

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **Once upon a time in a reality far, far away...there were parties.** People gathered together in large groups simply to celebrate. To connect with others. To eat. To drink. To dance. To sing.
1. Sometimes the parties were **elaborate affairs**, with all of the details thoroughly and thoughtfully planned. Decorations were carefully selected to set the right mood. Lighting was considered. The menu was carefully curated.
 2. Others were more **casual affairs**: lots of bags of chips appearing on the pot-luck table. Guests overflowing a small space - perhaps in an apartment, pouring out on to the the back balcony.
 3. The parties could be **large**, a banquet hall filled with people dining on a catered meal, or **intimate** with a half dozen folks enjoying delicious food and lively conversation.
 4. Whether large or small, you knew you were at a good party when there was **stimulating conversation, laughter**, or the freedom to **dance with abandon**.
 5. The best parties were grounded in **joy**. It wasn't that life was all easy. Things could be immensely difficult, but here in this place, gathered with others for a few hours there was communal permission to **put the hard aside and honor the good**. People could relax together and affirm that they were human and there was beauty in that. They often celebrated occasions to be sure - birthdays, holidays, weddings - but beneath the surface they were celebrating something more, too. They were celebrating being alive. Being together. Connecting in joy.
 6. Do you remember that reality, that seems so far, far away now? Can you picture it in your mind? Being in a group of people, no one wearing a mask. Eating good food, maybe drinking good wine or beer - connecting in meaningful conversation. Do you remember feeling relaxed in the company of others; like the problems of the world were a bit less present to you?
 7. I invite you to take a moment to think back and recall a party or two in your past in which you experienced real joy. Can you see it? Can you feel it? Who were the people that were with you? What were the sounds you heard? What music played in the background? What were the tastes and smells you were alive to?
- B. Well I start with this little mental exercise to help set the scene for the story we're going to be considering this morning. **Last week I introduced a new teaching series: the Stories that Sustain Us.** The idea of this set of conversations is that we are returning as a community to stories from the life of Jesus as told through the gospels. In this season of what can feel like long wilderness wandering, we're looking at the stories of Jesus' life to see how they might bring a kind of sustenance to us. **How might they, and the person of Jesus they speak of, be like manna for our souls?** And as we engage this journey together, what might we learn as a community about what it means to Haven to center our faith in Jesus?
- C. Today we're going to look at a story that comes to us from near the beginning of the gospel of John.
1. But before we look at it, I think it makes sense to talk briefly about what is this text we call "the gospel of John"? Perhaps not all of us are familiar with the Biblical genre we call "the gospels". A bit of a primer might be helpful to give us some context.
 2. First, the word "Gospel" - **it comes from a Greek Word "Euangelion" meaning "good news"**.
 3. As a genre, the **gospels are biographical, but not in the way we think of historical biography today.** They are intended to paint a clear picture, not just of what Jesus did or

taught, but why the writers think he matters. They're written to proclaim how Jesus and what he came to do are good news.

a) The texts we have and call our four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - were all composed decades after the life of Jesus. They rely on oral traditions and perhaps written documents that probably circulated in small house churches for decades before being written down - words we no longer have. The gospels seem to be written in reference to one another. The first three particularly, often called the synoptics, relate much of the same material. Most scholars agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a template in writing their own accounts, reflecting on many of the same events or teachings but highlighting different aspects and shading the stories uniquely based on their own memories, traditions, and literary goals.

4. **John's voice is the most distinctive; the most set apart of the four.** Many scholars believe he was the last to write, offering his perspective some forty or so years after Jesus' death and resurrection. It is thought that he was aware of the other gospels, that they were circulating in the early church, and John, in writing his own, wanted to compliment those works with another perspective.

a) **So many of the stories and teachings we see in John don't appear anywhere else.** His stories and his language seem to be highly symbolic at times with many layers of meaning.

5. I share all of the with you so as we go further into this series, you can engage these stories with your own inquisitive mind and heart, considering afresh what the gospel stories tell us not only about the historical person of Jesus himself, but also how the literary works of these storytellers reveal their deeper insights about who this person was, why he matters, and how he brings good news.

II. So **let us turn to our story for today**, one that is unique to the gospel of John and comes in John's account at the very beginning of his ministry, right after his baptism and the calling of his first disciples. **Many students of the gospel note that the first portion of the book seems to center on seven "signs"**, 7 miracles that are intended to reveal something unique about Jesus. So today, let's look at the first of these signs.

