

Continuing our Epiphany Journey January 16, 2022

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We continue our Epiphany journey this morning on this 2nd Second Sunday after Epiphany. The word epiphany is a word from Koine Greek that means **a manifestation or appearance**. It is derived from the verb **phainein**, meaning "to appear." In classical Greek the word was used for the appearance of dawn, or the appearance of an enemy in war, but especially for the manifestation (the appearance) of a divine being.

The church celebrates Epiphany, and the beginning of the Season of Epiphany, on January 6. The date is usually associated with the arrival of the Magi from the East to pay homage and respect to Baby Jesus. But the manifestation of who Jesus really was started even before His birth.

Mary was made aware by an angel that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. Joseph was told that the baby was to be named Jesus which means "He will save His people from their sins."

How was your birth announced? Maybe your dad called some relatives or friends or passed out cigars to celebrate and announce your birth. Or maybe a birth announcement was placed in the local paper. Jesus was announced by a host of messengers. We sang about them and called them the herald angels because they were the ones who announced (heralded) the birth of Jesus. And do you remember what the angel said to those shepherds? "...for

unto you is born this day in the City of David a SAVIOR who is Christ (the messiah) the Lord.” The shepherds had an epiphany – one from celestial beings.

The old couple Anna and Simeon had their eyes opened by the Holy Spirit in the Temple when Mary and Joseph came for the rites of dedication and purification. They both recognized the baby as the salvation of the world.

God made those Magi aware of the great new King of the Jews with a star. They followed it all the way to the Near East. They traveled months to come to worship Him and offer Him gifts of great value.

Even Herod acknowledged that this unknown infant was the “Christ” when he summoned the chief priests and scribes to tell him the place where was to be born. Check out Matthew.

When Jesus remained in the temple at the age of 12, there was a manifestation of His great knowledge and wisdom about God. And the seminal manifestation event showing who Jesus was came at His baptism. The presence of the other two persons of the Trinity, the voice of God the Father and the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, on that day showed that Jesus was God and was the coming Messiah.

These all were signs of who Jesus was. They were all manifestations of Jesus as God by God. They all announced that God had taken human flesh and in His mercy and compassion had come to save us.

Today, the location and number of observers to these facts grows in scope. We have gone from a room in the house of a lowly man and woman in a backwater town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a stable in Bethlehem, to the Temple, to the Jordan River, and today, back to another small Galilean town, 9 miles north of Nazareth, to Cana.

God purposefully manifests the identity of Jesus again and again at all these places. From the awesome announcements of His identity spoken by angels, to the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, and now to a small town wedding, God Himself demonstrates who Jesus is in His humanity and divinity.

The audience for these announcements of who Jesus is and what He will do, grows from single individuals to small groups, to an entire town. (And, Biblically it will grow even greater in the coming months.) It has also grown to include each of us.

A pastor went to visit his parishioner, let's say his name was Fred. He was 94 years old. Fred told the pastor that he wanted to marry Ethel who was 81 years old. The pastor was curious about the motives for this marriage and so he asked Fred, "Do you love Ethel?" There was a long pause as Fred screwed up his face in concentration, as he appeared to be pondering the question deeply, and then, finally without much conviction, Fred said, "I suppose so."

The pastor was not entirely convinced because of the long pause before Fred's response and the hesitancy in his answer so he probed a little more. The pastor asked Fred, "Well, is Ethel a good Christian woman?" Fred replied

back, “I don’t really know.” The pastor was surprised and puzzled by this response. So, still trying to get at the reason that Fred planned to marry Ethel, he asked the oldest reason for marriage in the book. He asked, “Well, Fred, is she rich?” Fred’s reply was instant. He said, “Nope. She hasn’t got a penny to her name.”

This amazed the pastor even more and piqued his curiosity even higher. So he ask Fred outright, “Why exactly do you want to marry Ethel?” Fred looked directly at the pastor and said, “Because she can see well enough to drive at night.”

Reasons for things are often hidden. Reasons for marriage can often be obscure. The miracle at the wedding feast at Cana is like that. The social situation and the serious dilemma that unfolded there were significant but the **real** “sign,” the **real** reason for this event makes the wedding and marriage mundane and insignificant.

Most, if not all of you, know this story as the first miracle, or as John describes it, the first “sign” of Jesus. In the Near East of Jesus’ day, a wedding was a massive community affair that could last as long as a week. The family of the groom were the hosts for the celebration and the expectation was that they would go all out to celebrate the union of bride and groom.

