

Noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman wrote a book called Journey to the Common Good. It begins with a description of life under Pharaoh's rule and then tracks the changes Israel had to undergo to transform from an enslaved people to God's people.

We focus on Israel's place in this ancient story because that's our story. But Brueggeman referred to chapter 47 in Genesis. It's a chapter I had never really paid attention to but it brought a new understanding. It portrayed life under Pharaoh for Egyptians. Turns out that wasn't that great either.

If you remember, while Joseph was in Egypt there was a terrible famine throughout the region. Joseph devised the strategy for survival. During the seven years of plenty, grain was stored up in massive quantities. Pharaoh ended up having massive stores for all to eat. But that came at a price.

It ended up being not just about survival. It began the process of Pharaoh concentrating more and more power and wealth in his own hands. When the famine hit, residents of Egypt had to go to Pharaoh to buy food since their own crops perished. After they gave all their money to Pharaoh for food, they had to give Pharaoh their livestock.

Then when they had nothing left, they offered themselves as slaves in exchange for food. That gave way after the famine to a sharecropper system.

Pharaoh owned everything and everybody. Increasingly, wealth and therefore power was concentrated in the hands of Pharaoh and his officials.

Pharaoh wanted cheap labor so he could amass even more wealth and power. His was a system fueled by fear of scarcity and the aching need to accumulate.

Centuries later, when Joseph was long forgotten, a new Pharaoh arose. This Pharaoh saw the massive numbers of those foreigners from Canaan and grew anxious. He was worried that they would rise up against him and take his power.

The Pharaohs created a system that was fueled by anxiety – by fear of scarcity, fear of losing power. That anxiety led to ever greater oppression of the Israelites...and for that matter the Egyptian peasants.

Peasants did not own their land. They had to pay heavy tributes and taxes to Pharaoh and Pharaoh's officials. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

It was a system of stress, anxiety, and oppression. And under that kind of system, there can be literally no thought about the common good.

Each person is focused on either their own power and wealth...or their own survival.

God freed the Israelites from that. The wilderness beyond Egypt became the place where they would be shaped by God into something different.

The most natural thing would have been to duplicate the system they already knew... that system of anxiety and scarcity...a system where nobody is quite sure they have enough wealth or power...or even are themselves...enough.

But the wilderness was scary. That system of scarcity and anxiety was all they knew.

They grumbled and even said they wanted to go back to Egypt. Egypt may have been terrible, but it seemed like a more secure terrible. They didn't really know how to survive on their own.

Their introduction to the first commandment came before God even gave the actual words for it.

They were sure they were going to die of hunger and thirst. Then God came through with manna and fresh water. Ultimately there was plenty to eat for everyone.

I am the Lord your God who led you out of Egypt. There are no other gods you can turn to now. You will have to trust me. And they'd already seen that they could.

The second lesson came when they realized they couldn't hoard the manna – if they took more than a day's worth, it rotted.

Coming from a system of scarcity, what they knew was to take as much as you can today because there might not be enough tomorrow. They had to learn to trust God each and every day.

That began to break the bond to the system of anxiety and scarcity they have lived in for so long. Only once that happened could they look beyond themselves and their own needs.

That put them in position to hear the 10 commandments, not as arbitrary rules but as a way to structure life for the common good for the good of all.

First the commandments structure a life that does not worship the god who can be limited to precious metal and stone. It structures a life that worships the God who sets free.

This new way of life creates Sabbath rest, not only for the people but for their servants, their animals, immigrants, and even the land. It's a life that does not exist only for productivity and a 24/7 demand for more of everything.

It's a life where care for elders is prioritized.

It structures a life that does not have room for coveting. Coveting is not just envy but that deep need to have more even if someone else doesn't get enough. Coveting is understanding life as a zero-sum game where if you get more so you can live, I might not have enough.

And it's not always just about material things but a sense of your own worth that can be called into doubt. Our egos – our small selves as the mystics call it – worry constantly about whether we're receiving proper credit and appreciation for what we do.

The commandments structure a life that doesn't have room for the aching fear that you don't have enough or aren't enough. They create a life that doesn't leave room for stealing or tarnishing the name of another to make yourself look good.

That system – that Pharaoh system – is a system that creates endless anxiety and fear of scarcity. It did then. And it does now.

Anxiety and scarcity are the enemies of the common good.

In the economic system of Pharaoh – and honestly the one we have created – anxiety is a valid response for many people. The massive imbalance of wealth means there truly are those who don't have enough.

When we construct an economic system based on fear of scarcity and the need to accumulate, it seems to be inevitable that some will have too much and others not enough.

On Mt. Sinai, God offered a better way. God offered a better way to Israel. And God offers that way to us.

The term beloved community was coined by Josiah Royce in the early 20th Century. It was later amplified by civil rights activist Howard Thurman. But it really caught the public imagination during the civil rights movement and the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The beloved community is a community where all live with the common good at the forefront. Where racial and economic justice are actively worked for and diversity is cherished.

So how do we get to that beloved community? Some might just say we can't in this life. That it's a utopian dream.

But MLK thought differently. Both he and Howard Thurman believed it was achievable. But for humans to do it we need to be transformed. As MLK said, only a community transformed by love is capable of the kind of work for the common good that is necessary.

In the wilderness, Israel began to be transformed by God's grace...by God's abundance. In the wilderness, they were shown over and over that God was faithful...ultimately even when they were not.

Only when they knew they could trust that they would have enough could they hear God's call to live for the common good.

To transform a community we need to be transformed.

Maybe we need to get a better handle on our own exodus...our own freedom from the slavery of anxiety. Like Passover for the Jews, the doorway for us is Jesus' death and resurrection. Have we actually walked through it?

The gift of Christ's body and blood we receive at each Eucharist is God's gift of abundance and love to us. It's a replay of the manna in the wilderness.

As we are nourished by the word this morning...as we are nourished by that bread and wine...may it transform us so that in the coming weeks and months, in our every day lives, we are shaped to live for the common good. To live so that all have what they need...to work to create the world God began to shape at Mt. Sinai.