

## Water or Wine? TEXT: John 2:1-12

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on February 25, 2024*

This week we're turning to a passage from the Gospel of John. And because John's gospel basically lives on another planet compared to the first three, I'm going to start the sermon with how I think this informs our year-long theme of making choices and then use the text as an example of how I got there.

The story of the wedding at Cana is traditionally associated with the season of Epiphany, which celebrates the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. We usually think of Epiphany in connection with the Magi—the kings who followed the star from the East to Bethlehem. But the star and the Magi are just one of the biblical signs revealing who Jesus is. A second is the voice of God with the descending dove at Jesus' baptism; and a third is turning the water into wine at Cana—today's passage—in John 2, a story that I think also has Lenten overtones.

The first chapter of John has John the Baptist telling his own disciples that no, he is not the Messiah and that Jesus has the greater call. That's actually how Jesus gets his first disciples in John. They were John the Baptist's disciples who get redirected by John to Jesus instead. With its messianic focus, chapter one primes us for a sign that Jesus is the Messiah. John gives us the wedding at Cana at the start of chapter 2 as the first of seven such signs in his gospel. In John, they're never "miracles." He uses the word "sign," instead. John's agenda is clear.

But, for our purposes, there is also a central choice here. Unlike the Wise Men and the baptism, where Jesus' nature is revealed by outside forces, at Cana, Jesus makes the conscious choice to reveal himself. How he chooses to do it is instructive.

In the other gospels, the devil in the temptation story wanted Jesus to reveal himself with a spectacle. "Throw yourself off the top of the temple, and let the angels catch you!" But self-centered spectacle is not Jesus' way. In every gospel, including and especially John, Jesus will teach that the way to lead is to serve, that strength is shown in choosing to be vulnerable, and that those who think they deserve the best seat at the table will need to wait until others are seated and then pull up a chair at that awkward corner seat instead.

John does all of that specifically to make the point that the servant image, the shepherd who gives his life for the sheep, is what people should be looking for in a Messiah. Not a soldier; not a king, even though those were the more expected roles.

The temptations presented in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all about what Jesus chooses *not* to do. He won't draw on his divine nature to turn stones into bread to satisfy himself. He won't flaunt his relationship to God with spectacle. He won't abandon the worship of God to bow to those who offer fame, wealth, and political power, not even for all the kingdoms of the earth.

Okay, good. But we have precious few examples of how to live differently. We know what you *won't* choose, Jesus; but what will you choose instead? If you live as a humble servant and not a king; how will we know you're the Messiah? If the devil's options in the wilderness are not going to be the signs, what should we look for?

John's gospel is constructed to answer that question. John's account of Jesus' life is built around seven signs of Jesus' authority, mission, and identity. Cana is the first, right here at the beginning, and the raising of Lazarus is the last, in chapter 11, right before the events of Holy Week kick off in John 12.

You would think that someone trying to convey a message as important as, "Hey, I'm the Messiah you've been waiting for since Moses," would be a little more direct about it than the sign in Cana. But that's not Jesus' choice.

Jesus isn't interested in crowds following him for the wrong reasons. He's not interested in celebrity. He wants disciples who will take up a cross, not a selfie camera. He doesn't even really care if people understand that he's the promised Messiah, although he's willing to make the case for those who are interested. He wants disciples—those

who will live the life of healing and repairing the world that he will model and who will then be ready to take up the work once he's gone.

John's gospel, on the other hand, wants to make plain to those immersed in studying such things that Jesus is indeed that Messiah, so John lays out his gospel in symbol and sign, with just about every word reaching down to multiple layers of meaning.

If you learn just one thing about studying the book of John, know that what it says on the surface is just the tip of the iceberg. When you read John, read slowly and think like an archaeologist. Especially if something seems odd or off or there's a miracle happening, just stop right there. There's likely a whole city underneath your feet. That's certainly true of this wedding story, which has layers that stretch all the way back to multiple point in Genesis and all the way forward to the book of Revelation, which was also written by someone named John who liked to write in signs and symbols.

You could probably do an entire doctoral dissertation on Cana, so I'm going to try to distill it down, spending most of the time at the surface layer, because that's where the choices are made. The further you peel back the layers, the more you get to John's choices rather than Jesus' choices, which is fascinating, but not the main point for today. At the end, I'll show you where to dig for those who want to follow those other threads.

But, here on the surface, the setting is a wedding feast. We're used to feasting at wedding receptions, but a wedding feast in Jesus' time lasted a full seven days, and it was the groom's family who issued invitations and paid the tab. If the groom's family was not wealthy, it wasn't uncommon for their invited guests to help out by bringing food and wine—kind of an early potluck. But it was on the groom and his family to make sure they were covered for the week, one way or the other.

