

## **Epiphany 2 C 2022**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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January 16, 2022

John 2:1-11; Isaiah 62:1-5

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

This story of Jesus turning water into wine has occupied a privileged place in Christian tradition and in Christian imagination. This story used to be read every January in the Christian Church, but after the reforms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we only read it and hear it every third year. Those 20<sup>th</sup> century reforms were intended to bring more Bible into worship. But that means that some things that used to be read on a regular basis, like today's gospel, get read less frequently.

Regardless of how often we read it, the author tells us that this was Jesus' first sign. We are at the very beginning of the gospel, the very beginning of the second chapter. That first chapter, which we had the opportunity to read and to hear two weeks ago, begins with the very pregnant words, "In the beginning." A reiteration of Genesis. But here in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, of his work, this is his first sign, the evangelist tells us Turning water into wine.

I think that the evangelist, as he tells us this story, wants us to be dazzled by both the quantity and the quality of this wine. I think he succeeded, because even when I was looking at this story several days ago with a group of preachers, they were again trying to calculate how many bottles of wine this was. Even jaded members of the clergy get out their calculators for this story, such is its power. Six stone jars, of twenty to thirty gallons each. Receptacles designed to hold enough water for bathing. We're talking about bathtubs full of wine. 640 of our standard wine bottles, at the bottom end of the estimate. 960 bottles at the high end. And not bottles from the five dollar clearance shelf, either. But the really good stuff.

So I think the initial impression of this story, and the lasting impression of this story, is the sheer magnitude of wine, its quantity and its quality. But the gospel writer says that this is Jesus' first *sign*. He says *sign*, not miracle. Not merely a magic trick. Not merely a demonstration of supernatural power. A sign indicates something beyond its self. So what does a lot of wine mean, what does it sign-i-fy, signify? Well, it signifies: Party, Party, Party. I don't think there is any way to avoid that. We like to say "joy" or "gladness." That's in the traditional prayer for weddings. "*Eternal God, our creator and redeemer, as you gladdened the wedding at Cana in Galilee by the presence of your Son, so bring your joy to this wedding by his presence now.*" That's very elegant. It elides the fact that Jesus brought gladness and joy to the wedding by way of wine. Alcohol. But joy and gladness are churchy words for what looks to me a little more to me like partying.

Jesus will say two things later in this gospel. When he is talking about the Good Shepherd, Jesus says, (1) *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* There’s life, and then there is abundant life. There’s surviving, which is necessary, but we want to go beyond surviving. We want to get to thriving. (1) *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* Jesus says that later, in chapter ten. And then in chapter fifteen, at the last supper, Jesus says, (2) *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”* Once again, we have not just joy. But complete joy. And when Jesus says those words, it’s right when he is talking about how he is the vine and we are the branches. So we are all in the wine-making business. At least, figuratively and spiritually. (2) To make joy complete.

So: what we have here in the first sign signifies (1) *abundant* life and (2) *complete* joy. These are themes in the gospel, the things that Jesus says he came to accomplish. The wine in today’s gospel is both abundant and joyous. You know, I begin most of my sermons with the words of the apostle Paul, *“Grace to you and peace.”* Not every sermon brings grace and peace to everyone, but that is sort of the measure and the standard for my preaching overall. My preaching should be aligned with Paul’s preaching, and my preaching should ultimately bring grace and its corollary, peace. And I’m telling everyone that up front. It’s the keynote to my preaching. Whether I succeed or fail, that is the measure. But how much better is today’s keynote to the work of Jesus. A magnitude of wine. Which keynotes a gospel in which Jesus claims that the reason he comes to us is for abundant life and complete joy.

There is a lot of other stuff going on in this story. In the fourth gospel, there’s always a lot of layers. The dialog between Jesus and his mother Mary seems harsh. That’s partly due to poor translation. In the Bible translation that I grew up with, Jesus really seemed angry with his mother. *“O woman, what have you to do with me?”* Today’s better translation says, *“Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?”* Part of what undergirds this story is something about the Jewish messiah. (A notion that we encounter in our first reading from Isaiah.) God is the husband, and the people of God– the Jews– are the bride. When the Messiah comes, God will be with his people, the groom will marry his bride. And that will be a day of great happiness and victory. This concept pervades the Bible, especially the Old Testament prophets, and the parables of Jesus himself.

Jesus is saying that his hour has not yet come. Which in this particular gospel, his “hour” means Holy Week. His betrayal, arrest, torture, execution, and ultimate resurrection and ascension. And Holy Week is really the work of Jesus, and in the understanding of the writer, Holy Week is the “hour” of Jesus, when he really becomes the messiah. So in this perplexing dialog between Jesus and his mother, part of what Jesus is doing is addressing the concept of a messiah, and addressing the messianic hope, the hope for fulfillment.

And the fact that he calls her “woman” seems harsh to us. But it probably harkens back to Genesis. As the first chapter of this gospel did. “Woman” has to do with the garden of Eden, and perhaps has to do with Mary as the one whose offspring crushes the serpent. That’s probably intentional on the part of the author, but it could be just the imagination of his readers.

Unfortunately this story was weaponized in arguments between Catholics and Protestants about the role of Mary the mother of Jesus. So there are attempts to elevate Mary on the basis of this story. And there are attempts to denigrate Mary on the basis of this story. Those attempts don't help to add clarity to our understanding. I think this peculiar exchange between Jesus and his mother is more about Genesis and Isaiah and the proper role of the Messiah than it is about the mother and the son.

But the first impression this story makes is probably the most important impression. It's the magnitude of the wine. Both its quantity and its quality. And this is the first sign of Jesus. He's known for many miracles. The evangelist will close this gospel with these words: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his 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.* Many other signs, the writer tells us. But of all those signs, the first one did not involve healing a leper, or casting out a demon, or multiplying fishes and loaves. The first one involved wine. For a wedding celebration. Many other signs. *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.* So the author shares selected signs— usually tallied as seven signs— so that you and I might believe, and that through believing, we might have— and here's that big word again: life. Abundant life. Complete joy. In the Sundays after Epiphany, Jesus begins his ministry and gives us clues to who he is and what he seeks to accomplish. Hundreds of gallons of wine is a pretty big clue. And a pretty good one, too. Amen.