

“To Get from Scarcity to Abundance Take the Road of Imagination”

*Listen to me ... you that seek the LORD. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.
For the LORD will comfort Zion; and will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.
Listen to me, my people ... I will bring near my deliverance swiftly....*

It's so hard on our hearts to suffer grief and loss. We lost so much during the pandemic. We've lost the ownership of our church building. Some have lost a measure of their health and independence. Some have lost family members and friends to death. Some have lost others because they've moved away. And it is to people experiencing loss that the prophet Isaiah speaks so powerfully, offering comfort, hope, and renewed vision of abundance.

God's chosen people were beaten and broken. They had lost their homes, their temple, their way of life, and had been taken away in chains to Babylon. They had lost everything, probably even their trust in God. They were living in captivity, exiled from everything they had known and loved. They were defeated, devastated, displaced, disoriented, and full of such despair, that they could see no hope. All they could see was loss and lack.

Not only had they experienced the death of family members and friends, they had experienced the death of their entire way of life. Not only had their bodies been captured by their enemies, their minds had been captured and were held in bondage by a scarcity mindset.

It's no surprise that the Israelites are functioning within a framework of scarcity: their homeland had been left a "wilderness," a "desert," a "waste place". When you've lost everything, it's easy to cling to what little is left, gripping tightly to a few morsels protectively, suspicious of others' motives and needs.

Into this scarcity mindset, Isaiah speaks a new vision, an absurd vision of abundance. There were likely many who just shook their heads at these ridiculous words of this delusional prophet. Yet, despite their response, the prophet insists that deliverance resides in this very place, a transformation so concrete that the people will sing for joy!

Notice the concrete images Isaiah invites them to see. This is no generalized "don't worry, be happy" dismissal of pain; this is no "pie-in-the-sky" pat on the hand. It is a specific and compelling picture that Isaiah paints to fire the imagination. God will "comfort" all her "waste places," her "wilderness" will become "like Eden", her "desert" will become like the garden of the Lord".

And further, God's justice will "be a light" to a people who know no justice. Isaiah expands the frame of reference beyond oppression, offering an alternative and prophetic line of sight to what God has in mind for their future.

Today, our gaze, too, is fixed on scarcity. Identity politics in every segment of life – even the church – convince us to fear any one who is not like us or anyone who disagrees with us; Newscasts filled with every terrible thing one can imagine causes us to fear the future. Consumer addictions convince us that we need more, that our jobs, lives, relationships, possessions, homes, are not enough. We have allowed our consciousness to be colonized by the loudest voices and most frightening scenarios. And when we allow our brains to be crowded with outrage and fear, then there remains no room in our minds to imagine what God might be up to. Our vision is so preoccupied with loss and grief and fear that our knee-jerk reaction is to hang on to our own control of the situation. And holding tightly onto our own control completely prevents us from recognizing the abundant life God offers us, right here, right now – if we only let go and let God.

Much like holding a child's chin in order to direct their eyes, their attention,
Isaiah commands us to "Look!" as he shakes us from the numbing stupor of the scarcity worldview.

Isaiah seeks to fire not only the imaginations of the exiles in Babylon
but everyone who has read his words since – including us!

Isaiah seeks to cultivate the imaginations of God's people
so that they can participate in the deliverance that God promises.

Isaiah seeks to help us to let go.

Don't remember the things of the past and don't dwell on the things of the present;
instead, IMAGINE something entirely new!

Imagine moving from a waste place to Eden, from desert to garden, from captivity to freedom!
And yet sometimes we lose the capacity to imagine beyond what we have experienced.

The thing is, we can't step into God's abundance without stepping out in faith,
and we can't step out in faith until we have been freed from our scarcity mindset,
and we can't be freed from that mindset until we can envision the alternative,
and we can't envision the alternative without imagination.

But our collective imagination is a muscle that has severely atrophied.

One of the reasons so many of the current problems in the world continue unsolved
is because we do not use our "imaginations" or the creative potential that God gave us
when fashioning us in the "image" of the "Creator".

There exists in contemporary culture a bias of right brain over left,
of the cognitive over the imaginative, of science over the arts.