A. Now on the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine ran out, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no wine left." 4 Jesus replied, "Woman, why are you saying this to me? My time has not yet come." 5 His mother told the servants, "Whatever he tells you, do it."

1. OK before we go on, can we just take a moment to appreciate the very real, relatable human dynamics that are at play here? As a mother of a teenage son, I can so appreciate this dynamic between Jesus and Mary.
2. They're at a wedding together, along with a few of Jesus' friends who've started to follow him, and apparently the groom, who's responsible for providing for the guests, has run out of wine. Now in the ancient world, this was a huge faux pas. Hospitality was a major cultural value, and to not provide it when it was expected could result not just in embarrassment but in social disgrace, even financial calamity. There's potential for the family of the bride to sue the family of the groom if they think they've shirked on their social responsibilities. Apparently Mary is aware of the problem and invested in solving it. Why, we're not totally sure. Perhaps she's related to the groom's family or maybe the mother of the groom is a close friend. Whatever the case, she sees the disaster that is about to befall this family if it comes out that they have run out of wine. She also somehow senses that her son could do something about this issue in a way that no one else could.

What exactly she has in mind, we don't know. The story doesn't tell us how or why she discerns that this is the moment to call upon Jesus to do something wondrous, and Jesus himself seems to resent her asking.

3. "Why is this my problem?" He seems to say. It's not his time he says, using language that the gospel of John would later pick up when describing the unique time of Jesus' tribulation. When Jesus was arrested and eventually crucified, this would be his hour John tells us; his time. Perhaps Jesus senses to do something here might only hasten that time coming.
4. But if Jesus' mother is rebuffed, she doesn't seem to take it to heart; she just takes another approach, addressing the servants and telling them to follow any directions Jesus gives them. Part of me wonders if perhaps she knows that though Jesus might not do something marvelous for *her*, if the servants ask for help, Jesus won't be able to turn them down.
5. John doesn't tell us why Mary thinks now is the moment, or why Jesus doesn't seem to agree. He just goes on and tell us how the story plays out.

B. 6 Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washing, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus told the servants, "Fill the water jars with water." So they filled them up to the very top. 8 Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the head steward," and they did. 9 When the head steward tasted the water that had been turned to wine, not knowing where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), he called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the cheaper wine when the guests are drunk. You have kept the good wine until now!" 11 Jesus did this as the first of his miraculous signs, in Cana of Galilee. In this way he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

C. OK, so despite Jesus' earlier ambivalence, he ends up working with the party staff to do something wondrous, turning water into wine. It's one of Jesus' most famous miracles. John tells us this is the first of his signs. But if this is intended to be a sign, and not just a cool party trick, what did the sign reveal? I think that there are likely many answers to that question - John's stories are always layered. But this morning I just want to point out a few things that I notice; things that I think might be sources of sustenance for us in this moment too.

1. Let's start by consider **who the sign is for**. From the story we can tell it's not a sign for everyone at the party.
 - a) **It isn't for Jesus' mother**. It's not for Mary. She didn't need a sign to know that Jesus was special. She clearly already knew.
 - b) In a different way, **this sign also doesn't seem to be for the steward, the bridegroom, the bride, or any of the guests**. None of them seem to know what's gone down. The steward marvels at the quality of the wine, but he has no idea where it has come from.
 - c) Those who **saw the sign and were moved by it, those who Jesus seems to reveal something of himself, are the people doing the work behind the scenes**. The people making this whole thing happen. The people in the back room - the servants, the helpers, those who were putting on the party, which apparently also included Jesus, his mom, and his new disciple friends.
 - d) The fact that the miracle is only done for a relatively small number of people at this large event reveals something unique about what Jesus is doing. He's not here to make a name for himself. **He's here to assist and equip those who are doing the work.**

He's here to bless them. Maybe he senses that though it's not their fault in any way, the servants are the ones who will bear the brunt of their master's anger when it becomes clear the wine has run out. They are the most vulnerable. So behind the scenes Jesus helps them out. **Jesus' power is revealed first to those who are active in service.**

