

TURN IT AROUND



Jesus moves us from scarcity to abundance.

BY KAREN G. BOCKELMAN





SOMETIMES WE need to turn things around.

When our daughter was 3 or 4 years old, she went through a phase of “night terrors,” the kind of bad dreams that are not uncommon for young children. It seemed we could do nothing to ease her panic or still her crying. (Toddlers don’t respond very well to reasoned explanations or suggestions of relaxation techniques.) I was at a loss.

Then I read an article in a magazine that offered a seemingly simple solution—one I couldn’t imagine really working. But I was desperate to help my daughter, so I gave it a try. After waking her up just a bit, I sat down beside her on the bed. “It is a bad dream?” I asked. She nodded. “Well, no wonder,” I said, “You’re sleeping on the bad dream side of the pillow. Let’s turn it over so you can sleep on the good dream side.” The response was immediate. Her tears dried; she snuggled back into bed and fell readily to sleep. This worked repeatedly.

Sometimes we need to turn things over and turn things around. From my daughter’s bad dreams, I learned that children need a concrete reason to change their thinking. Adults, too, can benefit from a different perspective, although it’s a bit more complicated than flipping over a pillow.

One of the “nightmares” that besets our culture is the message of scarcity. Much of the advertising we see, hear and read tells us that we lack what we need—cars, clothes, beauty, romance, resources. There’s an all-too-long list of what we might be missing and how our dreams could be realized if we only had more. Our current political culture seems bent on telling us that jobs, power, prestige and security are in short supply, so we need to circle the wagons and protect what should be ours because there isn’t enough to go around or to be shared. It’s a zero-sum world, where whatever others have takes away from what I could or should have.

Even the church can fall victim to such bad dreams. We don’t have enough resources to maintain our building. We don’t have enough money to pay a pastor. We don’t have enough members to sustain our congregation. We don’t have enough children in Sunday school or singers for the choir. We don’t have enough people for Bible study, for the altar guild or to help at funerals. It can be easy to cry and hard to pull ourselves out of our panic. Now we need to turn things around and face in a different direction, thinking in terms of abundance, rather than scarcity. Granted, that’s easier said than done, but people of faith have the resources to recognize that God gives us more than enough of what we truly need.

One of our greatest resources is Scripture. Although you may be reading this article in January, I wrote it last August—in the middle of five Sundays worth of Gospel lessons from John 6, beginning with Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000. It’s a powerful story—powerful enough to be told in all four Gospels—and told twice in Mark. In the John 6 account, a large crowd follows Jesus, and now they are hungry. Jesus’ disciples can only see scarcity. “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (John 6:7). Even when a young boy comes forward with five loaves of bread and two fish, the disciples are stuck on what’s lacking. “But what are they among so many people?” (John 6:9). Jesus, however, sees abundance in the boy’s offering. He takes the loaves, gives thanks, distributes them to the crowd and then the disciples gather up 12 baskets of leftovers!

John’s Gospel is full of stories where Jesus turns scarcity into abundance—an abundance of wine at a wedding at Cana, a Samaritan woman who finds living water at a well, an invalid healed, an adulterous woman saved from stoning, a blind man given sight, a dead man restored to life. In each account it would be easy to see only scarcity: We’ve run out of wine ... Here we go with the daily drudgery of going to the well in the heat of the day ... Someone always beats me to the healing water ...

He or his parents must have sinned ... If you had been here Lazarus would not have died. And yet what was lacking was turned into more than enough by One who came “that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Throughout my ministry I have frequently reminded people (and myself) that we are an Easter people. If we believe in the resurrection, we are never stuck with what is lacking. We are promised a new start, a new day full of the life that Jesus promises. When you hear the Gospel lesson at worship or read Scripture during Bible study or devotions, pay attention to the turning, the shift from scarcity to abundance. This comes from God’s love present in Jesus.

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But Scripture is not our only resource. Jesus continues to come to us through other people, and not just the people of our own faith community. One popular “explanation” for the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is that, when the boy gave up his lunch, others were inspired to share what they had brought but were keeping back for themselves. Whether or not that’s what really happened, God’s abundant love and care comes to us in sharing with one another. In these words from the ELCA Southwestern Minnesota Synod mission statement, “by God’s grace, together we have what we need.”

Three years ago the congregation of which I am a member experienced a devastating fire that destroyed the interior of our 110-year-old building. In the days and months that followed, it was hard to focus on anything but what we’d lost—a treasured altar painting, beloved stained glass windows, white and gold Swedish-style chancel furnishings, a recently refurbished pipe organ, glorious acoustics, the kitchen and space for our free neighborhood breakfast, library books and archival documents.

But the whole community came together to give us what we needed. Other congregations, including the Jewish congregation and the Islamic community, offered us worship space. Our neighboring Roman Catholic congregation offered space for our breakfast. Community

fundraisers added to our insurance coverage, making it possible for us to rebuild. Artists have helped us make beauty out of our broken pieces of stained glass. A 3-year-old neighborhood girl, distressed by the “big, bad, crawly fire” painted and sold 70 small paintings, raising \$125 to “fix the church.”

Once you start looking, gifts of abundance are visible—often in unexpected people and places. For example, I read a news article about a New York City mail carrier who was retiring and wrote a letter to each of the people on his route. He said he’d gained so much by encountering each of them that he considered his life full and abundant. I don’t know anything about his faith life, but I know his story encouraged my faith.

And that’s a place for one more turn-around, one more change in direction. I’ve been reminded more than once to see Jesus in those I encounter in daily life. The message seems to be to treat the grocery clerk or the panhandler, the bus driver or the janitor, the mail carrier or the teacher as I would want to treat Jesus himself. But the message might also be that those whom I encounter should be able to see Christ in me. While I am looking for signs of God’s abundance in Scripture and in my community, could I be a sign of God’s abundance to others?

Sometimes we do need to turn things around. 🌸