Now notice, even though this was an important day for the bride and groom and an extraordinary day for Jesus in His story, we don’t even know the names for most of the people. The family is celebrating with their friends in the town of Cana, but we don’t know their names. They seem

to be connected to Mary, the mother of Jesus, only because she is so concerned about the embarrassment they might suffer. John writes that Jesus was invited with his disciples but we are not sure which ones were there. He hadn't formally called them yet. We can speculate that Nathaniel was present only because he was from Cana. Several household servants perform various tasks but none of them are named.

Only three people speak during this event and only two of them, Jesus and Mary, are named. The master of the feast (the maître di) is unnamed. (For you trivia masters and Bible scholars, these are the last words that Mary speaks that are recorded in the Bible.)

So, the center of this event is **clearly Jesus**. He is the one who St. John, the only Gospel writer to record this event, wants us to see. St. John wants us to see a compassionate, caring, loving Savior.

Now at weddings, wine is more than just a festive beverage. It's a sign. In the Old Testament, wine was a sign, a symbol, of God's grace – a sign of joy, of abundant blessing and even hope for the future. And at weddings, it is the same for us too. Wine is a sign, a symbol that God had blessed this couple and this family with good things. So, wine is an invitation to celebrate these blessings. And, wine is a symbol of a couple's joyous life together.

Like a good marriage, wine takes hard work to produce, wine takes time to mature and mellow, wine takes loving care for it to become an exceptional vintage, wine takes patience to make and the payoff is off in the future,

sometimes its years later before the beverage is ready to be consumed and enjoyed to the fullest. Wine and a marriage are a lot alike.

So, wine was as important at a wedding in the time of Jesus as it is today. But at this wedding, to which Jesus is invited, for some reason, the improbable happened. The wine, that wonderful sign of God's blessing, ran out. Can you imagine the panic the family must have felt?

Now at weddings and wedding receptions in our time, stuff happens. I am sure you can all relate a story from your own experiences. At the last wedding at which I officiated, which was outdoors in July, just as the bride and groom were to exchange their rings, the heavens opened up and it rained cats and dogs. Like all glitches at weddings, we were able to overcome this one and carry on.

But in the 1st Century, running out of food or beverages was usually one of the worst possible embarrassments that a family could face. They blew it. They hadn't planned appropriately.

Think about such a situation today. Half the wedding guests are fed and the waiters have to tell the rest of the guests that there is no more food but they can serve them the left over Hord 'oeuvres. Cheese, nuts, chips, crackers. Half the wedding guests have their wine poured out for them and the rest are asked if they would like water or iced tea or soda. What would be your reaction? Who would you look at with disdain? After all you brought your gift! And, what about the poor bride and groom? Who is going to stand up and apologize?

The same situation was true in Jesus' day. Weddings were major community celebrations. The attendees were not just a few friends and relatives from out of town, the whole town was there. And the celebration could last for an entire week. The host of the wedding was usually the groom or the groom's family, and they supplied all the food and drinks. Preparations, like today, were made a year in advance. Running out of food was a social embarrassment. But, running out to wine was more than a failed wedding feast, it could mean disaster for business. It could result in the community ostracizing the host, the bride and groom, and the master of the feast. It could mean unemployment, without unemployment insurance, for the servants.

And, this failure would never be forgotten. It would be the talk of the town and the surrounding communities for years to come. No one would likely forget this great faux pas.

With all this in mind, at some point early in the celebration, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the one who notices that the family is running out of wine. She knew what an embarrassment this posed to the family and came to Jesus. She simply says to him, in only four words, "They have no wine." It's as if Mary knew Jesus had the power to make things right and save the reputation of the family. But Jesus seems to put his mother off. He says, "So. Your concern is not my concern." Despite Jesus' response, Mary also seems to know that she can leave this matter in the hands of Jesus. She does not nag him but tells the servants to do whatever he tells them to do. She didn't seem to know

what he would do but she was confident that he would do something and she departs to let him do it.

Now all of you know the rest of the story. Jesus does have compassion and mercy on his hosts and responds obediently to his mother's plea. He told the servants to fill some 6 stone jars with water. The water was probably drawn from a well. Each of the jars held a considerable amount of water – about 20 – 30 gallons. They were probably used to hold the water for the ritual washing of the guest's hands before eating. It may have taken some time for the servants to do this chore. They had to carry between 120 and 180 gallons of water from the town well to the house. But when they were finished, Jesus told them to take some of the liquid out of one of the jars and take it to the master of the feast – the head waiter, if you will. He was totally surprised to learn this was the best wine and complimented the family for having saved the very best until last.

