

## **SAVING THE BEST FOR THE LAST**

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### **JOHN 2:1-11** *Jesus Changes Water Into Wine*

*2 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there,<sup>2</sup> and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.<sup>3</sup> When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."<sup>4</sup> "Woman,<sup>[a]</sup> why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."<sup>5</sup> His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."<sup>6</sup> Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.<sup>[b]</sup><sup>7</sup> Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.<sup>8</sup> Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so,<sup>9</sup> and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside<sup>10</sup> and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."<sup>11</sup> What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

This morning, we finally leave the Christmas season behind us and move through the scriptures that will take us quickly to Ash Wednesday, in just a few weeks, and then on to Easter. I mention how quickly things move because we notice that John's gospel takes us from his birth story to his first miracle in very few verses. This miracle comes at the very beginning of the things that Jesus will be doing in John's gospel.

Here is how John covers the early days of Jesus. He begins with his birth story that is different than Matthew and Luke. You remember he says, "In the beginning was the Word." Then he tells us of John the Baptist who calls attention to Jesus who will baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit. One of two people who heard John say this was Andrew, who became the first of what were to be twelve disciples. And he shares this in these few verses.

The thing that amazes me is that before Jesus begins to teach anything he is at a wedding and performs his first miracle.

This rapid movement of Jesus bids us welcome to the strange, enchanted world of the Fourth Gospel. The wedding at Cana is a strange story, a weird way to begin a strange gospel. But perhaps it is a great way for us to begin our time together in 2025.

Because it is John's Gospel, we are not surprised that we are in for a great deal of symbolic language. We find that seemingly ordinary phrases may have significance that we

don't at first appreciate. Talk of transforming water into wine, *"the third day,"* the density of Jesus's mother, and the wine steward's ignorance of what the servants knew must mean more than we think at first glance.

In the Sundays after Epiphany, we have an increasing awareness of the significance of Jesus as God Incarnate. What do these *"signs"* tell us about Jesus? What does the 180 gallons of wine tell us? The theme of overflowing abundance runs throughout the text. Six water jars, each 20-30 gallons, filled to the brim, and of the very best wine too. With Jesus, there is an abundance that can't be contained or apportioned out in a miserly way.

Mary doesn't seem to know what to make of all these events at the party after the wedding, nor do we. Though Mary is Jesus's mother, she seems to be as baffled by the strange, wondrous actions of Jesus as everyone else. The changing of water to wine is an amazing *"sign"*— but to what does the sign point?

As with so many of John's rich, sometimes overly rich stories, we preachers have to make some decisions about just what we will talk about amid the excess of mystery that John sets before us. I would like to suggest that a good place for us to begin is with the statement by the head waiter to the groom in chapter 2 and verse: *"Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the good wine until now."*

The *"wine"* that Jesus creates out of water that Jesus brings is far superior to previous wine.

And yet, we don't know quite what to make of this.

Many of you here this morning have been in the church since the day you were born. You have seen the church in what you consider to be its better days, when the building was full and as each year ended you were able to see more people in the pews than you did the year before. And, ever since that time we have been talking about the good old days in the church.

But does this miracle remind us that the best time to be with Jesus is today? The wonders that he worked in the past can be worked among us today. Can it be that the *"good wine"* has been saved until now? But can it mean that the future just may look very different than the past.

Yes, the first time we see Jesus in action in John's Gospel, the first occasion to hear Jesus teach or preach, is not in a religious service. It's at a wedding or, to be more accurate, the reception after the wedding, a party. And what is the great human need, the huge crisis that causes Jesus to speak and act? The wine gives out.

*"They're running out of wine,"* Jesus's mother says to him. Jesus brushes her off with, *"Woman"* (not exactly the right tone to take with dear old Mom) *"What's that got to do with us? It's not our party."*

But then Jesus springs into action, telling the caterers to fill the water jars up to overflowing. *"Do whatever he tells you to do,"* says his mother, words that could be posted over the door of every church I suppose.

They do what Jesus says and, wonder of wonders, there is wine to overflowing. Then there's an odd exchange in this already very odd story: *"The head waiter called the groom and said, 'Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the good wine until now.'"*

At most of these things, I am told, you serve the good wine first, then when everyone is tipsy out of their minds, you bring out the cheap stuff when they can't tell the difference. But now, now that Jesus has shown up, you appear to have saved the best stuff until the last.

John says, *"This was the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him."* But our questions may be: A sign of what? The disciples believed what?

*"You've saved the best wine until the last."*

The beloved *"Serenity Prayer"* of AA—with its petition for the courage to change what we can, acceptance of what can't change, and wisdom to know the difference—applies to the church. We can humbly ask for the grace to learn to live with what we can't impact and to impact what we can.

However, note anything missing from the Serenity Prayer? God. We are not the only actors. Sure, it's important to follow best practices and try proven methods to give ourselves a future. But human work alone cannot do this.

