The Best is Saved for Last!

Preached on Jan. 19, 2025

The Gospel of John opens with a deeply symbolic poem celebrating the early Christian insight that God *revealed* or *manifested* God’s self in the “Word-made-flesh” who “dwelt among us,” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14).

Throughout the Epiphany season, we have been exploring a variety of images and stories that the Gospel writers employed to unpack the mystery of the Word-made-flesh: the manifestation to the wise men through the wisdom of the stars, the revelation of Jesus as Beloved Son in the waters of Baptism, and today, the revelation of Jesus as the caterer at a wedding feast turning water into wine.

Anyone who has read John’s Gospel knows that it is very different from the other three: the language and images seem farfetched and even more unbelievable than the nature and healing miracles we read in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Scholars argue that John’s entire Gospel and all of the stories and speeches in it are richly *symbolic* and *theological*—and cannot be taken as literal or historical. More than any other biblical writer, the author of the fourth Gospel seems to warn against, inveigh against, and show the absurdity of that all-too-human tendency to seek to capture divine mystery in historical facts or literal statements. So we need to keep this in mind as we dive into this inaugural scene of Jesus’ public ministry in John’s Gospel.

The text reports on the transformation of a large quantity of water (120 to 180 gallons) into wine.

But the meaning of this story does not depend upon its “happened-ness.” Instead, it is a “sign,” as John puts it. Signs point beyond themselves. To use a play on words, they *sign*-ify something, and what they *sign*-ify is their significance.

So what is the meaning of this story as a “sign?” What is its significance?

Consider the sacredness of water

1. Rather than thinking about literal water changing its composition and becoming literal wine, we might wonder if this story is about turning something that’s seemingly mundane into something that’s very special, turning something that’s simply refreshing into something that’s remarkably enjoyable and satisfying.

The wine steward tastes the wine and says, “Wait a minute, not only is this wine, but it is the best wine.”

For us to live into this story, we might think of wine every time it rains, or when we listen to water dripping from a faucet.

Whenever we see or hear water, we might think, “Wait a minute! This could be wine,”

which then brings us right back to the marvel and mystery in every drop of water.

Water is sacred! Water is life! Water is love! Water is the finest of wines!

I’m wondering if one of the take-aways from a text like this is the experience of the holy in our own bodies with everything we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

Consider God’s superabundance for all

1. Secondly, rather than thinking about the literal quantity of 120 to 180 gallons of wine, we might wonder if this story is about the superabundance of God’s provisions not only for the rich and the famous, but for everyone, even the lowliest among us!

Wedding banquets were the most festive occasions in the world of first-century Palestine, and they usually lasted for seven days. They featured dancing, wine, and vast quantities of food.

In stark contrast to the lifestyles of the rich and famous, the normal peasant diet was meager: grains, vegetables, fruit, olives, eggs, and an occasional fish. Meat and poultry were infrequently eaten, since people were reluctant to kill the few animals they had. But at a wedding banquet, there were copious amounts of food and drink of all kinds, even for peasants.

Could it be that this story points to God’s dream of superabundance for everyone?

When we read about six stone water-jars each holding twenty or thirty gallons, we may first think of the disparity between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. But then we imagine a world where *ALL* people have access to everything they need. And not only a superabundance of material blessings, but a superabundance of spiritual blessings as well.

When John’s community reflected on the significance of the life and ministry of Jesus, they placed on his lips these words, “I am come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Abundant life for everyone!

Consider the joy of the one world house

1. To what else might this story point? What else might it sign-ify?

Well, literally speaking, weddings were events where people from various families came together and were united around plenty of good food and wine. And there’s great joy that a new family is created.

Could it be that this story points to the creation of that new family, which in the words of Dr. King is the beloved community or the one-world house?

Imagine a world where diverse people celebrate the marvel and mystery of the ***entire*** human family, a family where everyone belongs. No one is excluded.

Are we beginning, perhaps, to feel the heartbeat of the Johannine community? Despite our differences, everyone matters. Everyone belongs. Everyone’s rights are protected.

Truly Dr. King dreamed God’s dream when he wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (Letter from Birmingham, Alabama jail, April 16, 1963).

Consider what the marriage of heaven and earth would look like

1. Finally, I’m wondering if this story might sign-ify one more important thing – the marriage of heaven and earth, which in Jewish understanding, coincides with the messianic age.

In the imagery of the Hebrew Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos), God proposes marriage to Israel and waits for her reply.

And Israel knows full well what this would require of her.

According to the Hebrew prophets, accepting God’s wedding proposal would mean committing oneself to peace, justice, an end to all hunger and oppression, the flourishing of all people and the rest of creation.

Are we ready to accept God’s marriage proposal? Are we ready to make this kind of commitment that turns the world upside down and inside out, where the first are last and the last are first, where the mighty get off their thrones and masters wash the feet of their servants; where women and children are as valuable as men; where the sick are healed, the naked are clothed, the homeless are sheltered, the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given fresh clean water and the finest of wines?

Imagine together the kind of family which will come of this marriage: the unemployed and underemployed will find good paying jobs; sinners will be forgiven, immigrants and strangers will be welcomed; prisoners will be visited, released and welcomed home.

Dr. King invites us to God’s wedding with these words:

“I dream of a world where the [children] of former slaves and the [children] of former slave owners sit down together at the table of brotherhood…

… little black boys and black girls … join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Dr. King continues, “…hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you…. But be assured that … we will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience [and] we will win you in the process…” (*Christmas Sermon for Peace,* 24 Dec 1967).

Conclusion: Friends, the best wine is saved for last!

The best wine is love that makes friends of enemies. It is meeting physical force with soul force, including all and dismissing none, wiping away all tears, calming all fears.

The best wine is love that keeps giving and giving and giving and never runs out, the kind of love that shows up when it’s least expected and most needed.

The best wine is standing with the marginalized and oppressed in God’s reign of justice.

The best wine is saved for last! Amen.

Intro for closing song: Jesus, our bridegroom, is Lord of the Dance! Please stand as you are able for the first dance of the wedding feast. Dance Dave Myers! Dance, people of God! Dance with joy!