



Towers of Power

October 31, 2021

This week we are beginning a new worship series. It is meant to show us what it means to live in abundance. The sense that there is not enough drives greed, fear and exclusionary behavior. We begin to live in "Scare City" where it seems that death, starvation, feelings of being overwhelmed and swallowed up can lurk around every corner. This has seemed to be especially so in the last year and a half, but maybe that's just me. The Good News is that this is an illusion. A spiritual journey ... into the truth of abundance of all that we need ... offers us an alternative vision of where to live our lives. Over the next four weeks, this series will have us "Moving Out of Scare City" and traveling to the vast, open habitats of God's Abundance Forest of grace.

Our theme verses for this series come from Philippians 4:6-7

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Are you familiar with the story of Aladdin? A young man finds an old metal oil lamp, rubs it a little to be presented with a genie (a spiritual magical being) that will grant the holder of the lamp three wishes. Now, even with the wishes, things don't go exactly as planned. Yet, people can see verses like these in Philippians and think that they can pray to God, and if they do it just right, the result will be like genie and the wishes.

Or, that one should go through life, not being watchful and aware of what is going on around them ... or be sure that any and every difficulty will be overcome without their active participation. They interpret it to mean that worrying or anxiety is a sin, or because of everything going on in the world, it is not possible. Oftentimes, people see these verses, and it seems ludicrous, like we are supposed to go around in blissful unawareness, not looking before we cross the street, not being concerned whether we can pay the rent or make the mortgage payment, like we can rub the magic lamp and our genie will grant our wish to take away any difficulty.

But this is **not** what Paul is saying here. There **are** things to be anxious about. One of the reasons he wrote this letter is that he was anxious about the spiritual health of this church and the people that he loved within it. So much so that he is writing to them while he's in prison, also a concern. He doesn't say that we have nothing to worry about, or that what we do worry about is unimportant. But in light of what God has done through Jesus, we can be **sure** that God is in control and will hear our prayers. We can rely on that. We can take comfort in that. When we understand that, we will have peace regardless of what is swirling all around us. (cf. NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, pg 131)

Through this series we will taking the path to peace as we Move from Scare City (full of anxiety, worry, and strife) to Abundance Forest where we can find peace.

This week we start by looking at the Towers of Power. We turn on our TVs, look at our computers, scroll through social media, and we see ... More, more, more! Like skyscrapers that begin to loom over us casting a shadow below, our quest for "more" things, power, prestige, wealth, and domination have created a culture of oppressive "not enough-ness." We are overwhelmed, overworked and overstressed. Our perspective of how much we actually have is skewed by the immensity of images of what we "ought to have," or maybe what we used to have. In this first week of our series, we begin to confront the myth of scarcity and focus on abundance.

In Genesis we have a narrative about the first skyscraper.



The people had been told by God after the Flood ... You remember, raining 40 days and 40 nights. Noah and his family are floating around in the ark with all the land animals. Eventually, the waters receded, and just like with Adam and Eve, God told Noah and his family to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

But there were many who clustered together afraid of what would happen. They built a stronghold with a tower to reach the heavens.

We find this in Genesis 11:1-9. Hear the word of the Lord.

11:1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."



5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. 6 The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

8 So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The word of life.

Thanks be to God!

Was the problem that they built a city, like maybe God was against cities? We might come to that conclusion because we are out here in Wallowa County far away from any big cities. However, two of the most prominent places in the Bible are Jerusalem and the *New Jerusalem*. The New Jerusalem described in the book of Revelation is full of living things like in the Garden of Eden but on a much larger scale, large enough so that all the people could live there too ... and in harmony.

No, the problem is the why.



This is more like what the tower actually looked like according to archeologists. The previous images that I've shown were artistic imaginings of the tower since the time of the Renaissance.

Why did they want to build this tower, have this stronghold, this strong tower, so to speak? It was a place to huddle and barricade themselves from what they were afraid of. What do they say?

*“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; **otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.**” [Emphasis mine.] (Genesis 11:4)*

Despite what God had told them, they were afraid of the future, what it might bring. They were worried that their community might be broken up. They were afraid of being sent into a world they didn't know or understand, so they withdrew and built themselves a fortification with a tower that would show the world ... God how powerful they were in their own right. They don't trust God to do it, so they take care of it themselves. Due to this fear, they put on this bravado to convince themselves that they can keep out the threats and were in control of their future.

I say that in a way that sounds terrible. How dare they challenge God in that way, right? But really how different are we? The human condition gives us a tendency to want to hold onto things, to conserve them. Could we be living out of fear that we won't be able to preserve what we have? Do we worry that someone or

something is going to take it away? I'm not telling you to throw out your insurance policies. In recent weeks we've been reviewing our insurance here at the church. But, where's the line between worry, or lack of trust, and simple prudence and good stewardship or caretaking? It can be hard to tell sometimes. Looking at our level of anxiety around an issue might give us a clue.

Let's take a look at some of the words we find in the buildings of our simple city line drawing (See the top of the document): Fear rules me, Survival, Adversity, Blame, Victim, No!, Mine, Need, Control. Do you think that the people of Shinar could have been feeling some of these things? They wanted to assert some control. How often do we feel that way? Some of us can be all "go with the flow," and fine with it, right up to a certain point. We find our tipping point, and we say, "This far and no further." We want some certainty. We want to preserve what we have. We want to be able to predict a little bit what the future is going to be like, and we want to shape it, at least a little bit. Especially in the last year and a half, with things changing almost every day, it can be hard to know which way is up. That can be scary.

