***THE WINE IS A SIGN!***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

January 20, 2019

Texts: Amos 9:13-15 and John 2:1-11

 Everyone has a wedding story to tell, and pastors have more wedding stories than just about anyone else. There was the wedding here at which the four-year old ring-bearer refused to come down the aisle until his grandfather promised to give him five dollars and then still wouldn’t come until his grandfather paid up. There was the wedding of a fireman whose buddies locked a stereo in the basement of the country church blaring the song *Another One Bites the Dust* throughout the whole service. There are stories of dropped rings, grooms repeating bride’s vows, fainting groomsmen, and a bride who was so nervous that she kissed the priest performing the ceremony instead of kissing her new husband. But there are also stories of steely grandparents hobbling down the aisle to take their place at a grandchild’s wedding, and tender moments when the expression on the faces of bride and groom said far more than words could ever say, and Earl Locklear determinedly struggling to get to his feet from the pew as his daughter walked down the aisle three weeks ago. Everyone has a wedding story, but no wedding story can match the story told by John about the wedding at Cana in Galilee two thousand years ago.

John places it near the beginning of his gospel, shortly after the call of four disciples – Andrew, Peter, Nathanael, and Philip – though we know there are more to come. These disciples use grand names to describe the One who called them, even though they have barely met him. They call him *Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel*, though one might well wonder what they understood those titles to mean. Did they have any idea what kind of Messiah or King he would be, or who he was as Son of God, when they agreed to follow as his disciples?

 The same might be said of us. We use those names for Jesus with relative ease *– Son of God, Lord, Savior, Christ* which means *Messiah*. We sing of him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Yet do we really grasp what it means to say that Jesus is all of those things? We haven’t stared into his eyes as the disciples did. We haven’t sat at his feet or listened to his voice or watched him heal a blind man nor seen him risen from the dead. We have only the witness of four Gospel writers and some letters of Paul and the testimony of saints across the ages that tell us who Jesus is as *Messiah,* *Lord,* *Savior*, and *Son of God*. Is that enough for you to believe in him, trust him, and call him by any of those names?All of which brings us to this story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

 Cana is a lost city. There is no town by that name in which people live today. There is no collection of homes with a sign at the end of Main Street saying: *Welcome to Cana of Galilee*. As best the experts can tell, it is a long-deserted city about nine miles north of Nazareth, a site today marked by a pile of unexcavated rubble. But in Jesus’ day it was a real place to which he traveled with his newly called disciples in order to celebrate the wedding of some unnamed friend or relative. To the bride and groom he was just the son of Mary and Joseph, and throughout the wedding and first days of the reception – for the wedding celebration lasted about a week – Jesus remained unnoticed, just another one of many celebrants. Then the wine ran out. The custom was for celebrants to bring wine and food to share, but it was the responsibility of the groom’s family to assure that there was enough for all. The breach of hospitality created by the empty wine jars hardly seems to be a crisis worthy of the intervention of the Son of God, but as is so often the case, God chooses an unexpected time and place to act for God’s good purposes.

 At first glance, Jesus doesn’t seem to agree that this is such a time or place. When Mary comes to share the problem of the empty wine jars with him, Jesus takes little interest; “*What concern is that to you, and to me?” he says.* The wine jars are empty – so what? But Mary expects him to do something about it, though what she wants him to do is less clear. Jesus seems to shrug off her request and suggests that the time is not right. “My hour has not yet come,” he says. But Mary leaves it in his hands, instructing the servants to do whatever he tells them. Perhaps she knew her son well enough to know that he would do something for her or perhaps she sensed that his divine moment was indeed at hand. John doesn’t tell us, except to say that Jesus acts. He instructs the servants to fill six jars, not wine jars but the water jars used for purification – for washing hands and dishes. “Fill them to the brim with water,” he says. And so they did. Then without another word or the waving of a magic wand or an abracadabra, he directs that they draw water from those same jars and take what they’ve drawn to the chief steward. And when they do, the chief steward identifies it as a fine wine. Miraculously the water has turned to wine, not some cheap ripple but fine wine, finer than the wine served by the groom at the beginning of the celebration.