Being able to provide a feast, with or without the help of your guests, was far more important than our culture can understand. Hospitality was a central virtue in the ancient near east, and still is in quite a few cultures today. For a groom's family in Jesus' day, the failure to provide for your nearest and dearest, after you have invited them to come celebrate a marriage, would bring lasting shame on the family. So, wine running out before the week was finished, which is the presenting problem at the Cana wedding, was a full-blown crisis.

We learn about it because Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are invited guests at the wedding, and Mary notices the problem. "They have no more wine," she says. Why would Mary care? Jesus appears not to care, why is Mary concerned?

Just on the face of it, Mary, Jesus, and his disciples would only have been invited to the wedding because they were known to the groom's family. And since the wine has run out before the feast is over, we can be pretty sure that this wasn't a wealthy groom who could easily provide for a new local celebrity and his followers. A family who ran out of wine would have only invited close family and friends to have any hope of affording the extravaganza. So, Mary, Jesus, and the disciples are only there because they have some close connection to the family.

A claim that we can't know for sure but that's present in traditions from at least the third century is that Mary and Jesus, and maybe even some of the disciples, are actually *part of* the groom's family. The adult study will get all the details on the possibilities when they get to the New Testament volume of my Bible studies. But for our purposes here, know that the earliest church traditions believe that the groom at Cana was John, the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' closest disciples, and that John's father, Zebedee, was married to Mary's sister.

There's no way to prove or disprove that; but there are many, many things in the Bible that make better sense if that family tree is correct. If two of Jesus' three closest disciples—John and his brother James—were actual family members, that makes a ton of sense, and if this is John's wedding, it would explain why not just Mary and Jesus, but also some of Jesus' other disciples are invited guests, even though the family didn't have the means to cover a lot of extra people.

And if John's gospel comes from the traditions of John the disciple—not necessarily written by him but based on his accounts—we can better understand why this event is highlighted in John's gospel and nowhere else. It may well have been John's own wedding. Even further, if the groom is Mary's nephew, it's at least partly on her to make sure that there's enough wine, which could explain why she raises the issue of running out in the first place.

Because we readers know what's coming, when Mary says to Jesus, "They have no more wine," we often think she's asking him to perform a miracle. But the more likely scenario is that she wants Jesus to go on an errand to get more wine. Remember, this is a week-long feast, not a three-hour party. He could easily go and come back with wine. Jesus responds by saying, "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come."

That response has several places to dig for further layers, so I'll leave that to one side for now. But it's possible to read Mary's next move, where she tells the servants to "Do whatever he tells you," as accepting that Jesus doesn't want to go on a wine-run himself and she's prepping the servants to make the run when he asks. And really, if Mary isn't a family member, why is she bossing around other people's servants at a wedding? I'm in the "Mary is family" camp.

The climax of the story comes next as Jesus does tell the servants to do something, but it's not to hitch up a wagon and go get more wine. He has them fill up the jars for ceremonial washing with water and then take some of that water out to bring to the guy running the banquet. By the time the master of the banquet gets the water, it has become wine, and not just any old wine, but the very best.

The point is made in the story that only the servants Jesus instructed knew that something miraculous had just occurred. But, as servants, their witness would not be trusted, so it was effectually a miracle done in secret. And Jesus allows all the benefit to go to the groom. The master of the banquet calls the groom aside, and the groom likely expected to hear condemnation for running out of wine and questions about what to say to the people now.

But instead, the master of the banquet tells him, "Wow—usually families put out the best wine first, when people still have taste buds, but you've saved the best for last!" The implication being that, just when everyone thought the groom and his family were shameful, failed hosts, the groom proves that they are not the least, but rather provide the best hospitality in town.

Jesus has turned the groom's deep shame of running out of wine into extra honor for providing guests with the very best wine even this late in the feast. But Jesus just steps into the shadows and lets the groom get all the hospitality credit. If John is indeed the groom, it's no wonder that he was the lone male disciple of Jesus' to stay at the cross as Jesus faced his own shameful end. And if John is Mary's nephew, we can better understand why Jesus, from that same cross, gives care of his mother over to John after his death rather than to Peter or someone else.

That surface lesson is powerful all on its own. Jesus' chooses to use his divine power not to turn stones into bread for himself, but to turn water into wine for others. And he does it in such a way that no one but the servants would know where it came from and where the honor of providing fine wine would be given to the one who least deserved it—the groom who began the feast without enough for his guests. Hospitality, humility, grace, it's the way Jesus chose to manifest himself in the world.

