

Signs: *The Wedding*

John 2:1-11

I spent the summer of 1973 doing mission work in Japan as a part of the Wheaton College student missionary program. Somehow, the mission leaders in Japan discovered I financed a lot of my way through college singing, i.e., recording music jingles for radio, soloing in churches and evangelistic meetings, etc. So, after a few weeks of being in Japan, the mission leaders asked me to take a trip up to the Aomori Retreat Center to sing at a conference there. However, they said I would need to take the train trip on my own because no one was available to go with me. As a 21-year-old college student, I was sure I could do it. I was living in Kofu City and the retreat center was a 6-7-hour trip through Tokyo and then to the north.

<https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Kofu,+Yamanashi,+Japan/Aomori,+Japan/@38.1924766,137.7638757,7z/data=!3m1!4m1!4m1!3m1!11s0x601bf850977851a9:0xc276c11755ca7309!2m2!1d138.5683001!2d35.6621331!1m1!1s0x5f9f9f01c2b6aa3:0xc2d9c6d85a17e12m2!1d140.7473524!2d40.8222197!3e3>

Everything went fine until the train went past Sendai and into more rural train stations. Back then, the signs in rural areas only were written in Kanji i.e., a script I couldn't read. <https://gaijinpot.scdn3.secure.raxcdn.com/app/uploads/sites/2/2015/05/Signs-Colored-1024x768.jpg> Not being able to understand the spoken announcements and not being able to read the signs, I began to panic. I went from person to person in the train car to ask if they would help me know when to get off – and they all simply shook their heads as if to say, “I don't speak English. I don't know what you are asking.” Let me tell you: On that day I began to understand the importance of signs if we will find our ways to our destinations. And, I learned I not only need to have signs – but to be able to understand the signs.

I think all of you can understand that illustration. We've all had times when we have tried to find the exit from a theater, the directions to a person's home, and even our way around a church campus as complex as ours is here at LAC. **The important thing about a sign is not the sign itself. What is important is what the sign points toward or tells us about.** Signs point to realities that we do not currently see or understand.

In his Gospel, the Apostle John did not call the supernatural works of Jesus miracles. They were miracles, but John called them signs (semeion). Why? Because they all pointed to something about Jesus's identity that people otherwise would never have seen. Jesus was a man. People could see that. But, he was much more. Jesus did what human beings did – ate, fished, took trips, etc. But, he came to do so much more. The signs in John demonstrate who Jesus is and what he came to do in our lives and in our world.

So, what will happen to you when you have eyes to see what the signs of Jesus were pointing toward? Hear John's words: “*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name* **(20:30-31)**.”

Do you see the two effects of opening your eyes to see and be directed by these signs? 1) You will believe in Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, and 2) you will have the life God made you to have. Indeed, you will find the “life to the full” (Jn 10:10) for which God created you.

We start today where John started in his gospel, i.e., with what he called “the first sign” in **v. 11**. This one took place in the small town of Cana in Galilee, just 16 miles from where Jesus spent most of his ministry life and did most of his miracles, i.e., in Capernaum. <http://www.gods-word-first.org/bible-maps/images/cana-bible-map.jpg>.

To what/whom does this sign point? I believe that as the 1st sign, **this sign 1) points back** to what has happened in our world **as well as 2) forward** to what Jesus came to do in our world, i.e., that he will make all things new. And, today, when we see those things, we see how this sign speaks 3) **into our present lives too**, especially into times that feel like crises.

A Sign to Help us Understand Our Past – God has been at work since before the beginning. *On the third day... (2:1). Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing... (2:6).*

Right now, I turn your attention to two phrases in the story – the one about the 3rd day and the mention of the 6 jars. As we look at these phrases, one important thing to know is **how important the early chapters of Genesis are for John's telling us about Jesus**. In fact, the Gospel of John begins with the same opening phrase as does Genesis, i.e., “*in the beginning*”. In John, Jesus himself is the “Word” through whom the world is created (1:1-4). Jesus is the Creator entering into his creation to recreate it.

So, when we come to the phrase, “on the 3rd day” in 2:1, we have to stop to ask -- the 3rd day of what? Is it the 3rd day of the wedding? The 3rd day of the week? Or, is it more? One question we should ask is, “What happened in Genesis on the 3rd day of creation? **Gen 1:11** -- *God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-*

bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. So, the 3rd day was the day God created the vines from which wine is made.

Then, when we read the prophecies in the OT that pointed toward the coming of the Messiah, one prophecy had to do with the Messiah demonstrating God’s sovereignty over all plant life including the fruit and wine that comes from it. So, over 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah had prophesied that when Messiah comes: *The LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines... He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces (Is 25:6).*

The point I want you to see in this sign at Cana is that it points back to the fact that God created a good world, including the plants and all the fruit and wine that is produced. God knows that sin has harmed his world, but he has a plan to make all things new. So, God has been at work continuously to bring about a day in which there will be no hunger, no tears and no death! Jesus’s coming was central to that work. He is still at work. But, right now, that final perfect world has not yet come. Right? Yes, right!

