

When Scarcity Is the Illusion

A sermon on Romans 5:12-19; Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; & Matthew 4:1-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 February 2026

© LaughingBird.net

Message

In a world ruled by suspicion and blame, the gospel announces an abundance that was never earned and cannot run out.

Sermon

The “original sin” of Adam and Eve in the garden featured in two of tonight’s Bible readings. Many of us have a funny split-personality reaction to the “doctrine of original sin” that this story often calls to mind.

On the one hand, we instinctively react against it, reluctant to believe that we are anything other than strong independent actors who can freely choose good or evil for ourselves. But on the other hand, when we are dealing with the practical realities of our daily lives, we know only too well that we are constantly contending with forces that are way larger than just individual choice. Most of the powerful realities that push us around and seem to dictate much of how we behave, and even more of how we feel, are not things we have any personal control over. Whether it is the sustained pressure to compromise in order to keep our jobs, or the percolating outrage in our social media, or the fear of climate catastrophe, or just the relentless process of growing old and fragile; these are not things we ever chose or can really take charge of.

But what today’s Bible readings want to announce is that the power of those things is nothing compared to the power of what God has done and is doing. God’s action doesn’t merely match it and counter-balance it; God’s action blows it right out of the park.

In our reading from his letter to the church in Rome, we heard the Apostle Paul spelling this out:

The free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through Adam’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of Jesus Christ abounded for the many.

“The free gift is not like the trespass.” They are not equally matched. God is not measuring out grace in just-enough handfuls: this much sin needs this much grace; a bit more over here because there’s a bit more sin. No, says Paul. The free gift in the grace of Jesus abounds. It is abundant. Lavish. Overflowing. Out of all proportion to anything we have done or even anything we really need.

It’s like if you’ve got a little smudge mark on your cheek, and instead of grabbing a face-washer and carefully dabbing away the little smudge, God runs you a bubble bath in a giant spa tub and lights candles and pours you a champagne for good measure. A totally lavish and over-the-top response. A flood tide of generosity.

But wait, there’s more. After discovering that God has run you this bubble bath, you discover that this wasn’t in response to the smudge on your cheek after all. God was already inviting you to bathe in generous love, regardless.

So, let's come back to Paul's vision and let's try to see what it looks like on the cosmic scale that he is unveiling. It is not about your personal cheek smudges. It is about the prevailing atmosphere in which you live. Is it choked by sin and death, constricting and herding you in directions you'd probably rather not go? Or are you now living under the reign of Jesus the Messiah, a reign that sweeps away that cloud of toxicity and allows you to breathe freely again and reimagine your life, as you are gently carried along on the refreshing breeze of abundant love, joy, and generosity?

Paul says you don't have to wait for that, or work for that, or try to achieve that. It's already here. It just is. God has already intervened on that scale, and you don't have to do anything at all except relax into it and enjoy the lavish benefits of it.

Actually, perhaps it's not even a new intervention; perhaps it was always the case. That seems to be what is being described when we go back and reread the Garden of Eden story in Genesis. Generous abundance was a given, right from the get go. Nothing had to be earned or conserved or measured. It just was, overflowing with every imaginable goodness.

So how did things go so wrong? What screwed it up?

You will sometimes hear preachers say that this story is one of greed, of people desiring to have more than God was prepared to give them. But the way the story tells it, it is not a desire for too much, but a suspicion that God has given too little, that God is withholding things. The serpent sows the seeds of doubt and suspicion. Maybe this apparent abundance is a bit of an illusion, and it all could run out at any moment. Maybe God is being a bit stingy with us, and we are being short-changed. Maybe we have to struggle and bend the rules a bit to make sure that we don't miss out and get left with nothing.

Once we no longer trust that God is an enthusiastic provider of inexhaustible abundance, we find ourselves unable to even recognise and enjoy the abundance anymore.

Paul is telling us is that once this sort of suspicion got started, it became contagious. It started with one moment of suspicion on the part of Adam and Eve, and then spread rapidly to infect the entire human race. Surely our generation can immediately recognise the truth of this. We live in an era where even the most bizarre suspicions and conspiracy theories seem to take root and spread rapidly. Paul and centuries of theological tradition reinforce our experience that suspicion and hostility are highly contagious.

If we had read on a bit further in the Garden of Eden story, we would have seen the beginning of another dynamic that we probably know by experience too. You may be familiar with the story. No sooner has their suspicion-fuelled disobedience come to light, than they plunge headlong into a vicious cycle of accusation and blaming. It was her fault. No it was his fault. No it was the serpents fault. And unspoken, but probably not far beneath the surface, it was God's fault for keeping things from us.

