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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany – January 16, 2022
John 2:1-11

Oh, weddings! Weddings are accidents waiting to happen. They are complicated and lengthy affairs, full of custom, tradition, invested meaning (and money), and an overflow of emotion. Weddings are also filled with humans, and we know what happens when there is a gathering of people... things get messy and go wrong. The groom faints. The pre-school aged flower girl suffers stage fright halfway down the aisle and runs screaming from the sanctuary. The best-man forgets the rings. The bride steps on her dress and rips out the hem. A great gust of wind blows away the flowered arch. And that's just the ceremony. Wedding receptions are a swirling, roiling hot mess of potential disaster. Someone gets sick at the dinner. The toast goes painfully awry. The best man passes out. The cake is knocked over. The DJ's setup trips the breaker, and the power goes out. So many possibilities for catastrophe.

All this, of course, was true in Jesus' time as well. And if we think our modern wedding celebrations are large and complicated affairs, it's nothing compared to what went on in the days of yore. A wedding would have been a huge event in the social life of first century Palestine, and the bride and groom celebrated marriage not with a honeymoon away but with a seven-day wedding feast at the groom's home. For those invited, it would have been a rare delight and respite from the mundane tedium of every-day life. To run out of wine at such an event would signal lack of preparation and thoughtlessness... an almost unforgivable social offense. It is within this context that our gospel lesson this morning takes place.

The story of the Wedding at Cana is the account of Jesus' first miracle and is found only in the Gospel of John. It is important to note that John refers to Jesus' action as a sign rather than a miracle. Signs are symbolic and mysterious, and always point beyond themselves to hidden truths. Like so much of John's Gospel, this story has what Frederick Buechner describes as a "curious luminousness about it, the quality almost of a dream where every gesture, every detail, suggests the presence of meaning beneath meaning, where people move with a kind of ritual stateliness, faces melting into other faces, voices speaking words of elusive but inexhaustible significance."

This dreamlike story begins "on the third day," which itself is ripe to bursting with meaning as it foreshadows the future act of earth-shaking significance that will occur on the third day. The day when Jesus will again change sorrow into joy, but that time on a cosmic scale. There is a wedding feast – a great gathering of community – and yet the faces remain blurred. We don't know who's there or what's going on. As often in dreams, we enter the action in the middle – the details and faces undefined – and all we know is that there is a celebration going on and feasting and drinking enjoyed by all.

There are six large stone jars to be used for ritual cleansing standing empty. It is these empty jars that Jesus fills with wine. Wine itself is highly symbolic in the biblical tradition, inferring prosperity, abundance, and good times. The once-empty jars previously used for purification rites are now filled to overflowing with the new wine of incarnational salvation. That there are six of the jars may also have symbolic meaning, perhaps suggestive of God's six days of creation.

And lastly, we have the Jesus' cryptic words spoken to his mother when she informs him that the wine has run out, with their surprising sharpness and seeming rebuke, only to be further shrouded in mystery by his sudden about-face. It is as if this story were playing out in a shifting fog – some parts illuminated and others obscured.

When the fog of the dream blows away, what becomes clear is the joyful nature of the story. The celebration is at risk – the wine has run out – and Mary is the first to notice. Despite Jesus' reluctance at this time to reveal how God is working through him, he does, in fact, act. The once-empty jars are now filled with fine wine for the wedding guests, provided by Jesus in order for the

party to continue. Changing the jars of water into jars flowing over with good wine becomes a metaphor for Jesus' ministry as he brings new vitality to the ancient religion. As one commentator writes, "Jesus' face is reflected in the pools of flowing wine being poured out for the laughing, happy wedding guests who are present to celebrate life."

As we move through this season after the Epiphany, we will encounter a number of stories that reveal the true nature of Jesus. The story of the Wedding at Cana shows us not only that Jesus is most definitely the best wedding guest you can have, but also how his incarnational ministry brings about God's abundance and blessing amid our temporal experience of scarcity.

The image of the wedding banquet is itself a sign of the restoration of Israel and the wine served there as a symbol of the joy and celebration associated with salvation. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the feast that God will prepare for all peoples, as "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines... of well-aged wines strained clear." The abundance of fine wine at the wedding banquet is symbolic of the abundance of joy that awaits not only Israel, but all people on the day of God's salvation.

Jesus' extravagant sign of changing the water into wine reveals that in him, life, joy, and salvation have arrived. At the beginning of John's Gospel, we read that "in him was life, and that life was the light of all people." And later in the Gospel, Jesus will tell us, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly." Abundant life is more than mere existence or survival, and certainly more than an abundance of material things. Abundant life is to know and be known by the One through whom all life came into being. It is to allow our hearts to be so transformed that we are able to see the Holy Spirit moving and active all around us. It is to have an intimate relationship with the One who loves us so much that he doesn't know how to stop giving.

Sadly, abundant life does not mean a life of ease, comfort, and luxury or an absence of sorrow and suffering. But, as Lutheran pastor and New Testament scholar Elisabeth Johnson writes, "it does mean that in Jesus we have an abundant, extravagant source of grace to sustain us, grace that is more than sufficient to provide where we fall short and to give us joy even amid sorrow and struggle." Johnson continues, "Abundant life means that in Christ we are joined to the source of true life, life that is rich and full and eternal, life that neither sorrow, nor suffering, nor death itself can destroy."

As the first miracle of Jesus, the Wedding at Cana reveals Jesus' incarnational ministry. And where creation is infused with God's Spirit, what will be found is the surprising blessing of abundance. With this story, we are invited to trust in God's generosity...even when we can't see it and our jars are empty. Even when we ask and it seems our prayerful request is rebuffed, God responds nonetheless with not only the living water we need for survival in this life, but also the good wine of salvation. Filled now to overflowing, we will surely never run out of this wine of new life.

While John doesn't much reference the reign of God in his Gospel as compared to the other evangelists, his dreamlike story of the Wedding at Cana shows us what the kingdom of God is like. It is like a village wedding celebration to which everyone is invited and at which the guests are surprised by the abundance and quality of the wine. The Wedding at Cana is a sign that in Jesus, life, joy, and salvation have, indeed, arrived.

Amen.