

## John 2:1-11

Epiphany is the season in the church where we talk about the manifestation of Christ in the world. In the gospel of John, what are called miracles in the other three gospels, are called signs. A sign is an act that points to Jesus. The first of the signs chronicled in John is the well-known narrative of water being changed into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. This is the place where the Johannine themes are introduced. The Wedding at Cana is one of the oddest stories in the gospels, and is only found in John's gospel. It's not raising someone from the dead or healing someone with leprosy, it's not even the feeding of the five thousand. This even takes place at some incredibly ordinary event: a wedding. But if you look between the lines, there is a lot going on here. What matters is not where God is revealed but who God is revealed to.

During the opening sign we meet the first of the characters that carry the gospel's storyline. It's a mistake to literalize these characters or the signs of which they are so deeply a part. The author of the Fourth Gospel uses literary licence to create memorable personalities who become the pillars around which he relates the themes of this Jesus story. It is important that we "read" and understand these characters as John, their creator intended them to be read.

First, let's look at the role assigned to "the mother of the Lord" by John. The "mother of the Lord" makes only two appearances in John's gospel, one in this opening Cana story and the other at the foot of the cross near the end of the gospel.

In neither episode is she ever called Mary and she is not nearly as significant a figure in the New Testament as Christian history has portrayed her.

The Apostle Paul who wrote all of his authentic epistles, that is seven of the fourteen, ten to twenty years before the first gospel was put to pen, never even mentions the parents of Jesus. The only reference to Jesus' family of origin by Paul is the mention of James, the brother of the Lord. Later, Paul refers to Jesus as one who was "born of woman" and "born under the law". The word he uses for "woman" is the root of the word "gynaecology", and has absolutely no connotation of virginity attached to it.

Mark, the first gospel written, ten to twenty years after Paul's epistles, describes the mother of Jesus as thinking that her son has become an embarrassment and is perhaps even "demon-possessed" or mentally ill. A little further, Mark's gospel describes Jesus preaching in Nazareth where he is called the son of the carpenter and Mary, and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon as well as some sisters. This is the first and only time that the mother of Jesus is called Mary in any New Testament source until the ninth decade of the Common Era.

During the ninth decade, the gospel of Matthew begins to develop her image mythologically via miraculous nativity stories. Mary's name is used four times in the birth story, yet she still plays only a secondary role. After all, in Matthew's Gospel, the annunciation is only made to Joseph.

No biblical scholar believes that these Matthean birth references are factual accounts of historical happenings. So in the absence of facts, myths were already evolving and revolving around Jesus' family of origin in the latter years of the first century. During the late ninth and early tenth decades, Luke wrote his Gospel. Luke writes sometime between 88 and 93 CE, and has the mother of Jesus begin for the first time to play a central role in the story of the life of Jesus, beginning with Gabriel's announcement to her. There is little history connected with Luke's portrayal of the mother of Jesus. She is a mythological figure in Luke's gospel long before she makes her first appearance in John's gospel.

John continues to develop the myth by building into his characterization of her the things he needs her to be and do in order to develop his story. Her first appearance is at the wedding feast. The mother of the Lord is cast in a central role. The symbols are obvious. The transformation of water into wine will occur "on the third day". The mother of Jesus stands at the nexus between the shortcomings of the ritual activity of the Jews and the celebration of the new life that Jesus came to bring - new life that is symbolized by the marriage ceremony.

Jesus is at a wedding with his mother and the disciples in the town of Cana in Galilee. Cana is not heard anywhere else in the gospels. But the writer of John needs to tell his audience that this is taking place in Cana and in Galilee. The location was important. It was in Galilee where Jesus was welcomed, which is different from Judea, the more cosmopolitan Judea where he was rejected. Galilee is also the place where Jews and Gentiles lived together. Having his first sign take

place here shows that God in Jesus loves both Jew and Gentile and they have equal standing in the new community that Jesus is creating. The wedding Jesus was at was not like modern weddings. In the ancient world a wedding could last for days.

Someone did not plan to have enough wine for the wedding, and the wine ran out before the party came to an end. Wine had a special place in that society. Wine was a sign of God's abundance, of hospitality. So, when the wine runs short, it means that abundance is limited. This was a major social faux pas. Jesus and his mother have an interesting argument about the issue. (The name of the mother of Jesus, Mary, is never mentioned in John.) She tells Jesus that the party is out of wine. Jesus responds that this is not his concern, his time to be revealed has not come. Mary seems to ignore his complaint as she tells the stewards to do whatever he tells them to do. For Jesus his time meant that he would be the one that would determine when he would reveal himself. But his mother believed that he could provide wine.

The mother of Jesus pushes her son to act in this crisis. He rebukes her, calling her "woman" and saying to her, in what seems like a harsh manner, that his "hour" has not yet come and no one can force it. The word "hour" is used many times in the Fourth Gospel to refer to Jesus' crucifixion and thus to the time of the ultimate revelation of who he is. When the Book of Signs, that is John's Gospel is complete, Jesus finally announces that "the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified", and the drama of the cross begins to unfold. Jesus, in this earlier narrative must decline to have his mother determine the hour of his death, which for the Fourth

Gospel will also be the hour of his glorification.

In this Cana of Galilee story, his mother now retreats, but before doing so, she is made to instruct the servants to “do whatever he says”. We should consider the environment that Jesus lived in. Producing of wine by supernatural means was a common story in the Mediterranean world. Dionysus was the Greek god of wine. The Roman name for Dionysus is Bacchus. While this story seems odd to our modern ears, when this story was first told or read in ancient times it made perfect sense. When John’s first readers in Ephesus, where John was writing, hear of Jesus’ first sign, their minds would go to the god Dionysus. His myth includes turning water into wine. In their minds they must have understood the story as proof that Jesus had power to take back from the pagan world the illusion of its power to transform. Dionysus was a myth. Jesus was a flesh and blood man known to John himself, who had witnessed in real life Jesus’ power and glory.