When the atmosphere we breathe is thick with suspicion, it will soon be a toxic fog of accusations and blaming too. This fog of accusation is a social atmosphere more than anyone's individual failing. While that might not entirely absolve individuals who seem to be deliberately amplifying it, they are victims of it themselves first. It is a contagion that spreads, and as long as we are still looking suspiciously at God and doubting God's generosity, we

remain largely vulnerable and unprotected. Pointing the finger becomes a reflex response, driven both by anger and by fear that if we don't identify someone to blame, the finger may be pointed at us.

None of this negates Paul's assertion that God has overwhelmed the power of this contagion with something a million times more powerful and expansive and generous and life-giving. It's a bit like life in Eastern Ukraine: which power currently holds the upper hand in your region is not nearly as influential in your life as which power you are allowing to hold territory in your head and your heart.

The lingering presence of contagious toxicity doesn't mean that nothing has changed and that it continues to reign supreme. It doesn't. The new reality is breaking out, and it is pretty contagious too. Contagious in a very very good way. The story we heard about Jesus facing temptations in the wilderness provides a powerful picture of what this new reality looks like in a human life.

You see, in this story, the Satan – and by the way, that name simply means the Accuser which is what we have just been talking about – the Satan is trying to play the exact same scarcity and suspicion cards that the serpent played in Genesis. “Surely if you are the Son of God, you shouldn't be hungry. What is God holding back from you?” “How come God is denying you the opportunity to prove yourself to everyone with a death-defying stunt?” “Let's make a deal. You worship me, and I'll get all the nations worshipping you. After all, God seems to have withheld that.”

It's the same voice we heard in the Garden. Maybe God can't be trusted to give you everything you deserve. Maybe you're being short-changed. Maybe God is running out of blessings, and you're going to have to do some wheeling and dealing to make sure you don't miss out.

But what we are seeing in Jesus is a human life that is no longer susceptible to that accusing voice. We are seeing the new reality that Paul is talking about made fully visible in a human life, in the life of Jesus.

You see, Jesus doesn't succumb to the temptations, but notice that he's not gritting his teeth and furrowing his brow and hanging on for dear life either. And he's not getting angry and starting to hurl accusations at the one trying to sow the seeds of suspicion. He doesn't have to, because he is has been gathered up in the overwhelming love and generosity of God. He trusts so easily and naturally in the generous abundance of God's gifts, that a temptation that relies on a suspicion of missing out is not experienced as tempting at all. Accusing God of being stingy and untrustworthy seems absurd. That world no longer holds any real power.

Now you may be thinking, “Well that's all very well in theory, but the toxic fog of suspicion and blame still seems pretty contagious and destructive to me. I'm still struggling to breathe freely.” And that's a fair call.

But this is not an either/or situation. I'm not trying to convince anyone that everything is progressing swimmingly. And if I was, you'd rightly be asking why I'd suddenly stuck my head back in the sand after six months of preaching that we need to get real about facing up to the civilisational and ecological collapse unfolding around us.

We can say both of these things at the same time, and live with the tension. The world does appear to be unravelling, but that does not mean that God has run out of blessings and that God is not lavishing abundant love and life and joy on all who will turn their faces to the Spirit's breeze and breathe deeply. The reason I've been saying that we need to get real about facing up to the collapse is precisely so that we can discover how to live under the reign of that abundance, trusting God's goodness and sharing our lives generously, even in the midst of the horrors of a collapsing world.

This season of Lent which we have entered in the last few days is often thought of as a time of scarcity, of fasting and abstinence, of tenacious effort, of gritting our teeth and setting our faces like flint as we journey with Jesus on the hard road of discipleship. And it can look like that when looked at from outside.

But here's the thing. All of that stuff only makes sense because all the rich gifts of God are already being lavished on us in abundant generosity. We don't do any of those things because we are trying to earn God's gifts, or make ourselves good enough to receive them. We are not trying to twist the arm of a miserly God in order to get an extra morsel of blessing to avoid starvation.

Lent is not a season for those who feel the need to punish themselves in order to impress God with their piety and win a few stingy blessings. That is a self-harming distortion. But as people who know ourselves abundantly beloved, who know ourselves to be living under the reign of God's extravagant generosity, this season is healthy part of the gift, part of the endless celebration of the new life that Jesus is leading us into.