And, that brings us to the 2nd phrase I mentioned, i.e., the one in v. 6 about those 6 jars usually used for purification rites. **In Jewish thought, the number 6 pointed to incompleteness while the number 7 means perfection.** So, we have six jars, big purification jars. These jars are a reminder of the fact that, ever since Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, there were and still are things in this world that are impure, unjust and imperfect. In those jars, the people of Israel sought to purify all sorts of things: eating utensils, clothes – even themselves. But, all the washing that could be done with these huge jars still could not make things completely clean and right in this world. But, **here’s the point: Jesus came to do what those jars could not do perfectly.** He came to make pure what was not pure, to perfect what is imperfect. And, that means that Jesus came to make you and me clean before God.

With all that in mind, let’s stop for a moment to try to see what this part of the sign points toward as it points back in history. I think Jesus’s 1st sign points us toward a way of looking at the world we live in. This sign points us to the reality that God has been at work in our world from the beginning on. It also points us back to our need for forgiveness and being made new. There is a continuity to the work of God. He was at work “on the 3rd day”. He works in spite of the impurity of our world. He was continuing his work when Jesus came. This sign in Cana is pointing back to all that.

Let’s face it: On a very personal level, we and our world need what those jars pointed to, i.e., we all have needs of forgiveness; opportunities for new beginnings. And, Jesus, the one through whom the world was made, has entered creation – to meet the needs we have, especially to right the wrongs in our lives and in his world. So, I don’t know what is happening in your life, but I do know this: God knows. And, he is greater than any impurity, any challenge, any failure, and any need you may have in your life. Confess your sin and need to him. Place your faith in him. Jesus came to purify what is impure and to restore what needs to be made new.

Let me add this: I think this sign has something specific to say to us as a church right now. We are walking into what we call “a transition time”. But, in the eyes of God, it really is “a continuity time”. We look back into our past and see that God brought this church into being 125 years ago to bring the gospel to our city and to our world. And, God has been at work throughout our history. And, I tell you, he is at work among us now too.

So, as our Nominating Committee is looking for the next elected leaders in our church as well as a Search Committee for our next Sr. Pastor – and all this followed by us voting on what they recommend -- I encourage us in this season to look back and discern what God has been doing in our church and among our leaders up to now. Through all my time here, I have witnessed our leaders seeking the Lord together and, often, hearing from him together. So, I urge us in this season to have eyes to see and ears to hear what he has already been saying and doing. Just as the coming of Jesus was consistent with the work and prophecies of God, so too, where God takes us as a church will be built on what he has said and done before. Hear me correctly: LAC will and must have ever-changing programs, music, communication vehicles and facilities as our world changes. – but the mission to bring the unchanging Gospel into our changing world will be the same.

So, this first sign is a sign that points us to look at what God has done in the past. And, it also is this:

A Sign to Make Known Our Future – Our Destiny is Indescribably Fantastic. *Each held from 20 to 30 gallons... (2:6). “Everyone else brings out the choice wine first... but you have saved the best till now (2:10).”*

I want to say as briefly as possible that followers of Jesus have always loved this miraculous part of the sign Jesus provided at the wedding in Cana. Please **do not miss two parts of it: 1) the quantity** – Jesus created 120-180 gallons of wine. It was, and still would be, an exorbitant and almost outrageous amount of wine. Some people think that what Jesus did was scandalous.

And, 2) the quality – it was the best wine! This was a part of the miracle, of course. Wine aficionados point out that the best Bordeaux wines do not become their best until 30-40 years after they're bottled. But, in Cana, Jesus spoke, and the wine was immediately the best.

I know that some in our day may be troubled by the quantity and quality of the wine Jesus made – but our brothers and sisters in Christ in the early church were not. Remember that they were a minority people, often persecuted and even killed for their faith. But they held on to the fact that God is at work and the Jesus they knew had not come to kill, steal and destroy. He gave us life to change our lives now but, just as much, to provide a fantastic future. Listen to one of them, a man named Irenaeus, when he, based on this story at Cana, described what he thought the world will be like when the Messiah returns and makes all things new:

The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty gallons of wine. And when any one of the God's people shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, "I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me."

What Irenaeus is saying is that our future is more fantastic than anything he could possibly describe. God is not a spoilsport. You see, what Jesus had come to do was not only to make things the way they were in Genesis 1-2 before sin entered the world. No! Even in paradise, Adam and Eve were still susceptible to evil. Essentially in this sign Jesus says, "Look and see. I have come to recreate the world I have created and that has gone wrong. I will do more than those 6 purification jars could do."

