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A Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

St. John 2:1-11

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On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding.

“On the third day.” All through the first week of John’s Gospel he tells us, “On the next day...on the next day,” but now it’s not just the next day, but the third day. That should resonate with us. John knew that a Christian can’t—or shouldn’t be able to—hear “the third day” and not think of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. John’s Gospel is a story of the birth of God’s new creation and it culminates on the third day after Jesus was crucified, the day when Jesus burst from the tomb, triumphant over sin and death to inaugurate God’s new world. Already here at the beginning of the story John wants us to anticipate, to be looking forward to Jesus’ resurrection. God, in Jesus the Messiah, is going to do something amazing this day—something will show a bit of his new creation and reveal his glory.

So Mary and Jesus are invited to a wedding in Cana and Jesus’ disciples along with him. Cana was small village just a few kilometres from Nazareth. The people of one town would have known the people of the other. Many of them would have been related, which explains why Mary and Jesus were invited. One Second Century extra-biblical source says that Mary and the groom’s mother were sisters. Another fairly early source claims that the groom’s mother was Mary’s sister, Salome—which would

make the groom none other than John. It’s hard to say how reliable these traditions are. They’re not inspired scripture. But if they’re true they certainly make sense of the details in the story. John tells it as someone who was an eyewitness.

Weddings in that world were a big deal. Way more of a big deal than even the biggest weddings are in our culture. The whole thing would begin with a feast. The actual ceremony would follow later in the evening. Once married, the guests, carrying torches, would parade the couple to their new home. They would wind their way through the town, taking the longest route possible so that the guests could wish them well for as long as possible. But that wasn’t the end of it. The bride and groom didn’t go away on a honeymoon. Instead, they would keep an open house for the rest of the week. They’d dress like a king and queen while they entertained their guests. You can imagine how big a deal and what a time of celebration and happiness this would be in a time and place when people were poor and spent their lives in hard work.

Picture the festivities. People eating and drinking, celebrating the bride and groom, and enjoying themselves. It was a reminder for them of what the Lord had promised it would be like on the day when he would finally return to set his world to rights. The Prophet Isaiah had written:

**On this mountain the Lord of hosts
will make for all the peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-
aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of
well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this
mountain
the shroud that is cast over all
peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all
nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
(Isaiah 25:6-8)**

The world was not as it was supposed to be, but a wedding gave the people an opportunity to look forward to the day when the Lord would visit them, wipe away their tears, and defeat their enemies—even, somehow, death itself.

Now as we’re picturing this great celebration, John writes that the wine ran out.

This was bad. Really, really bad. There was no such thing as teetotaling in Jesus’ day. The rabbis said that without wine there is no joy. You couldn’t have a feast without it. That doesn’t mean they were all drunk. The Bible condemns drunkenness and so did Jewish society, but they nevertheless enjoyed their wine as one of God’s great gifts. So to run out of wine at a wedding was a party killer. More than that, it was a disgrace to the groom. Hospitality was a big deal and the groom was responsible for being hospitable to his guests. But where did all the wine come from? The groom’s family provided some, but so did the guests. Depending on their relation with the groom and whether or not they were married or unmarried, there was an expectation amongst the male guests of reciprocal gifts. An unmarried relative might bring ten dinars worth of wine to the feast with the expectation that when it was his wedding day, the groom would return the favour with ten dinars of wine himself. For others, the groom’s generous hospitality at this wedding was in return for the hospitality they had once shown to him. If the wine ran out, it wasn’t just a social disgrace for the groom—it could heap financial obligations on him that would be hard to repay. Remember, these weren’t wealthy people. Cana was a small country village.

So the wine ran out. Maybe it was even Jesus’ fault. It’s hard to say whether or not he would have been expected to bring his own gifts of wine. That sort of thing was probably beyond his means. But regardless of that, he shows up at the wedding with

his disciples. How many is also hard to say. Up to this point, John has only told us of four, but John tells the story out of order, so that doesn't mean all twelve—or even more—weren't there with Jesus. In a situation where people would have taken great pains to make sure there was enough wine for everyone, the presence of Jesus and his disciples may explain why it ran out.

The worried servants went to the hostess, the groom's mother to tell her disaster had struck. Mary—possible her sister—was there with her. Maybe—again, I'm speculating—but maybe that's why they went to her first: “Your son and his friends were guzzling away despite having brought no wine themselves!” And so, John writes, “Mary, Jesus' mother, said to him, “They have no wine!” Whatever the case, it's clear that Mary told Jesus because she expected him to do something about it. And by doing something about it, I don't mean ducking out for a quick stop at the Cana liquor store to grab a case of wine. Getting more wine wasn't nearly that easy. I think it's pretty clear that Mary was expecting some kind of miracle even though, by all accounts, this would be Jesus' first. But Mary knew who he was, she knew that he'd finally begun his ministry, she knew he'd been baptised by John and had heard all about that whole scene with the heaven's being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. She'd met these men he'd been calling as his disciples. Mary knew: it was time for the Messiah to start doing Messiah things and what better opportunity—and especially so if Jesus and his disciples were the reason why the groom was in this awful spot.

