

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Full”

John 2:1-11

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Each of the four gospels starts with some sort of an introduction, an encounter with John the Baptist, and then some form of a calling of the first disciples. And then each marks the move to Jesus’ ministry by describing a particular event.

In Mark, the first thing Jesus does is cast out an unclean spirit, announcing his intention to stand against all that would keep the children of God from abundant life. In Matthew, the first major event of Jesus’ public ministry is his Sermon on the Mount, where he teaches the crowds from the mountain and comes across as one like Moses who brought down commandments from the mountain. In Luke, Jesus first preaches, announcing his intention to heal and feed and release the captives and bring good news to the poor. First things matter.

Here, in John, the first thing Jesus does is go to a wedding.

Scripture: John 2:1-11

On 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.

Sermon:

I was working on my sermon this past week while on the tail end of our daughter’s covid quarantine. I’ve lost count of how many times Chris and I have had to work in shifts while caring for our daughter during the pandemic. We’ve gotten the rhythm down. Chris starts work at 6am, and our day is spent in three-hour increments trading off work and childcare, work and childcare. Once Eleanor’s in bed, we try to make up those hours of work we missed until we head to bed ourselves and prepare to do it all again the next day.

We have little room to complain, really. We just have the one child in a preschool that’s been extra careful, and we both have jobs that can, for the most part, be done remotely. My sister-in-law and her husband, on the other hand, had ten weeks of quarantine with their three children between July of 2020 and August of 2021. That means their household, with two full-time, working parents (one of whom is in healthcare and cannot work remotely), quarantined for nearly 1/5 of a year.

I value the health of my neighbor, and I know why quarantines have been a necessary part of our lives. But I also understand why so many families are just plain worn out. Exhausted.

Our wells are dry. And so when I talk with parents, particularly those without grandparents or family backup nearby, I can hear the strain and worry in their voices. I know they are doing their best to be so careful in this difficult season—not only for the health of their children (which is paramount, of course), but also for the sanity of their household. The pandemic has been hard on all of us. But there’s an added layer of stress on families, particularly with children too young to be vaccinated. And it’s been building for nearly two years now.

“They have no wine,” Mary says.

Ugh. I get it. Their cups are empty. There is no reserve left.

Maybe this is why I chose John 2 for today. We are tapped out, and yet here in the gospel—as foreign as it is in this moment—is a miracle about plenty, about abundance, about joy.

It’s the start of Jesus’ ministry in John. Jesus, his mother,ⁱ and his disciples are at a wedding. (Remember those? It’s where a lot of people gather in one room together to eat and drink and celebrate.) Jewish weddings in those days were not light affairs—they went on for days. On the third day, at this wedding in Cana of Galilee, the party ran out of wine.



At first glance, that doesn't sound so surprising. Three days means a lot of wine, and if it were a particularly thirsty crowd, we can imagine that they ran dry.

Now if this were to happen today, we might whisper sheepishly to a trusted friend and ask them to run to the store and pick up some more. But much like a modern family on quarantine—it's not that easy! You can't just run out to the store to purchase more. And wine in Jesus' day wasn't just a social lubricant, it was a sign of the harvest, of God's abundance, of joy and gladness and hospitality. So, when they run short on wine, they run short on blessing.ⁱⁱ Timing is everything. The wine has run out before the wedding has. It's a catastrophe.

And Mary notices. She sees what's amiss. She perceives the high likelihood of scandal and humiliation brewing beneath a glossy surface. Mary notices and registers concern before Jesus does. "They have no wine."

His mother tells him that it's time. This is the moment, Jesus, this is the hour. But Jesus says he isn't ready. "My hour has not yet come," he tells her. On the third day at a wedding; on a third day at the tomb—no one is ever really ready. This scene at the opening of John is a foreshadowing of its ending. Perhaps Mary somehow knows this, in the ways that mothers do.

The Gospel of John doesn't include any infancy narratives. No angelic annunciations. No babe in a manger. No prophetic words or shining stars. But the Mary John describes still knows who her son is. She knows what he's capable of, and she also must know how the world will receive him. She also knows he is more than her son alone. She knows the time has come for him to reveal what he can do. She sees a need, and she trusts that he alone can meet it.

