

January 20, 2019

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

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After weeks of talking about the advent of Jesus. His birth. The swaddling clothes, the manger, all his visitors and the star in the sky – we’ve made that sudden transition to stories about Jesus, all grown up and getting to work.

It’s a curious little story that John tells us. And he is the only one to record it.

John says that this takes place on “the third day.” Which, if your memory is like mine- you may be asking, the third day of what? If you go back to the first chapter of the gospel, you will find that after an incredible, poetic introduction – the writer tells us that the priests and the Levites had come out to Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist about his identity. Who was he? Moses? Elijah? A prophet?

And John replied, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord....”

“I baptize with water. *But* among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

On the next day- or for the purposes of counting – **the first day** after John talked to the Jewish leaders, Jesus is walking down the path when John sees him and says, “Here! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Andrew and Simon Peter, who had John’s faithful disciples, pick up and go with Jesus, without any hesitation. And on that day Peter declares, “This is the Messiah.”

On **the second day**, after John talked to the Jewish leaders, Jesus decided to go to Galilee. Andrew and Peter run into their friend Philip who decides to join them in following Jesus. Philip tells his friend Nathanael about Jesus and it is Nathanael who famously asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” To which most people of that time would have answered, “No. Nothing good from Nazareth. At least nothing worth mentioning.”

After meeting and talking with Jesus, Nathanael changes his mind and confesses that Jesus is the Son of God and the king of Israel. So now, it is **the third day** since John talked to the Jewish leaders about how he was preparing the way for one much greater than himself. Jesus has finally arrived. He’s ready to go. And the setting is of course, a wedding. It was most likely a Wednesday because the Rabbis taught that the weddings of virgins were to take place on Wednesdays. But we’re not totally sure where Cana was located. It doesn’t get a lot of mention in ancient texts. But tradition says that it was probably about nine or ten miles from Nazareth. And Jesus with his four brand new disciples has been invited to a wedding. Now, I don’t know about you, but in my experience, the only reasons people ever feel comfortable making that kind of last-minute wedding invitation is because either they are very rich, and five more guests won’t make a difference to the head count. Or they don’t have a lot of anything, and so five more guests isn’t going to make a difference either.

It’s impossible to know the setting of this story, but somehow it is easier for me to imagine that Jesus found himself at the wedding of a family that was willing to share what they had. It might not have been a lot – but they were happy to have five more at the celebration. And so that’s where Jesus finds himself on the third day of his public ministry. His mother Mary was also invited and she is the one who gets the first word with Jesus. “They’ve run out of wine.”

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All too often we think of Mary as being meek and mild, but in his *Commentary on the Magnificat*, Martin Luther pointed out that the description of Mary as “a humble servant” is not a description of her personality. It is her economic and social condition. To put it plainly, Jesus did not come from a rich family. And there’s no reasons that we should assume his mother was a shy and retiring little flower.

In Jesus’ time, weddings were known as drinking parties and wine was the celebration drink. A wedding party could go on for days and to run out of wine would have been an embarrassment for the family. I’ve often thought that Mary’s insistence that Jesus take care of the problem is a sign of a mother’s bossiness. But Dr. Eliseo Perez-Alvarez makes a strong point when he says, her words “do whatever he tells you” point to Mary’s “discipleship,” a trait that is displayed throughout her entire life.

“In spite of the fact that her son is somewhat rude in his response; in spite of being a single mother, who could’ve been punished with a death sentence; in spite of the fact that Mary was not allowed to choose the name of her first fruit of her womb; in spite of the fact that Mary had to run away from persecution to her cousin’s home -- still Mary says “do whatever he tells you.”

Another view is that the word that Jesus uses, “woman,” might actually have been said as “dear woman” and that it was an endearment one might use with your mother. But whatever the truth of it was- Mary clearly believes that Jesus can manage the problem.

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It must have taken quite a bit of time to fill the jars up. After all, they had no running water; they had to go to the well to draw it, and that’s a lengthy process. When the jars were full, the servants heard the next step in the drama that was unfolding. Jesus tells them: “Now draw some out of the jars and take it to the chief steward.” This was the man who was responsible for the approval and serving of the wine. The sommelier if you would. The servants must have been mystified. They knew that the jars contained water, but it seemed to have changed. It looked different from what they had drawn from the well. But not wanting to create a scene or get in trouble, they wait for the steward to figure out what was going on.

In the ritual manner of the wine steward, the man took a beaker and tasted the liquid. His eyes must have shown his surprise. “This is excellent wine,” we can hear him saying while looking at the servants as if they were somehow responsible.

There have been and will continue to be tons of paper expended on the ideas around the numbers given: six stone jars, and fifteen to twenty gallons. While the material they are made of (stone) may refer to Leviticus 11:29-38, which is primarily about dead animals getting into the water supply. Trying to figure out the meaning of the numbers or the water or the jars seems to miss the key idea, which is : **a lot of water was turned into wine. A LOT OF WATER WAS TURNED INTO WINE; this is the point.** Some scholars want to further de-mystify the event by changing the amount or offering the idea that only the water drawn out was turned into wine. But again, this misses the point that Jesus turned a huge amount of water into wine quite miraculously.

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When the wine steward got to the host, he offers what might be a criticism or maybe just a statement of fact. The man had served at many feasts and banquets and knew his wine. He tells the host: you have saved the best for the last. This is not done. First you offer the best wine and then, when they are too drunk to notice, you offer the inferior wine; that’s how you do things at a party like this! You give them the wine with corks, then you get out the screw tops and when that’s all gone you get out the cheap boxed Chablis. You have reversed a time-honored tradition!

And who knows what the host had to say.

The scene ends there. We are left to fill in the blanks. What John tells us is that the disciples – newly chosen, newly called – believed in Jesus as a result of this Epiphany. What John emphasizes is that this is the first sign that reveals that God’s presence is unhindered within Jesus: This is his glory. On an ordinary day when two young people are married, as they have done through the ages, a young man from Nazareth reveals that he has creative powers that can affect even nature. An Epiphany for us and for him. An uncovering that allows light to shine into a long creative process. An uncovering that shows us that his hour has come.

This is not magic. This is the true connection to the Creator.

It’s a miracle but unlike every other miracle that the gospels report. The other stories tell of Jesus healing the blind. Making the lame to walk. He casts out demons. and brings Lazarus back from the dead. Every other miracle mends something that is broken, but in this one case the wonder that Jesus works is done for pure joy. It is a miracle of celebration.

It’s a sign that God is present in every moment of our lives. There is nowhere that the light of God cannot shine. No place too small or insignificant. Nothing that cannot be changed by the power of God.

Water into wine was “the first miracle” and it was an epiphany as much as the wonders of healing the sick and raising the dead

A revelation of who Jesus really is.