

“A Wedding Epiphany”

Introduction: The season of Epiphany is that time in the church year when we have opportunity to step back and catch our breath after all that took place in Advent and Christmas, and all that will take place when the seasons of Lent and Easter begin (3/6). In this in-between, “resting” space, we take the time to reflect on the various ways God reveals himself to us through the person and ministry of Jesus.

To that end, in the gospel of John, we are given seven “signs,” as John calls them, to help us see. These signs are more than miracles; they are not meant to simply be demonstrations of divine power but to point to a deeper reality, to help us to see more of the glory—the beauty and wonder, the majesty and greatness—of Jesus. I had my annual physical last week and I always get a kick out of the question: “Do you see or hear things that a normal person does not see and hear?” To which I always answer, “I hope so!”

In the changing of water into wine, the first of such signs, what are we to see? Not only do we see Jesus revealing his glory at the very ordinary occasion of a wedding, but in doing so, he rescues a marriage and, in the process, gives us a foretaste of how we come into a relationship with the living God, and the joyful hope that becomes ours when we do. Let’s begin by considering the trouble that surfaced at this wedding in a little village in the northern region of Galilee called Cana

I. Trouble in Paradise

A. We’re not sure just how Jesus got on the guest list of this couple (guest lists, I’ve learned, are very challenging and stressful things!), but it’s a good thing that he did. Moreover, the fact that he went to this wedding suggests that he was not afraid of celebrating and having a good time. And weddings in first century Palestine were celebrations indeed. So much so that they didn’t just last for an afternoon, or an evening, followed by the sending of the couple off on their honeymoon. Rather, the couple skipped the honeymoon and invited everyone to stay and enjoy one another for up to a week! Practically, this meant making sure there were enough provisions for such an extended celebration. And, interestingly (in a tradition I’m all in favor of bringing back) the financial responsibility for these provisions lay with the groom and his family. Even more to the point, to run short on your provisions was considered to be a great embarrassment, to bring such shame, that a lawsuit could be brought by the bride’s family against the groom’s for breach of hospitality. Talk about getting off on the wrong foot!

B. But here in Cana the nightmare was threatening to become the reality, for, before the week had ended, the wine had run out. Fortunately, Mary was in a place where she noticed this, and, out of concern for the couple, it would seem, she notified Jesus. I’m not sure what she expected him to do, but it is evident that she knew that if anyone could do anything, it would be him. Jesus, however, wasn’t so eager to act. He was under the direction of his heavenly Father, not his earthly mother, and as of yet, his “hour,” a designation Jesus used to refer to the cross, had not yet come. But his mom, it seems, knew her son’s heart; she knew that he would not let this trouble in paradise get ugly, that he was interested in and had concern for the ordinary things of life, and so she instructed the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Before moving on to consider what he says, don't miss this statement. It reveals that if we want Jesus to have an impact upon our lives, if we want him to bring light into our darkness, then we'll need to do what he says. We'll need not only to hear his word, but to put it into practice (cf. Ma. 7:24-27).

## II. Jesus to the Rescue

A. So, Jesus directs the servants to fill six stone jars standing nearby with water. These, notice, are not just any old jars you might have picked up at the White Elephant's moving sale. These are the jars used to hold the water for the Jewish ritual of purification. When you came into a time of worship, you would dip your hands into the water, as an act of cleansing, to make yourself ready to enter into the presence of God. But, after the jars had been filled with water, when tasted by the wedding planner, the water had become choice, wonderful wine. On a highly practical note, the celebration could continue. A breach of hospitality had been prevented and a relational nightmare avoided. Jesus was at work, behind the scenes, in this couple's marriage. And he was able to work because he had been invited.

B. Marriage is a rich, and often used metaphor in the biblical story as God reveals his desire to be in relationship with us. It begins with a marriage, that between Adam and Eve (Ge. 1-2), and ends with a marriage, that between the Lamb and God's holy people (Rev. 19). In-between, it pops up frequently, like in our OT reading from Isaiah. There, marriage describes the on-going relationship God has with his people, Israel, as he woos them back from feeling forsaken and desolate in the exile, due to their unfaithfulness, to being delighted in and rejoiced over upon their return. As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, God is pictured not as a domineering or abusive husband, but as an ever-loving, ever-patient spouse who attends to the needs of his Beloved. In the NT, one of the remarkable passages that refers to marriage is found in Ephesians 5. There, Paul describes marriage as an illustration of Jesus' relationship with his church. As Jesus gave up his life for us, we are to give ourselves to one another. A healthy and joy-filled marriage comes about not as we seek self-fulfillment, but as we are willing to seek the fulfillment of another, submitting to one another as Jesus submitted to, and gave himself for, us.

C. So we shouldn't be surprised to learn that God cares deeply about marriages and that Jesus actually begins his ministry by attending a wedding and compassionately helping a marriage to get off on the right foot. Have you, it's worth pondering at this point, invited him into yours? That is important to consider because, as I'm sure you know, the best laid plans of brides and grooms will go awry; at some point, the old wine will run out. She'll wreck his car, he'll have cancer or a heart attack, one or both may be unfaithful, a child will experiment with drugs, and then what? Only Jesus can help us overcome failure, enable us to forgive, and give us perspective and hope when life doesn't go as we've planned.

## III. The Sign of Wine

A. But there's more. Like peeling back the layers of an onion, there is still more, for those with eyes to see, of the glory Jesus is revealing through this sign. First, reflecting on these jars used for ritual purification, by changing the water into wine, Jesus is pointing toward a change in the way people would now come into the presence of the living, holy, God. It would not be through a ritual involving water, but a relationship involving blood. The one to whom the ritual pointed was now here. The water was changed into wine, anticipating the blood that Jesus would shed for us and reminding us that we cannot become clean by washing ourselves but only by allowing him to wash us. His blood is what purifies us

from our sin, clothes us in gowns that are white, and enables us to “marry,” to enter into and enjoy a close and intimate relationship with, our holy God. Can you see glory being revealed here?

B. Second, Jesus also reveals here a foretaste of the joy that we will experience when the marriage between the Lamb and God’s holy people takes place at the return of Jesus. Notice the abundance we see here. Six jars times an average capacity of twenty-five gallons yields 150 gallons of wine. That’s a lot! Why so much? Perhaps a clue is found in another of the prophets of old, a man named Amos. At the end of his work, which comes down pretty hard on the persistent unfaithfulness of God’s people, Amos pictures the age of the Messiah when all things will be restored and made right:

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills, and I will bring my people back from exile. They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit.” [Amos 9:13-14]

Amos is not picturing a time when everyone will be stumbling around in a drunken stupor! Drunkenness, in fact, was so frowned upon in the first century that the wine was heavily diluted with water. Rather, Amos pictures for us an age of abundance, marked by fruitfulness, when grapes will grow faster than they can be harvested, the wine will flow liberally, and the people will be intoxicated by the joy of uninterrupted fellowship with God and his people. It might be something like a never-ending wedding reception, or even fellowship hour at church, when the goodies and the coffee, the conversation and the companionship, the laughter and the scrambling around of children, will simply just keep on going. We won’t want to leave or need to go home because we will already be there. Such a time, Jesus seems to be announcing for those with eyes to see, as he creates an abundance of wine at this wedding and so reveals his glory—such a time has dawned with his arrival.

May this glory, of a relationship rescued, reconciliation fulfilled, and new creation revealed, fill and satisfy our hearts.