It's possible to believe that for today's church, for our congregation, it's possible to have a better tomorrow than our cherished yesterdays. We have hope amid our present struggles, not because we've got certainty about the future but because we are clear about who God is and what God is up to. We don't know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future. Our hope is not wishful thinking, it's a reasonable expectation based upon all that we know of God—Jesus Christ. But that future may not look at all like the past.

Cynicism (the belief that our noble goals are mostly motivated by self-interest) is less demanding than hope. Rather than risk engagement, setting goals, and strategizing to achieve them, we declare, *"Tired of arguing, let 'em go."* *"Tired of arguing, I'm going."* *"Don't waste time, this congregation is on its way out."* *"People just aren't religious anymore."* *"We tried that ministry back in the Eighties. Didn't work then, won't work now."* *"All mainline churches are dying."* *"Clergy are lazy."* *"Members are not committed enough."*

Hope makes demands: will we stay out of step with God's resurrection reality? Rather than risk failure, it's safer to say, *"Why make an effort? No more good wine. I already know how this story ends."*

No, you don't. God only knows. It's Jesus who set this story IN motion and it's a story that doesn't end until he says it ends. The church is more than what exists in these four walls.

M.L. King, Jr. would have never written his *"Letter from the Birmingham Jail"* except out of his passionate, prophetic judgment upon the white church and his unquenchable hope in the power of Jesus Christ to save sinners and thereby give us a more open, more just, and more hopeful tomorrow than today.

The hopeless don't write letters from jail cells in Rome, as Paul did, or Birmingham. Those without hope do not listen to sermons, or refuse to study the scriptures, or to pray. Those without hope can be rattled by what the Holy Spirit will do next.

The church historically defined sloth as a sin of hopelessness. Sloth is not lazily lying too long in the bath; it's the arrogant failure to use the available means of God-given grace. Sloth is the temptation to believe that God is unwilling or unable to do any new thing among us. Sloth is the passive/aggressive unwillingness to be loved by God or to be called to God's work as we mutter, *"The best days for this church are over. What can anybody do?"*

Maybe John had the prophet Isaiah in mind when John narrated the unusual events at the wedding at Cana:

*Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up;*

*don't you recognize it?*

*I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness.*

But the new way (path) may not look at all like our expectations based upon our longing for the past.

If you are a mainline, protestant Christian, which many of us are, it's hard not to be nostalgic, to look back at our yesterdays as better than our prospects for lively tomorrows. Attendance decline in churches, money problems in congregations, and the rising median age of many congregations. For many, there's a great deal of loss and therefore a great deal of grief and a shortage of hope. Yesterday's wine was better than today's, a lot better than tomorrow's we say. But we must not forget that the church of Jesus Christ is more than just us.

Although Ecclesiastes says it's foolish to ask, *"How is it that the former days were better than these?"* (Ecclesiastes 7:10), it is still tempting to long for the good old wine that first warmed us.

Trouble is Jesus Christ, the same one who produced the good wine at the end of the party in Cana of Galilee, keeps providing for us even when there is scarcity, keeps raising the dead, and insists upon having the last word over our future. Therefore, we can't follow Jesus without following him into the future with hope.

As you are aware, I grew up on a small farm. And one of the first things passed on from father to son, or daughter, is if you want to plow a straight furrow, the farmer's eyes must be fixed on a point toward the horizon. *"If you look back to see how straight you're plowing, (or planting or any other number of things, you're sure to wobble and plow a crooked row."* Jesus, in one of his best parables couldn't have said it better. We can't go forward with the living Christ if we are so busy looking backward.

Paul declared, *"I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:13-14). We go forward, confident that Jesus may be indeed saving the best wine for the last.

Are we in a time of inward and spiritual defeat or is this a prelude to some of the most interesting, exciting experiences we've had with the risen Christ, wherever Christ's Spirit might lead us?

Toward the end of Luke's Gospel, as Jesus resolutely heads toward the cross, Jesus talks of the future. He tells of a different future. He tells of the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem. (Luke 21:5-28). Jesus and his disciples were walking by the temple one day, admiring the *"beautiful stones and ornaments dedicated to God."* What a beautiful building! How glorious, historic, and eternal!

Jesus said, *"As for the things you are admiring, the time is coming when not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished."*

*"There will be great earthquakes and wide-scale food shortages and epidemics. There will also be terrifying sights and great signs.... they will take you into custody and harass you because of your faith."*

Batten down the hatches. There's a storm coming, the world's response to the salvation it doesn't want.

But Jesus seems to say to his disciples, don't look back at the temple's faded glory from yesterday, look forward to the glory that is to be revealed. The worst of times for the temple and its admirers Jesus describes as the best of times for witness: *"This will provide you with an opportunity to testify."*

Jesus concludes his apocalyptic promises and warnings with joyful reassurance: *"Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near."* (Luke 21:28)

Take just a moment and ask what witness God may be asking of us. Is this parable for us? Just as God led us away from the familiar days in Egypt—where we knew we had food, where we knew how things would be—to a frightening future in a home we could not imagine and a place and time that we have only been told about. A place where the BEST HAS BEEN SAVED FOR THE LAST.