

Calvary Presbyterian Church  
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Isaiah 62:1-5  
John 2:1-11

Beginning with the story of those wise men following the star to Bethlehem, this season of Epiphany piles up stories of the initial appearances of God's glory in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so that we might see the light. The light has come into the world, and we get one glimpse after another, so that we, too, might have one of those epiphanies, a flash of insight—a moment of intuitive understanding when we really grasp what it all means. Today the lesson takes us to John's Gospel to hear a story about a wedding feast in the village of Cana.

John's gospel is organized around seven miracle stories—although **that** word is never used. Jesus talks about the “works,” that he is doing, but the narrator always calls them “signs.” This is the first of the seven signs that are meant to show us the power of God working through Jesus. At the end of this gospel, John will say to his readers, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God; and that through believing, you may have life in his name” (20:30-31). This is one of those signs that you need to believe and have life.

This first sign is different from all the others in several ways. This one seems a bit frivolous—to save a family from the embarrassment of running out of wine at a wedding feast. This is the only sign that happens indoors—more or less in private. Everyone around is invited to see all the other signs, but in this story, the sign happens behind the scenes. And, there is no conversation afterwards about what it all means, which is the characteristic pattern in John. It leads me to wonder if the rest of the gospel is all commentary on what happens here.

So, come with me to the party, and let's read John's account of a wedding at Cana, John 2:1-11.

### From Whom All Blessings Flow

The summer that I spent as an intern in the chaplain's office at a big hospital in San Antonio, we all took a staff development day to do a psycho-drama workshop. It was a group of about 50 hospital employees, mostly nurses and technicians, but also receptionists and office workers, and of course the chaplain's office. The psychologists gave us various scenarios to act out trying to imagine the feelings and emulate the outbursts that our character might have added to the drama—sort of a day of “improv” by the dramatically challenged. I was not the oldest person in the room. I was not the only stout, gray-haired woman either, but every group asked me to act out the part of the mother in their assigned presentation. Except for this one situation, where

they appointed me to be the grandmother because the mother was acting inappropriately—they hoped I would leap in and tell her how to be a proper mother.

Before that day, I didn't really understand how much mothering is a piece of the way I interact with the people around me. I must confess to you that I have come to see the task of an interim pastor as being much like being the mother of the bride. My task is to push you out into the world to search for the right person, for a soul mate, to continue your life with. I'm called to hold the household together while you give your attention to making that decision. I pray constantly that it will be someone who will bring out the very best in you, who will see you as a cherished child of God; that **your** welfare will be the most important thing in the new relationship. I want you to be searching for that perfect person you intend to spend the rest of your life loving—after you leave me. I will pray that I have taught you enough about who you are and who God is calling you to be, so that you will be able to make a wise and careful decision; finding someone to love you as much as I do. And when you convince me that you are excited by your decision, no matter what I think, I will put my heart and soul into making those wedding arrangements so that you can begin your life together in joy and happy expectation. That's the task of the mother of the bride—and an interim pastor.

The Old Testament prophets all use that wedding language to talk about God's relationship with his people. We heard the prophet Isaiah this morning using the metaphor to talk about welcoming Israel back from a deserved exile in Babylon, changing her name and cherishing her once again. The whole book of **Hosea** is a long marriage allegory with God as the faithful husband, loving his faithless wife, Israel, who keeps chasing after others, but God continues to love her steadfastly, forgiving her over and over again. The Book of Revelation will pick up that theme again to picture the church as the bride preparing for her union with Christ. "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the lamb" (Rev 19:9). In spite of all the biblical references to weddings, and our eagerness to appropriate that image whenever we think about the beginning of any relationship, we are still somewhat surprised to find Jesus at a wedding, worrying about the supply of wine.

The mother is a very important character in this story. This is her initial appearance in this gospel—no shepherds, no angels, no wise men to surround her—just a no nonsense mother, giving instructions to her son. I wanted to call this sermon *Mother Knows Best* and talk to the children about always doing what your mother says because Jesus did, even when it's clear that he didn't want to. Always listen to your mother—the bible tells you so. You'll notice, I restrained myself.

Our story begins on "the third day." Christians automatically hear a reference to the empty tomb in these words, but this particular gospel writer doesn't use that phrase in his account of the first Easter morning. It is more likely an echo of Moses' instruction to the people at Sinai to get themselves ready to meet their God on the third day (Ex 19:10-11). Or, maybe it merely gives Jesus and the disciples time to journey from the previous scene down by the Jordan River where John was baptizing, to the hill country around Galilee. This writer is not much interested in chronological time. However, he is very interested in God's timetable. Is this the hour?

