These bold

agents of utterance intend, in every utterance, to awaken us from our “dogmatic slumbers” and from the temptation to have our faith reduced to a privatized narcotic.

When we push these utterances back far enough, we reach back to the generative utterance of God that every time is a world-generating, world-changing act. Imagine what it was like for this holy God to say:

Let there be light!  
Let my people go!  
Let justice roll down like mighty waters!  
This is my beloved Son!  
Love one another!  
Fear not, I have called you by name!

Every such utterance merits an exclamation point!!

To be sure, they are only utterances, even the ones that come from God. In hearing them, however, over time we discover in them a transformative reality that always runs beyond our capacity to explain them or control the futures they create. For that reason, I am glad to be a wee part of that chain of audacity in which we people of faith stand, a chain that gives us an assurance that passes all human understanding and a mandate that leaves us, at our best, as restless odd misfits in the world. In retrospect my timid audacity is a bid that the church and its pastors should marvel at and respond to this long chain of words that summons us to glad, obedient risk. In our present moment such a summons is urgent, both because our society has clearly lost its way in a frenzy of alienation and anxiety and because old familiar modes of faith are not adequate, as the hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory” attests, for “the living of these days.”

As I reread my words I came to be concentrated on two familiar lyrical texts in the New Testament. First, Paul's great benediction in Ephesians:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21)

The apostle knows the power of God to be effectively active in the life of the world, an effective action in abundance. The human counterpoint to God's effective abundance is to “ask or imagine.” This is not a discouragement or limit on our asking from God or our imagining about God. It is rather, I suggest, an invitation that we should be asking from God and imagining about God extravagantly. Our text affirms we must not curb our asking or our imagining but recognize the inadequacy of our asking and imagining. God still surprises us with more and better. It is not fashionable in progressive circles to imagine that God can do “abundantly.” Consequently we ask only anemically of God because we do not trust much in God's agency. It is not fashionable in conservative circles to ask or imagine God's goodness beyond a rigid calculus of obedience.

But this fact simply makes clear how progressive and conservative Christians stand together before the mystery of God, who outruns all of our timid calculus, whether the rationalism of progressives or the moralism of conservatives.

The other text that has come to my mind is the famous inventory of Hebrews 11:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb. 11:1)

“Faith” in the rhetoric of this text is not a package of certitudes or a trusted mantra. It is rather reliance on and trust in a future-giving, future-hoping God who constantly makes a way out of no way. Thus faith, in this verse, promptly morphs into hope for the future that will be unlike the present. What follows in the chapter is a roll call of hopers who have refused the status quo because they trusted that God has “something better” for those who are courageously able to move on. Hope, in Hebrews 11, is not a head trip or a heart trip; it is a body trip of putting one’s body at risk for the sake of new possibility. Ta-Nehisi Coates (*Between the World and Me*) has reckoned whites to be something like “body snatchers” who want to possess and occupy black bodies. For most of us our bodies (thus our lives) are held in thrall by safe domestication. But here in Hebrews 11 are the names of those who have risked their bodies for the sake of the future. This roll call is pertinent for our dangerous time, and one wonders whose names are yet to be added to that roster.

It is my hope that these reuttered words of mine might serve as a contribution to the audacity of our talk and our walk. This dangerous time calls folk of faith to grow in our awareness and courage to subvert “by thought, word, and deed” (*Book of Common Prayer*) current ideologies that want to curb and administer our asking and our imagining.

I am grateful to Richard Floyd for his ready energy and discerning discipline to select from my many words these for reutterance. He has entered into my mind enough to know what I most want to say, and into my rhetoric

enough to know how I am most likely to say it. He has aided me in making my contribution to the chain of audacity in which we have the glad chance to participate.

Walter Brueggemann  
Columbia Theological Seminary  
July 5, 2017

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*Chapter One*

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# Abundance and Generosity

I invite you to keep this question before you: What are you after? And what would it mean to eat the real food of covenantal faithfulness, to receive and accept it, to live it and give it, to be transformed and weaned away from the stuff that only makes you more hungry?



When we do not trust in guaranteed abundance, we must supply the deficiencies out of our own limited resources. We scramble to move from our sense of scarcity to an abundance that we imagine that we ourselves can supply, all the while frantically anxious that we won't quite make it: It is necessary to erode the holy time of Sabbath for the sake of productivity, given our sense of scarcity grounded in distrust.



We baptized people are the ones who have signed on for the Jesus story of abundance. We are the ones who have decided that this story is true story, and the four great

verbs—he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave—constitute the true story of our lives. As a result we recognize that scarcity is a lie, a story repeated endlessly, in order to justify injustice in the community.

We have in our baptism declared the old story of scarcity to be false. And we have become the people and the place in the city where abundance is practiced. We notice that we have more than we need. We notice that we do not need to keep so much for ourselves. We notice that as we share, more is given. We notice that every time we commit to the truth of abundance, new energy, new joy, and new well-being surge among us.