Looking back, with the whole gospel in view, we can see that this movement costs Mary. She has helped usher into motion on this third day at a wedding what will end at the foot of the cross.

"My hour has not yet come." Of course, he's not ready. Maybe he's reluctant to start the journey he knows could end in pain. Maybe he doesn't think that winemaking should be his first miracle. Maybe he doesn't want to draw attention to himself or interrupt the conversations he's having with his friends. Whatever the case, Mary is not deterred. She presses the need and points the servants to her son—"Do whatever he tells you." She nudges her son's ministry into motion.

John tells us that behind the scenes, Jesus has the servants fill the ritual jugs with water. They fill these large, ceremonial jugs to the brim, some 180 gallons of it. Then, Jesus tells them to draw out water and take it to the chief wine steward. The man takes a sip and declares it the finest wine they've served yet! The party isn't over. The feast has only just begun.

In Mark, Jesus' first miracle is something really useful. He casts out a demon, rescues a man from possession. Here in John, he turns water into wine. There's nothing really useful about this. It's a frivolous, superfluous gift. No one's life is saved, no one's future is changed—save maybe avoiding some major social embarrassment.



Yet, something incredible is revealed in this moment. It's not a revelation of awe or judgment. But a revelation, a miracle of abundance, surprise, and delight. Jesus' first miracle, his sign, of abundance is revealing God's glory—and then follows the miracle that the disciples believed. This miracle, this sign, points to God revealing God's self in Jesus. This is the kind of work God is about. It's more than a story about how great God is, it's also a story about how when God is revealed, there is laughter, astonishment, joy.

This story is a reminder that what gets revealed is not always immediate. What you see is not always what you get. It's important for John to say you save the best wine for last. It's an indication that the full glory of God you may think you see, is only the beginning of things yet to be. There is surprise and delight, but there is also hope, a pushing forward with wonder. It makes us want to ask, "What is God going to do next?"

John reveals that this is the kind of God we have. The kind of God who once God starts doing something wonderful, God doesn't know how to stop. There were other pitchers and containers around the party—Jesus didn't have to go for the monster jugs. But he makes the choice to provide not just enough wine for one toast, but enough wine to fill six thirty-gallon vats. It's a glimpse of the great wedding feast to come, where nothing will run out and everyone will be welcome.

For those of us who feel a great wedding feast with vats of wine may be too far out from our reality to imagine—this miracle is also a reminder that when we, like Mary, have no idea how to turn gallons of water into gallons of wine, we do know how to speak up and say what is needed. Sometimes, when my well is dry, the only thing I know how to say is that "there is need here." "Everything is not okay." "There is trouble." "There is no more wine."

It is hard business holding the promise of God's abundance up against the agony of scarcity, and loss, and exhaustion. These days, I am more acquainted with water than I am with wine.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of us are, if we're honest. It doesn't matter what the particulars look like—anxiety, depression, chronic illness or pain, addiction, financial struggle, systemic injustice. Regardless of how we might rewrite Mary's line to meet our own circumstances, I imagine her words rings true for most of us in one way or another. "There is no wine."

So where do we place ourselves in this miracle of plenty?

As Debie Thomas writes, maybe we can be like Mary. "Maybe we can notice, name, persist, and trust."^{iv} No matter our circumstance, no matter how impossible the situation, we can "elbow our way in, pull Jesus aside, ask earnestly for help, and ready ourselves for action. We can tell God hard truths, even when we're supposed to be celebrating. We can keep human need squarely before our eyes,"^v especially when apathy, denial, and distraction are the easier options. And finally, we can invite others to obey the winemaker we have come to know and trust.



“They have no wine.” “Do whatever he tells you.” We live in the tension between these two lines. May we live there with trust and confidence in the one whose help we seek. May we live there open to seeing, open to recognizing God’s miracles and glory revealed in simple, earthly, human form. Because Jesus is with us. Jesus is good. Jesus is Lord.

ⁱ Note: John never names Jesus’ mother Mary.

ⁱⁱ David Lose, “Dear Working Preacher: Learning to Tell Time,” www.WorkingPreacher.org (January 13, 2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, “They Have No Wine,” www.journeywithjesus.net (January 13, 2019).

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