We are so curious about why the mother of Jesus—notice that she gets no name—cares whether there are sufficient refreshments for this wedding. There is considerable academic debate about whether Jesus' response to her is rude or not, but it is clear that Jesus' response means something like, "Why should I care about that?" It's as if he knows that such an act would announce his intentions to the world—and he's not ready. He says, "My hour has not yet come" (2:4). That sounds like, "no, not yet, not today" to me. Every election season we see how much attention potential candidates for office give to the perfect setting and the perfect moment to announce their intention just to form an exploratory committee to discover if and when they might actually announce their intention to run for office, so I have great sympathy for Jesus at this moment waiting to announce that he is the Messiah. How does one go about doing that? Does he mean that this is not the occasion he had planned? Was he waiting for something else? Should we see this as plan B? Was this her time and not God's time? Or, is Jesus waiting for this invitation from his mother, as a representative of the whole human race, to say, "We need you. We can't wait any longer. We need you **now**. Get on with it." Once this journey begins here, there will be no turning back. Once the water is transformed into wine, it can never be water again. Once the wine is poured out, it can't be put back into the jars. And the mother never doubts that Jesus will do it. She doesn't wait for his acquiescence. She doesn't wait to see what he will do. She turns to the servants—and perhaps also to us—in confidence and says, "Do whatever he tells you to."

The disciples are often conspicuous by their absence in John's gospel. But they are very important in this story. The Greek text literally says that Jesus and his disciples are "called into the marriage feast." It must have seemed very odd to some of these disciples who had been following John the Baptist three days ago—you know that odd man who lived out in the desert wrapped in the hairy skin of a camel and eating locust. And now they are at a wedding feast? In each of the gospels someone asks Jesus why his disciples eat and drink while John's disciples continue to fast and pray. Jesus' response is always about wine and bridegrooms. You've been invited to the party, the bridegroom is here. There is plenty for everyone. Don't miss the occasion to celebrate.

A wedding is a joyous occasion; a new family is coming into being. Jesus is called on to bring new life to a celebration that is already well under way. These village weddings often went on for days. He takes something they already have and makes it something extraordinary. The details of this story are pretty vague, **except** for the description of the jars—six of them, stone jars—not clay, but stone to ensure the purity of the water for the Jewish purification rites, each holding 20-30 gallons. And in case you think, there might be some scrimping, the writer is very clear that the jars are filled to the brim—each one so full that in order to ladle it out, it would have gushed over the top and run down the sides of the jars. That's a lot of wine—maybe 180 gallons. I figured that would have been about 75 cases of liter bottles. More than this wedding party could possibly have required. But God, working through Jesus, is known for extending unimaginable generosity—indeed so much that "our cup overflows." Into our daily living Jesus enters and offers an abundance of gifts. He comes that we might have life—and have it abundantly.

The narrator isn't much interested in the miracle itself. Water became wine. God became human. Transformation happens. We can't ever explain it adequately, and John doesn't try. He

is, however, very interested in who knows what. The servants know, while the guests do not. The steward—the one in charge of the arrangements—doesn't know where the wine comes from—but he doesn't even ask. This steward is the first character whose words say more than the speaker may know. He may only be thinking of the wine when he says to the bridegroom, "You have kept the good wine until now" (2:10), but we know that God indeed has saved his best gift until now. The steward may not know where the wine came from, but the disciples all know. They were called to this feast to witness this event, and "his disciples believed in him" (2:12) because of this first sign.

The word in the last verse (2:10) that is translated as "first," is not the normal ordinal number. It is *arche*, which means "beginning." Not the first sign, but the beginning sign. It is the same word used in the prologue, "In the beginning was the Word" (1:1). When the wedding feast runs out of wine, Jesus doesn't just go out to buy more, he begins his journey toward the cross with this beginning sign. He moves voluntarily and deliberately toward "his hour." In the other gospels, Jesus agonizes about the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane on the very last night; but in this gospel, Jesus fully accepts it with this beginning sign in Cana. There may be just the merest hint of the cross in this story, but with each additional sign, the shadow of that cross will get sharper and clearer.

When the party seemed to be over, with little chance for the celebration, with little hope that joy could be sustained any longer, Jesus enters and turns scarcity into abundance, dry places into fertile soil, worry into celebration. A new family is being formed. From here Jesus' attention will move from his birth family to this spiritual family that gathers around him and these first disciples. He transfers his primary affection to the twelve who see and believe. After the wedding, the mother can go home and ponder all these things in her heart. She was only needed to get things going. She has done her part, and the story will now move on without her.