

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday After the Epiphany
Sunday, January 19, 2025**

**“The First of His Signs”
John 2:1-11**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

We just heard the story of the wedding at Cana. Jesus was in attendance, with his mother Mary; when the wine ran out, Jesus gave instructions for water to be poured in, and for wine to be poured out, leading the steward to exclaim, “you have kept the good wine until now” (v. 10). John explains that “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee” (v. 11).

So the miracle at the wedding at Cana was not just any miracle, but it was the first miracle that Jesus performed. And it’s certainly a familiar story: Jesus turning water into wine has long been a theme in art and hymns and imagery... But I wonder: have you ever stopped to ask, why? I mean, why *this* miracle—especially as his *first* miracle?

This miracle at Cana begins Christ’s miraculous career—but this miracle isn’t quite like the others, is it? In his ministry, Jesus will perform miracles for desperate people: he will heal people who are seriously ill, he will feed people who are weak with hunger... But by comparison, doesn’t this miracle at the wedding—seem, I don’t know, kind of trivial? A party runs out of wine; I mean, that’s awkward, I suppose; and the hosts may have felt somewhat embarrassed... On the other hand, perhaps their guests should have paced themselves a little more responsibly! And at this point, I’m not sure that running out of wine is really such a bad thing; maybe it’s time for these guests to drink some water and go to bed.

And another question is: why is a miracle even needed here? Why wouldn’t the hosts just, like, buy more wine? Typically, that’s what people would do, right? At my home, if we have family visiting, and we unexpectedly run out of something, one of us just goes out to the store; that’s normally what you do when you run out of things. At the wedding Cana, it seems to me that the whole problem could’ve been solved with just a quick run to the LCBG. (That is, the Liquor Control Board of Galilee.) So the miracle itself—the question of why this miracle happens in the first place—it’s very puzzling.

Yet there’s another detail that’s even more puzzling, which is the volume of wine that results from this miracle. John writes that, “standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons” (v. 6). I can see you’re already doing some mental math... So what we have translated here as ‘twenty or thirty gallons’—in the original language, this refers to an ancient unit for measuring liquids (χωροῦσαι ἀνὰ μετρῆτας δύο ἢ τρεῖς).

And if you convert that ancient unit into metric, each barrel contained approximately one hundred litres. And there were six of them. So that's six hundred litres of wine—or, by today's standards, about eight hundred bottles. *Eight hundred bottles of wine?* Now doesn't that strike you as rather excessive—especially since these particular guests have already managed to drink a wedding dry. Eight hundred bottles? I mean, where's it all going to go? The point is, this miracle produces far more wine than the guests at the wedding could possibly consume.

So despite how familiar this miracle story is, it turns out to be very puzzling: first, there's the type of miracle, creating wine for a celebration, which is very different from the sorts of miracles that will follow; and second, there's the sheer quantity involved, this absolutely extravagant and overflowing amount of wine. And this seems all the more puzzling, since this is, as John reminds us, “the first of his signs,” the first miracle that Jesus performed. It seems very odd that, of all the miracles, *this* is the one that serves as a prelude, as an introduction, to Christ's ministry of teaching and healing.

And this is why it's so important, when we're reading Scripture, to take note of the things that surprise us or confuse us. Because in the wedding at Cana, it's these puzzling details that lead us right into the wonderful and grace-filled significance of this miracle. In John's Gospel, the miracles of Jesus are called “signs” (σημεῖον), something that points beyond itself to a deeper kind of meaning; for John, the miracles point to something profound about God in Christ. And that's exactly what we find here, with the peculiar miracle at this wedding. We ask, why would the first miracle of Christ's ministry be overflowing wine at a party? Why? Because that's precisely how certain Old Testament prophets imagined the day when God would draw near, the day when God would come close to restore: they imagined it as a day of celebration with overflowing wine.

Listen to this prophetic vision from the prophet Amos, an Old Testament prophet who dreamed of a day when God would come near to restore God's people Israel:

“The time is surely coming, says the LORD,
when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit” (9:13-14).

Or listen to this image from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who dreamed of God hosting a wine-filled banquet:

“On this mountain the LORD of hosts
will make for all 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.
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken” (25:6-8).

In these poetic, dreamlike images, prophets imagined a day when God’s compassionate purposes—for God’s people Israel as well as for us, the Gentile nations—when God’s compassionate purposes would be fulfilled, when God’s will would prevail against all the brokenness in our world. Both Amos and Isaiah lived in unstable, uncertain, dangerous times; yet they imagined a day when God would restore what had been lost and heal what had been hurt.

Amos dreamed of a day when cities laid waste by war would at last be rebuilt, when communities wiped out by violence would celebrate together again...and all with such joy that the “the mountains [would] drip sweet wine” (9:13). Isaiah dreamed of day when the shroud of grieving would be gone and death would be swallowed, when tears would be wiped away and shame would be no more...and in place of all that—in place of everything that oppresses human life—God would host a celebration, a party, “a feast of well-aged wines” (25:6).

Prophets imagined that God, out of faithfulness and lovingkindness—that God would draw near, bringing restoration and transformation; and our Gospel Lesson, presenting the water and wine as the first miracle, tells us that, in continuity with the hope of the prophets, God is coming near in Christ to bring joy and wellbeing for creation. Why is the first miracle overflowing wine? As a sign that the dreams of these prophets were beginning to unfold, in a surprising way, through Christ.

So this miracle, at the wedding at Cana, is about far more than merely the replenishment of wine. This miracle, by its abundance, its extravagance—this miracle, this sign, points to that prophetic hope of God’s nearness, a hope that God would come close to heal and to restore; a hope that God would come alongside, becoming unmistakably present; a hope that God would bring about a new dawn for healing and joy. And in this miracle at a small-town wedding in Galilee, that hope is unfolding, as God comes close, like in the dreams of the prophets, with a wine-filled celebration—a sign of the love of God drawing near to restore us with joy. Amen.