The Life of the Party

A Meditation on John 2: 1 – 11

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Let’s start with the servants. Do the servants in this story catch your attention? Do you give them any thought? I love Mary’s role in this story. She is every bit the fabulous mother of God she promised to be when the angel came to her and asked her to birth incarnation. She, as a wise, observant parent can do, nudges her child to step forward into the life which has been waiting for them. Mary – though John never refers to her by name – knows her son, knows his calling, and knows that the time has come.

It is not the setting we expect for a miracle – or sign, as John calls them. Remember in John we see seven signs: the water to wine, the healing of the nobleman’s child, the feeding of the multitude, walking on water, restoring sight to a man born blind, healing a man who was lame, and raising Lazarus. Signs that point to who Jesus is and the life of abundance which he comes to offer. Freedom from shame, freedom from fear – even fear of death, freedom from sorrow, freedom from need.

This sign this very first sign seems so unlikely. No dire need here. We really don’t know what to do with it because it is difficult to see how it truly helpful. Sure, the bride and groom would have been mortified about running out of refreshments, but sparing their embarrassment seems like a strange miracle when you put it side by side with raising Lazarus.

But it is the *first* sign. Not to imply that Jesus needs to warm up, to practice for bigger things. Like learning simple cards tricks before pulling a rabbit out of a hat. I don’t mean that at all. But unlike the other signs – dramatic signs of life renewed – signs that smack us in the face with the love of God and the desire of God for all people to live in fullness, this one requires more work from us.

Which leads us to look for symbols, for layers of meaning, and you will find any number of interpretations. I am intrigued by the opening line of this story: “On the *third day* there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.” No one seems to know why the “third day” is significant here. Third day after what? It seems like a random detail, especially for John. But as Easter people, we can’t help but leap to “on the third day he rose again from the dead.” So is this a resurrection story? Is this the sign that points us to the garden and an empty tomb? Is this the sign that points us *beyond* Easter to the great banquet of God, when all the world has been set right? Is this the anticipation of the fulfillment of the dreams of the Old Testament prophets?

Amos spoke of the day when “the mountains shall drip sweet wine**.**and all the hills shall flow with it.” (Amos 9:13) Isaiah dreamt of the day when all people would join in “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.” (Isaiah 25:6) If that is what this sign is all about, then that’s a pretty fabulous way to begin a ministry. “Do you want to know what I am about?” Jesus asks. I am here to proclaim abundance and joy for all people.

Let’s hold on to this resurrection, eschatological feast as a possible backdrop to this story…let’s hold on to that possibility as we continue to place ourselves in this story. The wine has run out, and Jesus’ mother has told him to step up, to restore the party. “It’s not time,” he responds. We know that feeling – not like Jesus knew it – but we get it. We’ve been there. Someone telling us that it is time. Time to step up. Time to do that next hard thing. As a child we know it as that first time to ride a bike, that jump off the diving board. As we grow, those moments become more complex. Time to commit. Time to embrace our calling. We almost always say, “wait!” but in saying it out loud, we release our fear, and find the way forward.

Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus needs them to do. She has no idea what his next steps will be, but she trusts him to do them. He instructs them to fill the massive stone jars (each would have held between 8 -9 gallons) with water. These jars would have held water for washing – water could be dipped out and used to wash hands and feet - and the water in these jars had probably been depleted by the guests. Refilling these would have required much work, especially if the well were some distance from the home.

Having filled the jars, they were then instructed to take a cup to the head waiter so that he could taste it and approve it. Two things to note here: the first people to witness the miracle are servants, and secondly, they are not only witnesses. They are also participants.

The servants are the first to be aware of what has happened. Let’s hope they got to taste - as well as witness - this miracle. I would trust Jesus to see to that. The servants, the least of the these. Not unlike the shepherds at the manger. Not unlike the odd assortment of people whom Jesus called to be his disciples. Not important people or wealthy people. Everyday ordinary people, and in this case, servants. They are the first to know. The disciples are next. We don’t know how they found out. Jesus wasn’t an attention seeker. Maybe it was his mother. Maybe she not only wanted to urge Jesus to step into his calling but wanted his disciples to do to the same. She knew he would need them. She knew he could walk this life alone.

Just as he did not perform this miracle alone. We could puzzle over this miracle and ask why Jesus wouldn’t just fill the jars himself. If he is going to transform the water anyway, why put the servants through so much additional work of running back and forth to a well in order to fill the massive jars? Could this be the reminder to us - in this very first sign – that Jesus is inviting *us* to participate in the world’s transformation? Could it be that Jesus is reminding us of all the labor that takes place behind the scenes? All of that amazing transformative work, work that renews our world, work that proclaims abundance. Maybe this very first sign is the reminder that following Jesus isn’t about sitting around and waiting to enter the kin-dom of God, but about laboring to bring God’s kin-dom where it is most needed.

It reminds me of the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes. Only in John’s version do we hear of a young person who shares the small lunch they have with them that day. This child is a participant in the miracle. And then there’s Lazarus, whose restoration to life is the last sign Jesus performs before his own execution and resurrection. Lazarus had been in the tomb three days when Jesus told the mourners to remove the stone. Though Lazarus was bound in burial cloth, Jesus called him out from death, and then turned to his friends and urged them to unwrap him, to set his body free. As with the servants who filled the jars, participating in the water’s transformation, so we see others joining in resurrection promises. The hungry are fed, the mourners are comforted, the dead are returned to life.

Isn’t it amazing to be reminded that God needs us? God loves us and redeems us, and we say, “thanks be to God.” Often, we ask, “how is that even possible?” But it is and there is more: God also *needs* us. Each of us. God longs for us to understand that when we participate in the world’s transformation, we are also transformed. We are changed from people without hope, to people who embody hope. We are transformed from people defined by scarcity to people who enflesh abundance.

Our good works don’t save us. God saves us, but laboring alongside God is the work to which we have all been called. The disciples were not the first witnesses to Jesus’ first sign. It was the servants. Having heard of what he had done, the disciples believed. Living into their belief, they also became co-laborers with Jesus. All along the way Jesus would continue to invite everyone – from a child who wanted to share his lunch, to mourners at a grave – to be a part of God’s renewal of all creation.

Just as Mary nudged Jesus to step up, to step out, how might we nudge one another? How might we encourage the holy within each of us to respond to the needs of this world?

On the third day there was a wedding. What if we approached each day as if it were the third day? On the third day Christ will rise from the dead. What if we watched for resurrection? What if we participated in the resurrection work? May we hold on to this story and the hope that if offers us. It is a story of promise and wonder. It is the story of Jesus, who takes ordinary water and creates a wine “bursting with flavor,” described by those who drank it as “having a joyful body,” with hints of amazement and a finish of enduring fulfilment.” Thanks be to the God of love and delight! Amen.

Sources consulted:

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Sneak Peek (Zoom gathering)