It is important to note how his mother brackets Jesus’ ministry. Here, he says “Woman, what does that have to do with me?” When he is on the cross, he sees his mother and tells her, “Woman, here is your son”, meaning John would take care of her from now on. Jesus relented and asked the stewards to fill six stone jars with water. The jars were used in Jewish religious rituals. Jesus asked that a servant draw out a sample of the water and give to the head steward. This was the person that made sure the wedding guests had food and wine so not having wine meant that blame rested with him. The steward never saw the stone jars being filled with water. The steward was confused when he tasted that water that was now wine. Where did

it come from? He was probably also puzzled about why the groom (who was the host) decided to give such good wine at this point in the wedding. So he goes to the groom and tells him the following: *“Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the good wine until now.”* This is a long way of saying that the groom was viewed as breaking a major hospitality protocol. It was more common to offer the good wine at first and then bring out the cheap wine when the guests are so drunk they won't tell the difference. But Jesus offered the good wine on the third day.

The people wonder at the source of this wine, for if we literalize the measurements given, there would be more than 150 gallons of new wine, meaning that this symbol of new life was present in overwhelming abundance. This dramatic act, says John, creates in the disciples faith, and “they believed in him.” The first of John's signs is now complete, so Jesus, his mother and his disciples go down to Capernaum and remain for a few days. This the final mention of the mother of the Lord until the scene of the crucifixion.

We need to remember that this is first of all not a miracle story. It is a “sign” pointing to something quite different from a supernatural event. Clearly in this story Jesus is the bridegroom, an image that we will see appear again shortly. He is calling Israel into a new status. The wine of the spirit has replaced the waters of purification. Who she is “the mother of the Lord?” She is developed in the Fourth Gospel, as a mythological figure who stands for Israel, the faith tradition that gave birth to Christianity and is one of John's interpretive keys. It must come, however,

only when all else is ready. It is shrouded in secrecy in this narrative, for we are told that no one knows the source of this transformation. At the proper time all will be known, but the ultimate revelation will come only when he – that is, Jesus – is lifted up on the cross.

The seed of the idea, so central to John, that it will be in the death of Jesus that his glory will be revealed, is planted. That is a different note from any we find in the earlier gospels. John's unique message, his transforming understanding, begins to come into view. We will watch it emerge slowly and steadily as his story unfolds. The mother of Jesus in this gospel is not a person; she is a symbol. When she appears again at the foot of the cross, the meaning of that symbol will become abundantly clear.

What is the significance of this story? Why is Jesus' first miracle changing water into wine? What does it say about God? Remember that John doesn't call what took place a miracle but a sign. A sign points beyond the act itself to show God. Jesus creates a huge amount of wine and it is not just any old wine, but very good wine, which is not what you would serve to guests three days into a wedding feast. What we see here is a God who gives abundant grace and love. Notice that it was the servants and not the steward that saw the sign taking place.

Like the feeding of the 5,000 this event shows a God that gives an abundance of love to all of us. It is a love that has no limit. In the Old Testament, wine is an example of deliverance from the exile. Amos says: *"The days are surely coming,*

*says the Lord, when the one who plows will overtake the one who gathers, when the one who crushes grapes will overtake the one who sows the seed. The mountains will drip wine, and all the hills will flow with it. I will improve the circumstances of my people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; and they will make gardens and eat their fruit.”*

So Jesus turning water into wine is a sign of God coming in the form of Jesus to bring salvation and deliverance. Sociologist and pastor Tony Campolo once shared a story about giving a birthday party for a prostitute named Agnes. Campolo comes to a restaurant and meets Agnes and learns she never had a birthday party and her birthday was the next day. This was her reaction as he relates the story to his colleagues: Three-thirty in the morning, in come Agnes and her friends. I've got everybody set, everybody ready. As they come through the door, we all yell, "Happy birthday Agnes!" In addition, we start cheering like mad. I've never seen anybody so stunned. Her knees buckled. They steadied her and sat her down on the stool. We all started singing, "Happy birthday to you!"

When they brought out the cake, she lost it and started to cry. Harry the diner owner just stood there with the cake and said, "All right, knock it off, Agnes. Blow out the candles. Come on, blow out the candles." She tried, but she couldn't, so he blew out the candles, gave her the knife, and said, "Cut the cake, Agnes." She sat there for a long moment and then she said to me, "Mister, is it okay if I don't cut the cake? What I'd like to do, mister, is take the cake home and show it to my mother. Could I do that?" I said, "It's your cake." She stood up, and I said, "Do you have to do it

now?" She said, "I live two doors down. Let me take the cake home and show it to my mother. I promise you I'll bring it right back." And she moved toward the door carrying the cake as though it were the Holy Grail. As she pushed through the crowd and out the door, the door swung slowly shut and there was stunned silence. Talk about an awkward moment. Everyone was motionless. Everyone was still. I didn't know what to say.

The story ends with the owner of the diner chatting with Campolo and wondering who he really is: Harry leaned over the counter and said, "Campolo, you told me you were a sociologist. You're no sociologist, you're a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when you come up with just the right words, I said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at three-thirty in the morning." I'll never forget his response. He looked back at me. "No you don't, no you don't. I would join a church like that!"

We worship a God that can turn water into wine and throw birthday parties for a hooker at three in the morning. Are we ready to see God shower people with God's grace?

Amen.