



Roanoke, Virginia

January 20, 2019

“Signs”

John 2:1-11

Rev. Rachel C. Thompson

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” ⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

This past week, the world said goodbye to a beautiful voice. Pulitzer prize winning poet Mary Oliver passed away on Thursday at the age of 83. If you were at Picnic Sunday this June, you may remember that in my sermon that day I shared with you my favorite of her poems: “Why I



Wake Early.”¹ Mary Oliver’s poetry has had a profound impact on my life and on my experience of faith. In one of her most well-known poems, “The Summer Day,” she remarks:

*I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention.*²

And that was the work of her life: paying attention. Her method of writing usually consisted of taking a walk in the woods near her home and noticing the detail and beauty of the world around her. She used to keep pencils hidden along the paths she often walked because at any given moment, something that she saw in the world might spark a new poem within her: a drop of dew on a rose petal, a walnut falling from its tree, a bluebird calling in the distance, a wave returning faithfully again and again to meet the shore.

She saw in each detail a gift, a sign of God’s mysterious presence, and through her poetry she offered those gifts to the world.

Critics have always responded with mixed reviews to the simplicity of Oliver’s work. Some say they find it trite or sentimental or unsophisticated.

But for me, her words have been a theological guide, reminding me to keep my eyes open, to always be on the lookout for signs of God’s goodness and grace.

I wonder where Jesus’ disciples were looking on that wedding day in Cana. They were guests of the bride and groom, likely enjoying the long celebration that a wedding in that region would bring. I imagine they were glad for the chance to spend time with Jesus, their new friend and teacher. Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist, and when he heard John declare that Jesus was the Lamb of God, he left John immediately, found his brother Peter, and they began to follow Jesus together. Jesus then found Philip and Philip found Nathanael, saying, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael wasn’t sure that anything good could come from Nazareth, but he must have been curious because he went with Philip anyway.

They all must have been looking for something.

So here they are, at the beginning of things, waiting expectantly for something to happen. And it’s Mary who seems to be the first one to understand what Jesus is capable of. At first, Jesus brushes her direction to the side. “My time has not yet come,” he says. But she must have been onto something, because eventually for some undisclosed reason, he changes his mind. He directs the servants to fill six large jugs with water, and suddenly, the water is wine. Jesus did this, the first of his signs, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

¹ Oliver, Mary. *Why I Wake Early*. Beacon Press, 2004.

² Oliver, Mary. *House of Light*. Beacon Press, 1994.



It strikes me that this is a rather odd way for Jesus to begin his ministry. I guess changing water into wine is miraculous. But compared to the other miracles and signs that Jesus performs throughout the Gospel of John, this miracle in Cana is kind of...small. Later, Jesus will restore sight to the blind. He will feed thousands of people out of a single meal of bread and fish. He will bring his friend Lazarus back from the dead. Those are miracles, right? Grand gestures that declare the glory of God so that everyone can see it.

But most people at the wedding miss this miracle entirely. The chief steward has no idea what's going on. The bridegroom appears to be oblivious. As far as most of the party is concerned, nothing out of the ordinary has even happened. It's only the servants, and the disciples, and perhaps Mary who notice the miracle. Everyone else just keeps drinking the wine, not knowing where it came from.

That's what it's like, isn't it? That's what it's like to experience signs of the presence of God. So subtle, you'll miss it if you're not paying attention.

It would be nice, I'll admit, if God's activity in our modern-day world were harder to miss. I hear the old stories – of burning bushes and parted seas, walls falling down, impossible victories, an army of angels singing, “Glory to God,” sight restored to the blind, the ears of the deaf opened, the dead raised – I hear stories like that and I think wouldn't it be nice if that's how God would show up for me. Give me a big miracle. That would make me believe.

It might be true that miraculous things do happen, occasionally. You may know a story or two of something you've heard that really blows you away, something that's not easily explained by reason or coincidence. My grandmother often tells the story of when she was a young single parent. She was diagnosed with cancer, and they told her it was everywhere. She distinctly remembers telling God, “I need you to get me through this so that I can raise my daughter. And I promise I will give my life to you.” She turned 81 in December and has been cancer free for over 50 years.

But most stories aren't like that.

We've had enough experience to know that the miracles we pray for don't always happen. There are moments when the violence of this world or the brokenness of our relationships casts such a shadow over our imagined future that it's hard to believe in anything. What we want is a miracle, for God to move in our world in such a way that we can't possibly miss it, that we can't possibly explain it away or mistake it for something else.

But when I think about the wine at the wedding, I'm reminded that sometimes the work of God is subtle. The wine at the party was for everyone, but only the people who were paying attention understood what it was. And yet, for those who *were* paying attention, the transformation of water to wine was a revelation of glory, the sign they needed in order to believe.

It seems to me that when it comes to signs, the question is not so much: Will God do something? The question is: Am I paying attention? Am I able to notice even the smallest, simplest ways that God is persistently present in all times, in all places?



I had a small moment like this a few weeks ago. I was walking on the Greenway, and for reasons I can't even remember, I was having a pretty bad day. I was moping along, staring at the ground rather pathetically, feeling sorry for myself. But I heard a noise, and I looked up, and I saw running towards me a tiny girl wearing a unicorn helmet. She started waving and smiling and shouting at me, "Hey! Hey! I like your shirt! And your hair! Do you like my helmet?" Before I could tell her that yes in fact I loved her helmet, she was off, running up to a man who was walking his dog behind me. "Hey! Hey! I like your dog!" and she was on to the next person down the path. It was nothing miraculous, I know it was small, but in that moment, I received her joy like a sign of God's steadfast, exuberant love. And for a moment, I believed that God was with me because I was startled into paying attention.

Belief doesn't always begin with logic. It doesn't always begin with something big or blatantly miraculous. It doesn't always begin with something everyone can see. Belief begins when we pay attention.

A rainbow stretched across the sky on a difficult day.

A phone call from a friend at the right moment.

A narrowly missed accident.

A deeply felt sense of peace.

A view of the mountains, stretching on forever.

A flower forcing its way up through a crack in the sidewalk.

A warm meal delivered when you're too exhausted by grief to go to the grocery store.

A timely piece of advice.

Hospitality.

Patience.

Friendship.

Transformation.

Bread broken.

A cup poured out.

Little miracles.

Signs of the grace and goodness of our God.

And they are everywhere.



Mary Oliver saw this. Her work is a testimony to the subtle, powerful, persistent presence of God. My prayer is that we might all have eyes to see it. I'll close this morning with one of her poems called "In the Storm."

In the Storm

Some black ducks
were shrugged up
on the shore.

It was snowing

hard, from the east,
and the sea
was in disorder.

Then some sanderlings,

five inches long
with beaks like wire,
flew in,
snowflakes on their backs,

and settled
in a row
behind the ducks—
whose backs were also

covered with snow—
so close
they were all but touching,
they were all but under

the roof of the ducks' tails,
so the wind, pretty much,
blew over them.

They stayed that way, motionless,

for maybe an hour,
then the sanderlings,
each a handful of feathers,
shifted, and were blown away



out over the water,
which was still raging.
But, somehow,
they came back

and again the ducks,
like a feathered hedge,
let them
stoop there, and live.

If someone you didn't know
told you this,
as I am telling you this,
would you believe it?

Belief isn't always easy.
But this much I have learned,
if not enough else—
to live with my eyes open.

I know what everyone wants
is a miracle.
This wasn't a miracle.
Unless, of course, kindness—

as now and again
some rare person has suggested—
is a miracle.
As surely it is.³

³ Oliver, Mary. *Thirst*. Beacon Press, 2006.

