

According to the United Nations World Food Programme, planet earth produces more than enough food to feed every human being in the world. Even now, in the middle of a pandemic and an economic collapse and a popular uprising against centuries of oppression.

The UN's research confirms what biblical tradition has affirmed from the beginning, in that first chapter of Genesis, when God says to humankind, "I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food" (Gen 1:29).

Not content with feeding only human creatures, the first chapter of Genesis affirms abundant life for ALL: "To every beast of the earth," God continues, "and to every bird of the air, and to every thing that creeps on the earth, every thing that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food" (Gen 1:30).

And, "Indeed," God said, "it was very good!" (Gen 1:31c)

Even in hard times, the Scriptures make known the provision of God for the human creatures of God: when a rag tag band of freed Israelite slaves survive on manna and quail in the desert (Ex 16); when the prophet Elisha insists the tithe of first fruits delivered to him as the representative of God should instead be shared with people who are starving in a famine (2K 4:42-44); when the Babylonian exiles appear ten times healthier than the tyrant king's most heroic men, even though they have only had vegetables to eat and water to drink as they pray to their God throughout the exile (Dan 1).

Yes, God provides every plant yielding seed for food, as the Bible proclaims. Yes, the planet produces more than enough food to feed every human being in the world, as the United Nations insists. Yes, both planet and Provider produce "plenty enough," even in hard times, as both science and religion have proven.

So how can it be that people still hunger? People still thirst? People still wonder when their next meal will come? Including right now, in a pandemic and an economic collapse and a popular uprising against centuries of oppression?

Both science and religion have an answer for that, too, and it is not a pretty one, I'm afraid: human hunger comes about not because of God, not because of the planet, but because of us. Because of humans.

We get scared. As do those ancient Israelites in the desert, who find themselves hoarding far beyond their needs out of fear it will dry up tomorrow. We get jealous. As do those earliest humans in the garden of Eden, who crave the one thing that is not good for us over the abundance that is right in front of us. And in the process of trying to assuage our fear and our greed we unleash evil and violence throughout the land. Like those Babylonian invaders who plunder a land of promise and plenty in the name of building up wealth and security.

Our fear and our greed cause so much hunger. Even today the United Nations estimates that 122 million hungry children live in countries affected by conflict. Many of those conflicts are made worse by the shock of climate change, also a result of our fear and our greed.

And then, of course, there is poverty. Worsened by economic and political systems that plunge the small farmers, herders, and fishermen who produce 70 percent of the global food supply into the most vulnerable categories of food insecurity. The awful irony of it all, that the very ones who produce the food find themselves unable to consume it.

How can this be? How can our human fear and greed lead to so much hunger, when both science and religion prove there really is enough for everyone, provided by God through this life-giving planet?

This, I would argue, is the question on the mind of Jesus in our lesson for today, when his disciples tell him – at the end of a long day beginning with heartbreak and concluding with mass healing – to “send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

How can it be, Jesus wonders (I think), that these five thousand men and their families, living in the land of promise and plenty – who fish and farm and herd for a living – are so food insecure that they have to “go into the villages” and buy whatever food they can afford with their meager paycheck? The food itself is growing right under their feet! It is swimming right under their boats!

How can it be, Jesus wonders (I think), that the Roman Empire can forcing these fishermen and farmers into the same kind of commercial system coal operators used to implement in the coal camps of West Virginia. We know the history: taking all the profits out of state while luring the locals into a form of debt slavery. We know the song: “I owe my soul to the company store.”

How can it be, Jesus wonders (I think) that right here, in the land of promise and plenty, where God has surely given us every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit for food, that fishermen and farmers have to go to the villages to buy food?

This land is *God's* land, Jesus concludes. Where God's principle of equal provision has been enshrined into Jewish law. Where the land is meant to be divided equally among each family and each community so that everyone shares in the fruits of their labor (Num 26:52-56).

This land is *God's* land, Jesus concludes. Including the requirement that farmers shall not harvest the outer edges of their grain fields, in order to allow those who may have fallen into hunger to glean enough to eat from the remnant of the crop (Lev 19:9-10).

This land is *God's* land, Jesus concludes, including the requirement to re-distribute the land equally every fifty years, in order to guard against perpetual poverty for any one family or any one community (Lev 25).

And if this land really is God's land, Jesus wonders, “What would this world look like,” in the words of biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan, if and when *God* sat on Caesar's throne or lived in the palace of Herod Antipas? (*God and Empire*, 116)

And then Jesus proceeds to embody the answer:

Give me what food you've got, Jesus says to the disciples. And then sits the crowd down on the grass. This is the land of promise and plenty, he declares. It may be “a deserted place,” but it is not a desert! And certainly not a *food* desert!

This land is *God's* land, Jesus insists. Not Herod's. Not Caesar's. This fish we are forced to sell to the Roman commercial system belongs to our children, not to the Empire. This grain in the fields that are growing on this grass should be gleaned, not hoarded. The fruit on the trees that are growing in this field should be shared, not sold to the highest bidder by an absentee landowner.

The kingdom of heaven, Jesus proclaims, the Beloved Community, the land of promise and plenty, the Great Shalom *has drawn near!*

And we refuse to live otherwise.

So trusting in the providence of God, and the command to distribute equally the gifts of the land, Jesus offers the traditional Jewish blessing for what little bread they have. It is the blessing that a faithful Jew, even today,

says before every meal: the *brachah rishonah*. The blessing is a reminder that God really has given us “every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; [we] shall have them for food.”

In the face of too much death, and an economic meltdown, and a popular uprising against centuries of oppression, Jesus holds up the bread to the heavens, in good Jewish tradition, and prays:

Baruch attah Adonai Elohainu melech haolam hamotizi lechem min haaretz.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates various kinds of sustenance.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the earth.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, by whose word all things came to be.

And the people join in the blessing. And marvel at the sea still teeming with fish. And the grass still gleaming with grain. And the trees still brimming with fruit. And they trust once again that God really does provide, when we open our eyes and share what we have in the kingdom of God.

Amen.