What Jesus will bring about is much more and much better than even the Garden of Eden was. We will be liberated from the enticements of evil. We will celebrate our recovery!! I know this is hard to imagine being possible. But, what is impossible for us will be made possible by God. That is our fantastic destiny.

A Sign to Give Us Hope Now – Jesus Is with Us in our Crises – *The mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine (2:3)."*

A wedding is usually a significant event in our lives and in our families. But, even the biggest and most extravagant wedding in the world I've grown up in, are nothing compared to the significance of weddings in Jesus's day. Their ceremonies lasted at least three days. A wedding was a community event in which two extended families were brought together. The groom and his family were expected to provide the celebration for the whole community – just like others' families had done for generations. And, the food and the wine were central to the celebration. Sometimes, half of what a man would earn his whole life would be spent on the wedding celebration. The reputation of both families rested on doing this well.

There is pathos in Mary's words when she simply said to Jesus, "They have no more wine." No more needed to be said. This meant shame would come upon the groom, and his family and his wife's family as well. I don't know if there is any event in our culture that has so much riding on it.

The group of pastors I meet with to prepare sermons put me on the spot about this. They asked if I had personally experienced times of shame. A number of incidents flooded into my mind – because shame has the power to stick in our memory banks. One time, it happened just before Chris and I got married. I was a music missionary in Germany for 6 months a year and a student at Wheaton Grad School for 6 months a year. And, I didn't have much money. So, one year, just before heading back to Germany, I bought Chris an engagement ring, paid the bills and knew I had, and then raked up every penny I could so that I could take to lunch one of my teachers, a man who had blessed me in countless ways. I wanted to honor him – to thank him.

I thought I had enough money to do this but on the morning of our lunch – just before I would be flying back to Germany, I received a notice from Wheaton's business office that I still had an outstanding debt that had to be paid. And, it took all my money. Remember, back then we had no cell phones, so I could not text my teacher to cancel our lunch.

So, it was with a lot of anxiety – and shame – that I stood at the restaurant waiting for him to come. And, he came with such joy and said, “I can’t believe that you’re doing this for me, Greg.” Just as I was trying to find the words to say, “Well, I’m not... I can’t...” – a couple rushed over to us and said, “Greg Waybright! You sang and spoke at our church last Sunday. It was such a blessing. We’ve already told the server that we’re paying for you and your friend to have lunch today!”

It was something like that – though much, much bigger – that happened at Cana that day. Did you notice that Jesus didn’t take credit for it? The wedding manager only knew that the groom had left the best wine until last. Jesus stepped into the crisis and removed the man’s shame.

Tsega Worku, our LAC Director of Counseling, pointed out that it used to be that, when church people faced a crisis in their lives, their first instinct was to go to church and meet Jesus with their church family. Now, he said, we have a growing tendency to hide our crises and problems from one another in church -- and look elsewhere for support. But, a church should be a place where we meet Jesus together in the midst of a world in which God is not yet done with his work and, because of that, crises and shame are still very much alive.

So, Mary brought the crisis to Jesus. Jesus said, “Woman, what does this have to do with me?” He was not being disrespectful when he said that. Jesus was pointing out what I’ve been trying to say to you today, i.e., Jesus’s central identity was as Son of God and his main calling was to do his Heavenly Father’s will. The prophets had said that the Messiah would someday have a wedding – and God’s people would be the Messiah’s bride. In a later book, Revelation, John would write that there would someday be a great wedding feast in which Jesus will be the founder of the feast – with no shortage of wine. But, that time had not yet come.

Nevertheless, in this time of crisis – Jesus was still the one to whom Mary came. So, I say to you: Whatever happens to you, when crisis and shame come into your life this side of heaven, do not run away from Jesus and from the church into which he has put you. He was at work in the past. He will be at work into our fantastic future. But he is at work now to. Even when the crisis hits, do what Mary did – go to Jesus. And, let Mary’s admonition ring in your ears, “Do whatever he tells you.” Then, see what he does.

And, should I tell you what happened as I was panicking in the train in rural Japan – unable to read the signs? Certain I would never find my way? Well, just as the train was stopping at a rural train station, a young man who earlier had shaken his head as if to say to me, “No English”, suddenly tapped me on the shoulder. He said, in perfect English, “Sir. This is your stop.” Through him, I found my way.

So, I pray that this series of messages on the signs in John might be messages in which uses me me – or whoever opens God’s Word to you – to tap you on the shoulder so that you will see better what God is doing in your life and that you will trust him. I pray, as John prayed, that these signs will lead you to reaffirm that you believe in the Lord Jesus -- and that, in doing so, you will find more and more of the life that Jesus came to give you – until his work is finished and all things are made new --to His glory alone.