- (1) There is a truth here about who Jesus is and what he's come to do that we'd see throughout his life, but is evident here in John from the beginning. Jesus is a different kind of leader, a different kind of "king". **Rather than occupying the places of cultural prominence, Jesus locates himself with those without social power.** He is present, embodying solidarity with those the culture would exploit, and calling his followers, his disciples to do the same.
 - (2) One of the most painful and tragic things to see in the last year throughout this pandemic is **the way our culture has shown so little concern for the wellbeing of those who are doing the essential work of keeping our society functioning.** Nearly 400,000 people have died in our country since the pandemic started, with a disproportionate impact on communities of color and low income workers. The choices being made by many to ignore public health guidance have a real impact on these vulnerable populations. And **it's not simply the grocery store clerks or restaurant wait staff that are being put in harm's way.** All the PPE in the world can't mitigate the immense and ongoing trauma being experienced by our health care workers as their shifts grow longer, their ICU beds overflow and they are forced to absorb so much preventable loss.
 - (3) For all of those doing the work behind the scenes while the majority are none the wiser, this story speaks good news. The Divine, revealed through the person of Jesus, **locates himself in those places.** Jesus is behind the grocery store counter. Jesus is in the ICU room. And for those of us who are not the most vulnerable, **Jesus is calling us to practice solidarity.** To join with himself, and his disciples, and help out in the back room. To be present in the places of service, where if we're looking closely, we just might see a miracle.
2. The second thing I notice about this sign is this: **Jesus has the capacity to invigorate our spiritual practices in new life-giving ways.**
 - a) There's a detail that's easy to miss here in the story. **Jesus doesn't choose just any vessels to use for making wine.** He doesn't have the servants refill the empty wine pitchers that were presumably around. Instead he instructs the servants to **refill the stone jars that were present for ceremonial washing.**
 - b) Remember Jesus was located in **a tradition with its own religious practices.** This included the practice of ritual washing. At various times, observant Jews needed to cleanse their hands, their feet or their whole bodies. The water for these practices was always kept in large stone jars, which their tradition taught to be more ritually pure than handmade ceramics. The practices around ritual washing weren't just about physical hygiene, **they was also rooted in a belief that the washing would purify the people spiritually as well.**
 - c) In choosing these vessels to **transform water to wine,** Jesus seems to be connecting with this tradition and transforming it into something new. Perhaps he sensed that the tradition itself had become, as traditions often do, a bit stale. Perhaps he sensed that the washing had become routine rather than an opportunity to connect with God and invite the Divine to cleanse the spirit, not just the hands. Perhaps he was concerned

about the teachings of some zealous religious leaders who used purity practices to shame others and control them. John doesn't tell us why Jesus chooses these vessels, but we do see the impact of the choice.

- d) At the wedding in Cana, **the six stone jars become the means of accomplishing the miraculous**. For the servants and disciples who witness the transformation, something new is drawn from the old they all may have taken for granted. And this too seems like a source of good news in this moment for us.
 - e) **Many of us have found ourselves on journeys of deconstruction around faith**. Many of us have wondered if the traditions built around following Jesus have perhaps done too much harm for us to have meaningful connection with God in the Christian tradition. This Jesus sign gives me hope that even if they feel tired or have been misused, our sacred traditions may still be vehicles to connect with the sacred. The Spirit has the capacity to invigorate our spiritual practices in new life-giving ways. Jesus can bring new wine.
3. And this finally brings me to the last thing I observe about what this first sign reveals about Jesus and what he's come to do: **Jesus comes to connect us with abundant joy**.
- a) John doesn't introduce us to Jesus by telling of an angel choir filling the sky, like Luke does, or mysterious travelers from the East laden with expensive gifts, like we see in Matthew. But in his own way he makes a similar proclamation by starting with this story of water turned to wine. Jesus' coming is a joyful event. God's presence in the world in an active way is a source of life. **It is intended to be a party**.
 - b) **Think back to the reflection we started with - to your memories of the best parties you have been a part of**. Think of times where you felt freedom and safety, connection and satisfaction, physically, emotionally, spiritually. This is what John is telling us it means for, in his words, "the Word to become flesh". This is what it looks like for the total wisdom of the infinite divine to come in the concrete body of a human named Jesus of Nazareth - it is a party. It is a source of abundant joy.
 - c) There is much we could say about the symbolism of wine in the Bible. But certainly at its most basic, **wine is present in the places of celebration. Wine flows readily at the most joyous of events**. And in that way, Jesus doesn't disappoint. If you do the math, he makes them 120 to 150 gallons of choice wine, wine that the steward notes is the best they've served. The value of what has been produced is immense, and it reminds us that the **Divine's provision for us is extravagant**. When we can really connect with the good news of God's care for us and God's desire to redeem creation, **we must connect with abundant joy**.
 - d) Many of us are running on fumes these days. **Like the wine cellars in the beginning of story, we have been depleted**. It's been too long since we've been at a party, since we've felt safe, and relaxed and hopeful. That may have some of us feeling incredibly stressed. Some of us may be depressed. And some of us may find our hurt and disappointment fermenting into cynicism, despair, even nihilism - a dark way of looking at life that believes nothing matters anyway so why not just burn it all down? In the last couple of weeks, we've witnessed the terror and destruction that kind of thinking can bring.
 - e) But I believe Jesus invites us to something different. The Spirit wants to ferment something different. **The Divine calls us to imagine being refueled**. The miracle at Cana invites us to connect with celebration and life. It reminds us that Jesus comes to