Commodity thinking says that you share with your neighbor stuff that you can afford. Covenantal thinking says that you share first with your neighbor, and then you and your neighbor live on what you've got together.



Jesus has come that we may have an abundant life. His feeding narratives attest that the generosity of God is assured wherever Jesus rules in the earth, and we count on that generosity. And that means that our common practices of greed, of the pursuit of consumer goods, of the frantic effort to acquire more, are both inappropriate and unnecessary. Our society hungers always for more: more body surgery, more cosmetics, more cars, more beer, more sex, more certitude, more security, more money, more power, more oil . . . whatever.

This hunger for more is a true sign that we do not trust the goodness of God to supply all of our needs; we do not trust that the generous rule of Jesus who has ascended to power is in effect. But we, we are Jesus people, and

therefore we are pledged and empowered to act differently, differently in the neighborhood, differently in the economy, and as citizens of the last superpower, differently in the world.



Our exhaustion, I propose, is rooted in anxiety that mistrusts the abundance that God has ordained into creation and, as a result, we—like the creator on the sixth day—have our spirits completely depleted. But we, unlike the creator, take no seventh day for refreshment, because, unlike the creator, we are too anxious to rest. And he says, “Come to me, all you that are weary.” True creatureliness, like birds and lilies, trusts the abundance of the Father. But we imagine we know better in our wisdom and in our intelligence. We spend ourselves in the futility of trying to take the place of the life-guaranteeing God.



When you are full, do not forget. Being full causes amnesia. Being comfortable causes indifference. Being secure makes us unresponsive.



There are enough flocks and herds and fish, because this is the creator God, the one who keeps on giving gifts. Prophets are those who complain about their work, threaten to quit, and face God when God is pissed off. But the call is to vouch for enough in a world of fearful anxiety. The people around Moses were weary with what they had. They complained. They complained for a lack of fish and cucumbers and melons and leeks and garlic and onions. In their scarcity they became restless

and contentious and romanticized the past, because scarcity does that. It produces greed and anxiety and often violence. It results in selfish budgets and privatization. It produces violence and meanness and parsimony and anti-neighborliness and road rage and class warfare against the poor.

And right in the middle of that, God revs up prophets who ask the right questions and know the faithful answer: enough!

Enough grace to include all!

Enough neighborliness to restore safety and dignity!

Enough resources to share with widows and orphans and immigrants!

Enough of pruning hooks and plowshares that we need not take up the arms of sword and spear.

Enough that we need not scandalize the poor with our selfishness.

Enough that we need not live with grudge and resentment and fear, as though we were under threat.

Enough bread broken and wine poured out to exhibit gifts and give thanks.



We exist because of God's inscrutable generosity in our creation, a generosity so rich that we need not be greedy or self-sufficient, because gifts are always being given. That story has its hope and culmination in the promise that God will make all things right, and that our destiny is to be in peaceable communion with God and with our neighbors, in this age and in the age to come. And between our beginning in generosity and our culmination in communion, our lives are lived in glad, obedient response to God's purpose in our lives.



Now I want you to think what happens when we forget, what happens when we give up the story and we think we are too sophisticated, when we practice amnesia. I will tell you what happens. We give up on the wonder of abundance. We neglect God's miracle of generosity. And we start imagining that there is scarcity of food, of love, of life.

And driven by scarcity, we scramble to get ours and more and more, climbing over and through and upon our neighbors to get ours. It is the case that our Western economy is rooted in a claim of scarcity and so we scramble. The poor scramble with robbery and violence and threat. The powerful scramble with investments and tax advantages and credit and exploitation. And together the rich and the poor create a jungle of anxiety, brutality, and violence. That is what forgetting will surely produce. And what is true in our culture is also true more closely in the family that operates on zero-sum love.

But we remember. And so we know that a life and an economy driven by scarcity is a fraud. And we remember to break ourselves away from the fraud of scarcity. We remember the gospel that there is enough, food is given, God is generous. The task of remembering is to break away from the grip of scarcity that holds us in bondage.



It is odd to talk about self-discipline in a therapeutic, self-indulgent culture of limitless consumerism that is on an endless binge of self-satisfaction. The news is that there is an alternative to all of that; it is rooted in the gospel. Christian people who are serious about Jesus have

always been invited to a more excellent way of deliberately saying “yes” and deliberately saying “no” about time and about money, about speech, about neighbor, about sexuality, about charity, about hospitality, about all those things that make us human. [Imagine] a church that is so clear on its holy calling, so sure of its identity in the world that it is not indulgent and flabby and slovenly about its identity or its mandate.



Imagine a group of people who no longer meet to sing and dance and remember fidelity. In that world, memory is lost and amnesia is the order of the day, forgetfulness that assumes that we are the ones and only ones, none before us, none to come after us, only us, free to use up all of creation . . . and its oil!—in our own extravagant way. Moses, of course, knows all about this; he knows that affluence breeds amnesia and the loss of a grounding memory:

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. . . . Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deut. 8:12–14, 17–18)