And yet, John writes, Jesus replied, “Oh woman! What's that got to do with you and me? My time hasn't yet come.”

What does Jesus mean? He responds to Mary with a phrase that's found

quite a few times through the Old Testament. Specifically, though, I think Jesus is deliberately recalling an episode from the ministry of the Prophet Elisha. In 2 Kings 3 we read about the kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom. They were on their way to do battle with Moab. Their armies had been travelling for a week and had run out of water. They were thirsty—just like the wedding guests were about to be thirsty. The King of Israel was wailing that the Lord had sent them out only to be defeated by the Moabites, but King Jehoshaphat—the King of Judah—told them that the Prophet Elisha was nearby and they should go to him and inquire of the Lord. Elisha wasn't keen on Jehoshaphat's request. “What's that got to do with you and me?” he asks the King. (Those are the same words Jesus says to Mary.) But Jehoshaphat insists. The Lord had sent them to battle Moab, but without water Moab would defeat them. So Elisha finally relents to the King's request and the Lord speaks through him: “You shall see no wind or rain, but the streambed will be filled with water...and he will also give the Moabites into your hand.” And, sure thing, the next morning a nearby stream was filled with water. Not only that, they defeated the Moabites just as the Lord had promised.

That Jesus adds that it wasn't yet his time, I think highlights that what Mary is asking of him runs a very good chance of getting him into trouble. Jesus hadn't yet officially launched his public ministry, but doing what Mary was asking him to do would get him noticed and being exposed as Messiah—well—it was bound to spark opposition. But I have to think that Mary knew her Bible and recognised Jesus' echo of Elisha. She knew he would do something and so she turns to the servants—again, this suggests that she was an insider to this family and was involved with the preparations for the feast—she turns to the servants and she tells them what to do with her own quote echoing the

Bible: “Do whatever he tells you to do.”

Those were the words of Pharaoh to the Egyptians when he put Joseph in charge of Egypt. Remember Pharaoh's dreams about the grain and the cows and how Joseph interpreted them to mean that Egypt was about to experience seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh was impressed with Joseph's wisdom and put him in charge of Egypt. For seven years the crown would store up as much grain as possible for the famine to come. Pharaoh presented Joseph to the people and said, “Do whatever he tells you to do.” And Joseph, because the Lord was with him, saved Egypt. And now Jesus, because the Lord is with him, will save the wedding. Like Joseph saving the Egyptians. Like the Lord causing that dry streambed to run with water.

So, John writes, “Six stone water-jars were standing there, ready for use in the Jewish purification rites. Each held about twenty or thirty gallons.”

Big stone jars. This was the water used to wash people's feet when they came in from the streets and it was the water they used to wash their hands before a meal and between courses, so that they would be ritually pure. The jars were big and there were so many of them, because the water was usually poured into a mikvah—like a big bath that could be used for immersion. Presumably these had already been emptied into the mikvah and were standing empty. John writes: “‘Fill the jars with water,’ said Jesus to the servants. And they filled them, right up to the brim.” This was no small thing for them to do. Did they have to carry the water to the jars or the jars to the water? Whichever it was, there would have been a lot of heaving and grunting and it would have taken time to fill those six big, heavy jars. But they obeyed. Then Jesus said, “‘Now draw some out and

take it to the chief steward.’ They did so,” writes John.

Surely they could see and smell the wine as they drew it out and you can imagine them running excitedly to the chief steward. He was sort of the ancient Jewish equivalent of a wedding planner and head waiter for the wedding. He had no idea that the wine had run out. He was just wondering what had taken the servants so long to bring more. John goes on, “When the chief steward tasted the water that had turned into wine (he didn’t know where it had come from, but the servants who had drawn the water knew), he called the bridegroom.”

The chief steward is confused. This wine was good. Really good. Better than anything they’d served so far. I’ll go so far as to say that since Jesus made it, it was probably the best wine anyone has ever tasted in the history of the human race before or since. And so the steward went to the groom. It was too late now, but he had to say it: “What everybody normally does,” he said, “is to serve the good wine first, and then the worse stuff when people have had plenty to drink. But you’ve kept the good wine until now!”