bring freedom and love and joy to all the places of despair. This is good news I think all of us need to receive.

D. I want to end with a story I've been reflecting on this week alongside our passage. As Deborah mentioned earlier, tomorrow is our national day of remembrance of the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King was not simply an activist, not simply an organizer - he was a follower of Jesus. And as I think about this story in John, I **can't help but think about the way it resonates with a moment in the life of that particular Jesus-follower.**

1. **On December 1, 1955, a 42 year old woman named Rosa Parks sat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.** The bus driver asked her to stand and give her seat to a white passenger who had just gotten on board, and Rosa Parks said no. She knew that the request, though legal, was unjust. She'd been working with the NAACP in Alabama for a while, considering together how the unjust Jim Crow laws in her state and others might be challenged, but without a clear plan for how to begin. In that moment on the bus, Rosa Parks seemed to discern something particular. She seemed to sense that this was a time for action. **And so she stayed in that seat, she allowed herself to be arrested, and she helped begin a movement.**
2. Now young Martin was also in Montgomery that day. He was just 26 at the time, a young pastor who'd only been preaching at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church a year. Dr. King was sixteen years younger than Mrs. Parks, about the same difference in age as between Jesus and his mother. Martin wasn't looking to make his name as an activist. His dream at the time was to preach and perhaps someday become a professor. The bus boycott that was quickly organized following Rosa Park's arrest was not his idea. When he was informed about the boycott, he was unsure how he felt about it. But the organizers behind the boycott, the folks who were doing the work called upon the pastor personally, they asked him to be involved. **He agreed to at least let them hold a meeting in the basement of his church, a meeting which he reluctantly attended.**
3. Four days after Rosa was arrested, the group gathered at Dr. King's church. They voted to form an organization, to call themselves the Montgomery Improvement Association, and much to his surprise, and likely because he was young, unknown, and no-one else wanted the job and the white reprisal it might bring, **the group elected Martin Luther King, Jr. to be their president.**
4. The vote happened just ahead of a mass meeting of hundreds of people that was planned at another nearby church. King had less than an hour to run home, tell his wife what had happened, and write his first political speech, a speech that when given would be transformative, helping King and the people he spoke to realize together that what they were embarking on was not just an effort to punish a bus company for discriminatory practices. This concern, that it might be just an unchristian act of revenge, originally had given Dr. King pause. **But that night Dr. King's faith, and the tradition that informed it, helped him understand that this action could be about something more.** "I came to see that what we were really doing was withdrawing our cooperation from an evil system, rather than merely withdrawing our support from the bus company," he would later write in his autobiography. "The bus company, being an external expression of the system, would naturally suffer, but the basic aim was to refuse to cooperate with evil."
5. **Dr. King drew from the words of the prophet Amos when he called people that night "to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."** In his speech that night and in the words he'd write and the speech's he'd give

and the actions he'd organize in the years to come, rooted in deep faith and embodied through non-violent resistance, the Spirit invigorated a spiritual tradition in new ways. People of faith were given a taste of new wine, a vision of abundant joy. They came to understand that the Divine was with them, that the Spirit was calling them into beloved community, that there were reasons to hope, even in the face of resistance and oppression, for the Jesus many of them followed promised good news.

6. So friends, ask you now, **who are the prophetesses and prophets among us today?** Who are the mothers and fathers discerning the moment we are in and calling us into bold, prophetic action? Where is the Spirit inviting us to push through our reluctance and participate in something transformative? How might we in solidarity with all who need more freedom connect with the abundant hope and joy that the Divine's presence with us wants to bring? May we follow Jesus to the places where he is still working behind the scenes. May none of us just be oblivious guests at the party but those who have eyes to see transformation and to taste new wine. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What about this story resonated for you?
2. What would it look like for you to connect with abundant joy?
3. Where do you think the Spirit might be bringing transformation today?