

Sermon – John 2:1-11: The Wedding at Cana

Epiphany was Thursday. It's always January 6. We usually observe it at a Sunday service, but some churches make a big deal out of the actual day.

The Greek root for epiphany is phanero which means to make visible or reveal. The Epiphany events, or signs, are those which reveal Christ as that Word made flesh...as God made flesh. In the Eastern church, it's also been called Theophany which means the revelation of God.

Last week, we heard Jesus invite us to come and see. Epiphany is the beginning of that journey – it's our first answer to the question, see what?

There are three signs, or events that make up Epiphany – the Baptism of Jesus and the wedding at Cana I mentioned earlier...any guesses on the third one?

The Magi. The Magi, or wisemen, read the signs in the heavens and traveled from a foreign land to worship the child Jesus.

Each of the signs of Epiphany not only reveal who Jesus is, they reveal something about what kind of divinity is being revealed.

The Magi reveal that Jesus isn't just for the people of Israel. The Magi are foreigners – they aren't Jewish. The Bible isn't very specific about where they're from, other than the East. Persia is often the guess we make – present day Iran.

Early church tradition has one of the wisemen coming from Africa, one from Asia, and one from Europe, representing all the world that was known to the early church.

The gifts they bring are weird gifts, but they too are signs of who Jesus is – the gold symbolizes Jesus' royalty. The frankincense, or incense, is used in worship and represents Jesus' divinity. Myrrh is an embalming oil. It symbolizes Jesus' death. While none of those are likely on any baby registry at Target, Myrrh in particular would be troubling. And it points forward to the unsettling way Jesus' rule will be established.

The second event, the baptism of Jesus, brings together God the creator and God the Spirit to reveal who Jesus is. Here's John's version – a little different from the other gospels, but the basic idea is there: John the Baptist testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."¹

From the very first words of John's gospel, John is a significant source of our understanding of God as a trinity. The baptism is a piece of that picture.

But what we're tasked with today is the Wedding at Cana. What is it about this particular event that led the church to decide it should be an Epiphany? It's a miracle, but Jesus did other miracles. It's the first mentioned so maybe that's why.

Maybe why isn't even the most important question. If Epiphany is the revelation of Christ as God incarnate, what does this event reveal about Jesus? What does it tell us, other than that Jesus can perform miracles?

There are all sorts of levels of answer to that.

I think the first obvious one is the connection to joy and celebration and love. This is a wedding! Weddings are a celebration of something new that is being created. Weddings were a time of joy for two families which would be joined.

I think this reveals a God who wants us to celebrate those times of joy and newness. Obviously, one can celebrate without wine, and some probably should. But the wine is a symbol of that joy and celebration.

Interpreters also wrestle with the exchange between Jesus and his mother. Our ears can hear it as disrespectful, but in the Greek, it doesn't come across that way. But I think the exchange does show that Jesus is still trying to sort out how his mission plays out.

Another level looks at the host of the celebration. They've run out of wine.

Any time I've hosted a party, I have two big fears. One is that nobody will come. The other is that we'll run out of food or drinks. The fear of running out typically means I end up with way too much left over.

Running out would be embarrassing. There's all sorts of speculation on why the host ran out. Maybe the hosts were sort of on the margin economically. Maybe there were more guests than expected. Either way, running out of wine at such an important occasion would not have impressed their guests.

So in this miracle, Jesus lifts the host's shame and turns it into more celebration.

Another key aspect of the story is sheer abundance. These stone jars each held 20 to 30 gallons. That's as much as 180 gallons of wine – over 4000 glasses. Way more than was needed. In a world that forever worries about scarcity, this sign points to the sheer abundance of what God gives.

Another revelation is that of Jesus' authority over creation. Jesus created wine out of water. There's a very old saying whose origin is unknown that says "the water saw its creator and blushed."

Other thoughts on what this story reveals are deeply sacramental images that equate the wine with Christ's blood and the eucharist.

Theologically, this is a sign that Jesus is the best wine saved for last. God has been leading Israel – and the world – to the moment of Jesus' incarnation. Jesus isn't just a sort of pinch hitter that will come in and set things right. God's whole project was always leading to Jesus, the best wine saved for last.

The story also is a preview of the Messianic banquet in the new heaven and new earth.

There's another level of the come and see invitation in these stories. It's the level where it hits you. What do you see in this passage? Jesus' invitation to come and see involves not only seeing Jesus but seeing ourselves in the story.

Here's where I end up.

The last wine was the best wine. But to get to the best wine, the first containers had to be emptied.

Let's say the container is your life. We spend a lot of time filling up the container of our lives and ourselves. We get jobs, careers...many of us start a family. Maybe we work to make a name for ourselves. We do lots of good things, usually a few not so good things. We struggle through tough times and celebrate good times.

As we fill that container, we may get to feeling pretty good about ourselves and what we can accomplish. We've worked to become our best selves and we're pretty pleased with how the project has turned out.

None of that is bad. It's a necessary and often very joyful journey, that building a life. But it can be a little hard to see how we need God. Our relationship with God might even be a little superficial.

But then, something comes along that we can't fix, can't control. Maybe it's just a realization that the way we thought things worked doesn't always work. Maybe it's a clear glimpse of reality that shocks us. It might even be something that leaves us devastated and doubting God. Our container is empty. We've run out of wine.

But that's just a new beginning. Now, there's room for the new wine. If Jesus is the last best wine, once we have emptied out our own agendas and programs, we can be filled to overflowing with the presence of Christ.

Our invitation from Jesus this year is to come and see...to see Jesus in scripture, in creation, in ourselves, and in others. That means making connections between what we see in scripture and what we see in us and around us. It's not an easy task, but it does open us up to faith as an adventure rather than simply a set of beliefs to check off.

There's an insert to take home for your own personal reflection this week. It's also posted on our website. You are invited into more than an hour on Sunday morning. Where will this journey take you if you truly respond to the invitation to come and see?