I can only imagine the groom’s confusion? What’s this guy talking about? We *did* serve the best wine first. And then he took a sip and was even more confused. The steward was right. This was the best. In fact, it was better than any wine he’d ever had—certainly better than any wine he could afford, better than any wine made in Cana or even the whole of Galilee. And what they’d find before too long wasn’t just that it was the best wine ever, but that there was no danger of it running out. If you do the math, those six stone jars full to the brim with wine work out to about 900 modern bottles of wine. Jesus never skimmed, because God’s new creation is all about abundance. Like the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, there was always plenty left

over. It pointed to the new thing God was doing in Jesus. These miracles reminded people of God’s provision of manna in the wilderness, but whereas there was ever only enough manna for the day and anything left over would spoil, in Jesus God’s abundant provision was a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over. Brothers and Sisters, that’s God’s amazing grace.

John then wraps up his telling of the wedding saying, “This event, in Cana of Galilee, was the first of Jesus’ signs. He displayed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”

He displayed his glory—that’s kind of the theme of John’s whole Gospel. And seeing his glory, the disciples believed. I have to think others at that feast believed too. The quality and the abundance of the wine—imagine the people of that little village scrambling for skins to hold all that wine so it didn’t go to waste—they saw the promises of God, the words of the prophets beginning to come true. As it turns out, it was indeed Jesus’ time. In the very next episode John tells, Jesus goes to the temple in Jerusalem and throws out the money-changers and the merchants and announces the coming destruction of the temple and a new one that he will build in *three days*. There’s John reminding us about those three days again.

But the disciples. Jesus had just been calling them. First, Andrew and Peter, who had been disciples of John the Baptist, and then Philip and Nathanael. And here, John says, they believed. Just the day before Nathanael had said to Jesus, “You’re the son of God. You’re the king of Israel.” “Wait a minute,” Jesus said back to him, “Are you telling me that you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You’ll see a *lot* more than that! In fact, I’m telling you the solemn truth. You’ll see heaven opened, and God’s angels ascending and descending on the son of man.” And see he did. I wonder if

Nathanael had any idea he’d see such great things so soon. Again, John says that the disciples saw the sign and they believed.

That was the purpose of Jesus’ signs. With each one he planted another signpost pointing his people towards God’s new creation. This time the wine was the signpost, pointing to that feast for all the peoples, the feast of rich food, the feast of well-aged wines the prophet had foretold. In Jesus the God of Israel was on the move—turning famine into feast, sparing his people from disaster, saving the day—leading the people towards God’s new creation.

Again, when John gives us details, they’re always rich with symbolism. Those six stone jars for the rites of purification are one of those symbols. The stone jars are symbolic of the law and of the old covenant. Jesus doesn’t ignore them or smash them. They served a good purpose. Just as the old covenant was God’s way of preparing his people for the new, Jesus fills those jars with his wine. He made them useless for their original purpose in order to serve a new and better one—to usher in a feast where no one would ever again have to worry about being unclean, because the son of God has shed his own blood to make us clean once and for all.

That’s the final sign in John’s Gospel. At the end—after Thomas has examined Jesus’ wounds—on the *third* day—John writes that “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which aren’t written in this book. But *these* are written so that you may believe that the Messiah, the son of God, is none other than Jesus; and that, with faith, you may have life in his name.” Jesus’ resurrection was the final and ultimate signpost. Follow it in faith and you become part of God’s new creation yourself, washed clean by Jesus and filled with God’s Spirit.

And that brings us to a final point.
Those words of Mary, quoting Joseph:
“Do whatever he tells you to do.”
Brothers and Sisters, believing—
faith—produces obedience.
Obedience isn’t always easy. Think of
those servants and the big stone jars
and 120 gallons of water. It was
through the faithful obedience of those
servants that Jesus manifested God’s
new creation at the wedding. And so
it is with us. Brothers and Sisters, we
have seen his glory. Now we
follow—we obey—in faith. Kingdom
work is hard work, but it is joyful
work. It’s work that wipes away the
tears of the people around us. It’s
work that brings God’s abundant grace
to the lost. It’s work that reinforces
our hope. God will surely set this
broken world to rights as the good
news of Jesus, crucified and risen,
goes out—light spreading in the
darkness. But remember, it doesn’t go
out by itself and more than that wine
made it to the steward and the guests
all by itself. That’s why God’s called
us—just as he called John to tell his
story. He’s forgiven us by the blood
of Jesus and made us his own; he’s
equipped us by filling us with his own
Spirit, and he’s given us—he’s made
us stewards of—the story, of the
gospel, of the good news. We’re the
servants joyfully carrying Jesus’ wine
to the wedding guests that might
rejoice and be glad and see his glory.

So come to Jesus’ Table this morning.
The Lord’s Supper is another of his
signposts pointing to his kingdom.
Come and feast. Eat his bread and
drink his wine, then go out in faith to
do whatever he tells you. Go out to
live and to proclaim the good news of
Jesus the Messiah that all the world
might see God’s glory.

Let’s pray: Heavenly Father, in Jesus
you have shown us your glory.
Strengthen us now that might be
faithful stewards of your good news,
going out in faith to make your gospel
of glory known to the world. Through
Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.