St. John says this was the first sign. And he goes on to say that it was an epiphany to his disciples and most probably to the servants and others who saw water placed in the jars. It demonstrated the glory of Jesus – his deity while he was celebrating a wedding in his humanity.

Most of all – it led the unnamed disciples who were with him to believe in him. The news of this epiphany –this manifestation of the nature and power of Jesus – probably was spread throughout Cana and to the communities around as quickly as a story about of running out of wine at a wedding might have done.

What do we see here? What lessons are there for our lives? One lesson comes from Mary, Jesus' mother. She showed us who we should approach when we see disaster. She came to her son, the Son of God. She appealed to the one who she believed could make things right. Jesus is the go-to one when we need help.

Another lesson to point out, Mary didn't expect Jesus to act immediately. She trusted Jesus act in his way and in his time. She only told those near him to do what he said. Our expectations for Jesus should be the same. Once we have asked Jesus for help – and He knows our needs – we should trust Jesus to act as He sees best and on His clock. Like, Mary, we need to put our faith and trust in Jesus.

The story also teaches us that our Savior is compassionate and merciful. His actions saved a family, without their even knowing it. Jesus saved them from humiliation and disgrace. He turned a disaster into a celebration of joy. Doesn't that sound familiar? Jesus takes our disasters and turns things around for us so that we experience joy even though we may not even see His hand in the actions. Often it's not until later that we see the effect of a gracious and merciful God acting for us.

And there was a subtle lesson to be learned from the servants here too. When Mary told them to do what Jesus directed them to do, they were obedient. They could have said, "It's a hot day. Do we really need to fill those jars of water? The guests have all arrived and they have washed their hands." They had no idea what was about to happen. But for their obedience to the commands of Jesus, they

were witnesses to a miracle – a sign – of God in their midst. They saw the power and mercy and glory and compassion of God firsthand. They could have said, “Why me? What good will it do?” Sometimes that is our answer when called by Jesus to serve him. Instead of saying, “Why me?” instead, like those servants, we should say, “Why not?” The outcome of our obedience and service to Jesus is not always readily apparent. So, when you are called by Jesus to serve Him, draw the water and wait for the outcome. Serve Him with gladness and see His compassion for others fulfilled through you.

We often see something, but we don't see what is front of us and sometimes, like in the story of Fred and the Pastor, things are not always readily apparent.

This story is more than changing water into wine at a wedding in a small town called Cana and saving a family from disaster. This is a sign of a time to come. It is a story of our Savior having compassion on us. It is about Jesus saving us from the disaster of our sinful lives. It is an Epiphany that points to Jesus as our Savior. The same Savior who on this day saved a family from embarrassment, BUT on another day will save us from eternal damnation. It points to that other day, when Jesus will save us from the embarrassment of a painful, miserable life in hell and gives us the hope for a joyous celebration at a heavenly banquet with Him.

This story is a recognition that the wine which we drink at our Lord's Table, as we will do today, points to the future. It points to another marriage... the marriage of Christ and

His Church (us). It points to another banquet in which the Jesus, the Bridegroom will celebrate with His Bride the church, with us. The wine we drink at our temporal communion is but a foretaste of the finest wine that we will drink in the presence of our Savior and Redeemer. It is an epiphany for us across the ages as well as to the people of Jesus time.

The importance of the marriage that day was in the “sign” that demonstrated that God had sent His Son, who appeared to be an ordinary and common place Galilean man, but really was the Savior of the world. The Savior who would change everything about our sinful lives, making them holy and acceptable to God.

The Gospel writers recorded 36 specific miracles or “signs” in the four Gospels. St. John recorded the fewest – only 9. This miracle, is the first St. John recorded, and was of particular importance for St. John, as it is recorded only in his Gospel. This miracle, the first “sign” of Jesus truly demonstrated the divinity of our Immanuel. But this miracle, this first “sign” performed by Jesus, also revealed and underscored the ministry and mission Jesus, as the Savior – who served to make a miraculous change in us. Changing our polluted and unclean lives as sinners into holy and righteous lives as saints who in the end are acceptable and welcomed in heaven.

And, St. John explained, just before describing the last of Jesus’ miracles in His Gospel, why it was so important for these miracles to be written and shared.

He wrote, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in His name." May this be so and be an Epiphany for each of us, too. Amen.