Many Christians in the West have a deep suspicion of the imagination.

Some Protestant Christians have even considered the imagination as the devil's playground
and warned the faithful away from engaging it.

Yet, imagination is central to the biblical witness and to Jesus' teaching.

And, through neuroscience today, we know that the imagination is a powerful tool embedded in our entire neural-network.

We deny the imagination to our own peril.

And so, if our imagination muscle has atrophied, we must rebuild it, stretch it, & exercise it.

How do we do that? Well, here are 3 steps:

First, we have to recognize that we don't already know everything.

We are so full of how we did things in the past, that we don't have room to imagine a different future.

We are so full of our own information, strategic plans, metrics, and expectations,
that we don't have room for God's purposes, plans, and promises.

Therefore we must humble ourselves before God, surrender our wills to God's,
and empty ourselves to make room for imagination to flourish.

**So to cultivate our ability to imagine and live into the abundant life God offers,
we must first recognize that we don't already know everything.**

Second, we must give up our need to be right,

which let me say parenthetically is actually a form of violence,
especially when we try to impose our human will on others.

We must give up our need to be right & instead, relax & be willing to be playful or even foolish
in order to cultivate imagination.

When our inner critic (or an outer critic) is constantly saying, "No, that's not right"

or "That won't work!" or "We can't do that!" or "They won't let us do that!"

or "We don't have enough to do that!", we shut down imagination before it can even begin.

Think here of the key principle of improv comedy: "Yes!" or "Yes, and ..."

The goal here is to develop the muscle, not to figure out what is right.

**So to cultivate our ability to imagine and live into the abundant life God offers,
we must first recognize that we don't already know everything.**

Second, we must give up our need to be right. And third, we must be patient,
as these new "eyes to see" beyond our scarcity mindset will take time to develop.

Just as we can't decide to begin exercising our bodies and then run a marathon the next day,
we can't decide to begin exercising our imaginations
and then have a vision like Isaiah's, take a leap of faith, and live into it the next day.

If we want to run a marathon,
we need to start by running a few blocks and then a mile and work up to 26 miles.
If we want to have a beautiful inspired vision like Isaiah, take a leap of faith,
and live into God's abundance,
we must be patient with ourselves, with each other, and with God.

**So to cultivate our ability to imagine and live into the abundant life God offers,
we must first recognize that we don't already know everything.**

Second, we must give up our need to be right. And third, we must be patient.

In order to live into the abundance God offers, we must trust in God's promises,
and have the imagination to envision all that God has planned for us.

We in our American culture of 2023 have lived too long in a scarcity mindset,
and today Isaiah invites us into a new mindset – a mindset of abundance.

If any thought of "not enough" –
not enough time, not enough energy, not enough health, not enough money,
not enough people, not enough consensus, not enough power...

If any thought of "not enough" has crossed your mind,
that means that you are operating within the scarcity mindset.

And as long as we are operating within the scarcity mindset,
we cannot step into the abundant life God offers,
because to step into abundance requires faith, and faith requires imagination.

Today Isaiah invites us to stretch our "imagination" muscle,
the part of us that is the very "image" of God.

Isaiah invites us to exercise that muscle and that requires us to do 3 things:

We must recognize that God knows more than we do;
that our job isn't to figure out the answer or determine what's right,
but simply to discern where God is leading our next step;
and that the process can't be rushed
because it will take as much time as it takes us to put our trust in God.

**So to cultivate our ability to imagine and live into the abundant life God offers,
we must first recognize that we don't already know everything.**

Second, we must give up our need to be right

And third, we must be patient.

When we do that then we, too, like the exiles to whom Isaiah spoke,
will hear in these words the divine promise which will fill us with new faith and hope:

*Listen to me ... you that seek the Lord. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.*

*For the Lord will comfort Zion; and will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.*

Listen to me, my people ... I will bring near my deliverance swiftly....

So says God. And so we believe. So be it! Amen and Amen!¹

¹ This sermon was inspired by a commentary on the passage by Amy G. Oden, Visiting Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality, Saint Paul School of Theology, Oklahoma City, OK, as found at this link:
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21/commentary-on-isaiah-511-6-6>