That's our reality, but is it really the truth? Maybe it's just the way that we're looking at it. We really live in ... an ... abundant world, but we don't believe it. Think about the sun and how much energy it is pumping out every **second**. If we put it in terms of mass, the sun produces 400,000 **tons** of energy every second. The earth receives about 4 and a half **pounds** of that per second, 1-2-3-4. That's enough energy to fuel life on this planet, and we, as a planet, only use a fraction of that energy. All day, every day, the sun shines its rays of abundance on us, more than enough. (<https://www.gocamsolar.com/blog/how-much-energy-does-sun-generate>, Accessed 10/30/2021)

What about plants? I am no gardener. Almost all of the plants that I've ever had die. The only reason that the violet that Linda Kehl gave me a couple of years ago is still alive is because it requires very little care, and cactus. I can do pretty well with cactus. But, in reality if plant life was left on its own, it would cover our cities in just a few years. A great example is the city of Pripyat in Ukraine where the Chernobyl nuclear accident happened in 1986. The entire area was instantly abandoned due to the massive radiation. A silver lining to the disaster is that they have been able to study what would happen to the urban environment once the people left. Nature just took over. Plants and vines covered things and animals moved in. Abundance of life.

Think of ocean waves coming on shore, wave after wave after wave, the energy and power there. It's almost limitless.

But, what do we hear about on the news and see in the headlines? Where do we focus? That there isn't enough, scarcity. The focus is on fear. The focus is on the battle of who gets what because there isn't enough. We believe that everything is going to run out. Most of our systems are based on the premise of scarce resources, our economy and political systems are based on managing those scarce resources. Wars are fought. Advertisers manipulate us. *Only available for a limited time* ... If there is a crisis, we have to tune in. More anxiety. More stress.

We all remember the stories of the shortage of toilet paper in the beginning of the pandemic. Now, we're experiencing supply chain issues, but that's another story. However, there's been another shortage that I don't remember hearing a lot about, antacids (Tums, Rolaids, and the like) due to the anxiety that we are collectively experiencing. Maybe you know about it because you've had trouble finding those things yourself, but it's not something that we often talk about.

With all of this we create a "self-fulfilling prophecy" of scarcity. That certainly happened with the toilet paper. So many people stocked up on it, to feel that they had some control over something, concerned about running out, that the shelves were bare for months.

All of that is living in Scare City, this place where we live in fear. It has become real because we made it real. We built our tower together, even if we didn't mean to. All of our actions together made it so.

But, we do have a choice. We don't *have* to live there. We can move to Abundance Forest, which we know is there if we look. Let's focus on the words there that show us the difference in mindset. [Slide.] Courage, Compassion, Plenty, Generous, Yes!, Share, Plenty, Possible.

If we want to change how we experience reality, we have to change our mindset. We must change what we believe about the world we live in. We must believe that we can have an abundant life. Jesus said in John 10:10, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (NRSV) This is not the prosperity gospel that says we're all going to be rich or wealthy. This is a promise of a rich life. How can we start regarding our lives that way? Maybe we have, but we need to get back on the right track. Maybe we're doing it now, but can encourage others.

The idea of changing the mindset of the whole world can be overwhelming, but can we do at our scale to move towards Abundance Forest? Maybe, we can plant a tree for our forest. Growing vegetables in our own garden or the Magic Garden. It's fall now, but we can start planning for the spring. (I guess that we already know that this is probably not the thing that I'm going to do. 😊) What about letting that person who's in a hurry go in line in front of us? Give comfort to someone in pain? Share a kind word or smile at a stranger. The limits here are only limited by your imagination.

When we do this, we stop being part of a "system" that keeps us in a scarcity frame of mind. We stop living in that system, in that isolating, protecting tower, and we can realize that we are living in an ecosystem. An ecosystem is a community of interacting organisms and their physical environment. Living things interact with each other and also non-living things like soil, water, and air. When we recognize this, we can move out of the fear and anxiety we experience in Scare City and move to Abundance Forest. We don't get there in a day. It's one step at a time, but we can make a start. Living in Abundance is a state of being, not a state of having. (Julie Ann Cairns, "Moving From Scare-City to The Abundance Forest," <https://theabundancecode.com/blog/moving-from-scare-city-to-the-abundance-forest/>, Accessed 10/18/2021)

One of the problems with the people isolating themselves in the Tower of Babel is that they were not living into the purpose that God had for them. They were not living into their potential. God made the whole creation, the earth, but God created humanity to care for it, to develop it. By withdrawing into their city and tower, they are in fact limiting themselves, what they can do and their potential. God had a much larger role in mind for them.

The same can be said of us. We are called to be salt and light for the world. That's churchy jargon that means that we are to help preserve the people in the world, keep them from going bad, as salt keeps meat from going bad. And we are also to lead people to the Lord, like light shining in the darkness. When we stay locked in our self-built towers of power, towers of shelter and isolation, it keeps us from the much larger role that God has in mind for us, freely sharing God's abundant life with others. It keeps us from sharing the peace of God with a world that so desperately needs it.

When we leave our towers of protection, we can be salt and light for the world, as a preservative and a light shining God's love out to everyone. Then, we can share the Good News and invite others into God's Abundance Forest of grace.

Amen!