 That is all John tells us about this miracle. He doesn’t tell us how it happened. The fact that water is suddenly wine is mentioned almost as an aside – *when the steward tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew)..*. In the blink of an eye, water jugs become wine bottles. There are now gallons and gallons of wine, drawn from the jars that had held water just moments before. It is a miracle! But no one seems to notice. John mentions no reaction from the groom or Mary or the servants; the chief steward is surprised that the wine is so good but knows nothing of the miracle that brought it into being. Only the disciples’ reaction is noted, for they know what has happened, so John concludes this wedding story by saying: *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

 *Revealed his glory* – that is what his sign is all about. If these new disciples had any doubts about the man they had agreed to follow, the man who had called them as disciples, then turning water to wine was a sign to dispel their doubts. The Greek word for *sign* is the same word meaning *miracle*. Changing water to wine was a miracle, but more importantly it was a sign for the disciples and the world that Jesus was more than a man, more than a prophet. Having seen the miracle, the disciples believed in him, says John. But what did they believe? It is hard to say. John doesn’t tell us, but one might suspect they believed what they initially stated – that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God wielding divine power.

 There is a birthday card that some folks have been kind enough to share with me that shows a police officer speaking to a preist who is seated in a car. “Have you had anything to drink?” asks the officer. “Just water,” replies the priest. “Then why do I smell alcohol on your breath,” asks the officer. “Praise the Lord, he’s done it again!” says the priest.

 The story of the wedding at Cana has been told for almost two thousand years now, but as far as we know Jesus never performed that miracle again. This one time in Cana he changed water to wine, the first of his miracles according to John, and thus offers a first glimpse into Jesus’ identity – a view that will be enlarged when he walks on water and stills a storm, heals the blind and the lame, casts out demons, and raises from the dead the son of a royal official and then his friend Lazarus. Through these signs he is revealed to be One who bears the power of God – the power to heal, to cast out demons, to calm the wind, and to conquer death. This is One to be heard, One to be followed, One to be trusted, One to be believed, for this One is the Messiah, the Son of God.

 That is what these signs point to – for the disciples and for us. There are those tee-totaling Christians who are pretty sure he meant to change the wine into water, but the truth is that wine has additional significance as a sign. One of the consistent Old Testament descriptions of the joy of exiles returning home and the new creation and the final days to be ushered in by the Messiah is an abundance of wine. “The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.” (Amos 9:13-14) This image of flowing wine shared in a great feast is a symbol of hope and rosy promise. It is akin to that hope-filled image offered up by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his I Have a Dream speech 55 years ago:

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

Sitting down together as family, sharing good food and good drink in abundance, these are messianic images, hope-filled images that have endured across time. The sudden creation of 150 gallons of fine wine from ordinary water by Jesus thus spoke of a promise being fulfilled in one who was the Christ, a promise of abundance and fruitfulness, and joy!

 We hear that wedding story, but we have not tasted the wine. We hear about miracles, but few of us have seen them with our own eyes. We hear about Resurrection, but we have not seen the risen Lord. We hear about Paul’s Damascus Road conversion, but we’ve seen no blinding lights. We hear about healings, but we are not among those healed. A few of us have recognized a sign or experienced a miracle and can testify to the power of God in our midst, but not all of us are blessed with such first-hand experiences. We have only the stories. “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe,” says John. Blessed are they. Perhaps it is in believing that we see, not just in seeing that we believe.

Singer/songwriter David Bailey, a cancer survivor who was something of a walking miracle himself, suggests just that, in these words:

*Some say you gotta see it to believe it.*

*I say it’s the other way around.*

*First you must believe, then you’ll understand,*

*Like a dream that’s waiting in the lost and found.*

It sounds like something Jesus would say: *Some say you gotta see it to believe it, but I say it’s the other way around. First you must believe…* and then you will be blessed – and so we are! Amen