

“Simple Abundance”

Psalm 23

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 3 May 2009

If there is one passage of scripture that most of us know, it is the twenty-third psalm, which is an appointed text in today’s lectionary. I remember having to memorize it in Sunday School using the Revised Standard Version with all of the thee’s, thy’s, and thou’s. And at many funerals, I read the psalm in the flowery and familiar language of the Authorized Version.

For most of us the primary thrust of the psalm is comfort and assurance...that we really don’t need to fear anything, because God is our protector. So, while we don’t need to take stupid risks, we also don’t need to spend our time fretting and getting overly anxious about things over which we have little or no control: things like the economy and the swine flu virus. We can be *appropriately* concerned and use common sense precautions.

I remember living through the big San Francisco earthquake of 1989. I was working at Stanford University at the time, and I remember looking at my office building on campus during the quake and the glass was undulating. It was frightening to be sure, but since we didn’t have electricity for a few days, we missed all of the really dramatic news stories that had the rest of the country glued to their TV sets. And when the electricity did come back, I was shocked at how sensationalized the stories were. They described the few people who had died, the one section of the Bay Bridge that had collapsed, and the one section of 280 that collapsed. But, for millions of us in the Bay Area, we got on with life and after a few days it was somewhat normal.

I am concerned that we do not let ourselves panic or become irrational in the face of the current swine flu outbreak. Yes, it is a real concern, but on a national, state, and municipal level, we’re reasonable well prepared. There is a plan in place should an outbreak occur locally. It’s also important to put this into perspective. In most years, more than 30,000 Americans die from seasonal flu, and we don’t hear too much about that in the news.

I’m not saying that we should bury our heads in the sand, but rather approach this rationally and approach it with faith. God is our shepherd. Even when we walk through the darkest valley, we don’t need to be afraid, because God has not abandoned us. We are not alone, but rather in the protective shelter of God’s love. Even when bad things happen, even if each of us were to contract the flu, God is with us. That is *ultimate* assurance.

That’s the comfort and assurance aspect of the psalm, which may be just what some of us need to hear this morning.

But, there is another reading of this psalm that speaks of sheer and simple abundance of life all around us. And as we conclude our second capital campaign in less than four years – even in the context of a serious recession – it is good for us to reflect with thanksgiving on God’s abundance.

Abundance is there in the opening sentence of the psalm: “I shall not want.” I don’t know if you’ve ever heard Bobby McFerrin’s beautiful polyphonic rendition of the psalm, but he begins by putting a positive and a feminine spin, “The Lord is my shepherd; I have all I need. She makes me lie down in green meadows.” [Play McFerrin]

I have loved that since I heard it years ago. And somehow, it conveys the luxuriant depth of God’s abundance better than any other arrangement I know. So, God provides for us all that we need.

After the first three sentences, there is a shift from God in the third person to addressing God directly in the second person: “You prepare a table before me.” One of the most basic needs we have is food, and when we think of abundance, our minds go to sustenance...food. And I want to add a dimension to your thinking about that. Look at the center of our liturgical space, and what do you see? Christ’s abundant table, prepared for you. This is the table to God’s abundance! There is enough here for everyone!

The psalmist continues, “You anoint my head with oil.” This is a symbolic act of blessing and abundance. Olive oil was, and still is, a precious commodity in the Near East. And it is used as a sign of healing, blessing, and abundance – all from God.

God doesn’t just fill our cup, God goes past the brim and fills it to overflowing. In a time when many of us open our 201(k) statements and feel anything but a gush of abundance, it’s important to put this in perspective. Plymouth came through the Great Depression and two world wars intact. The UCC and its Congregational forbears have been around in this country for almost 400 years. The church universal has been in business for about two millennia. And God was present to Moses a good 2,000 years before that. God’s abundance isn’t measured in quarterly statements, but across the ages, from everlasting to everlasting. So, don’t worry...there will be enough.

There is an abundance of gifts in this congregation. I saw it on the succession of committees and teams that got us to this place, where we are enjoying enhanced and accessible facilities: the **Strategic Planning** Team, the **Long-Range Planning** Committee, the **Capital Campaign Exploratory** Committee, the **Project Priority** Committee the **first Capital Campaign** Committee, the Building Committee, and now the **second Capital Campaign** Committee. The talent that all of you have shared is amazing. One of the other cool things that happened was that two of our members working as volunteers on our redesign – Dana Leavitt and Brian Betsill – were hired by the City of Fort Collins Planning Department and RB+B Architects respectively during the process. God’s abundance is everywhere!

And I have seen this congregation do what many thought we couldn’t do: grow in numbers, grow in spirit, grow in mission giving all while we raised the money to improve our physical facilities. We didn’t do anything exotic or extravagant with this building. What we did was to help ensure the future of people living lives of faith in a truly inclusive setting that is unique in this community. And there is a new sense of abundance and generosity spreading among this congregation as well. We’ve done what very few dare to do by conducting a capital campaign in an economic time like this. We have scattered seed on fertile soil, and now we are seeing just the beginning of Plymouth’s potential. Our best days are ahead of us. And with the Spirit’s guiding we will live into our dream, and God’s dream, for Plymouth.

I know you’ve been waiting to hear the financial result of the second capital campaign, so I’d like to invite our campaign leader, Terri Schulz to come forward with the good news. Every one of us owes Terri and the Capital Campaign team a debt of gratitude for their work and leadership, and for their faith in God and in this congregation.