We get that picture of the kind of *rabbi* Jesus is, but what about the Messiah thing? How is that a sign of Jesus' glory when he stays in the background the whole time? And besides, miracles weren't part of Messianic expectation. But we are in a symbolic setting for the Messiah—the wedding banquet. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and in several of Jesus' own parables, we find the imagery of God's people as the bride and God as the bridegroom. And with the choice wine coming last, we are primed for the end of days, in the time of the great wedding feast when God comes as the groom for his bride.

And in that day, the prophets write, there will be abundant wine. You can find it in Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah as well as in apocryphal Jewish sources written about the same time as John's gospel. The Messianic banquet includes not just wine, but abundant wine—enough that, Amos says it will drip from the mountains. Assuming that all the water in the jars at Cana had at least the potential to become wine, Jesus provided between 120-180 gallons for the guests. Sounds like abundance to me.

On that layer, Jesus is connected to traditional Messianic expectations by the wedding feast flowing with abundant wine. But on another layer, both Jesus and John are shifting the expectation that the Messiah would be a conquering war hero or triumphant king and connecting him instead to the servant songs in Isaiah 42-53. Jesus does that by acting as a servant and making sure the groom gets the credit for the wine; but John tells the story with three connections that go straight to the Cross. The first is Mary.

John's gospel never uses Mary's name. She's known only as "the mother of Jesus." Not only does Mary not appear by name, she hardly appears at all. There is no Christmas narrative in John, and no stories about Jesus' boyhood, so this appearance at the wedding is the first time we see her. The only other time she appears in John's gospel is at the foot of the Cross, standing with her sister, John, Mary Magdalene, and at least one other woman.

While the Bible records seven sayings of Jesus from the cross, only three of them are in John. The first is addressed to Mary, "Woman, behold your son." Wait, what did Jesus call his mother? "Woman." Just like in Cana, "Woman, of what concern is that to you and me?" People get offended by that at the wedding, thinking calling his mother "Woman" was disrespectful. It was actually a title of respect for women—akin to using "Ma'am" or "Miss" today, but it still wasn't what you'd expect from a son addressing his mother. What always addressing her as "Woman" and never using her name does is turn Mary into an archetype, which is a deeper layer still.

But before we get there, the second thing connecting Cana to the cross is the wine, which also only appears in John's gospel in Cana and at the Cross. Wine isn't even mentioned at the Last Supper in John. After Jesus gives his mother into John's keeping at the Cross, Jesus says, "I thirst." In response, someone gives him a sponge soaked in sour wine, aka vinegar, which Jesus accepts before saying, "It is finished."

The third connection between the stories is made when Mary tells Jesus in Cana that there is no more wine and Jesus says that his "hour" has not yet come. In John, Jesus talking about his "hour" is always a reference to Jesus' Passion—the Cross and the events leading to it. Jesus' hour has not yet come at the start of the wedding in John 2, but Jesus chooses to set the clock ticking when the steward brings the finest wine to the master of the banquet.

On this layer, maybe the master of the banquet—which isn't a known role at a wedding feast—is the steward who will keep the fine wine safe for later. Because when Jesus' hour finally arrives in chapter 19, the oxygen of his life has saturated the fine wine. The wine has become vinegar as Jesus takes his final taste. A feast of bread and wine has become a broken body and shed blood, and the shame of the cross has overtaken the groom who can no longer provide for his guests.

But never fear. The Cana story begins with the symbolic words, "On the third day..." Jesus transforms the water that gushes with the blood from his pierced side—a detail that only John includes at the crucifixion. That water of death becomes the finest wine; saved for the last, for the wedding feast, when Jesus as the Groom will come for his bride, the Church, which is, as best I can tell, the bottom layer of this story.

At the center of that bottom layer, as in all the others, is Mary, who Jesus calls, "Woman," both in Cana and at the Cross; but which is also what the first Adam called Eve and is how the figure of Mary is referenced in the book of Revelation chapter 12 where she battles the dragon coming first for her son, who is set to rule the nations, and then for her other children, the Church.

Mary as the new Eve and the mother of the Church, the bride of Christ, with a wedding feast of bread and wine is the bottom layer of the Cana story, putting Jesus at the very center of salvation history as an agent of transformation—the Messiah bringing abundant wine and transforming it through death into abundant life until it drips from the mountains.

"Signs, signs, everywhere are signs." But, for those of us who just want to follow Jesus' example, serve others in a way that lets them, rather than us, be lifted up; and know that, at the great heavenly banquet to come, the best wine will come last. Happy digging. Amen.