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Extraordinary Joy

John 2:1-11

Jeff Marian

If you do enough traveling, you're bound to run into some strange road signs that leave you wondering what, exactly, they're pointing to. Not all signs are perfectly clear. Sometimes it's hard to know exactly what they're pointing to. And I'd suggest that that is also true of John's Gospel. Let me explain what I mean. Like the other Gospels, John's Gospel records Jesus doing some miraculous things, like healing the blind and walking on water. But John doesn't call them miracles. He calls them "signs". And he does that because John wants us to know that the miracle itself isn't the point. The miracle is pointing to something else.

Let me give you an example. In John 6 the disciples take off in a boat across the sea of Galilee, leaving Jesus behind. Jesus later catches up with them by walking on the stormy sea. Now, walking on water is pretty amazing, but that's not the point of the story. It's a sign that points to something else. What it's pointing to isn't immediately clear to us, but it would have been clear to a Jewish audience. In Jewish consciousness, the sea was a symbol of chaos, chaos that only God can control. That's why the book of Revelation says that in the new heaven and the new earth the sea will be no more. You might wonder what God has against the beach, but it's the bible's way of saying that tame all chaos and create order. So, when John tells the story of Jesus walking on the stormy sea he's pointing to Jesus and saying, "This is God. He reigns over chaos."

So, Jesus' miracles in John's Gospel are signs. They point to something else. Got it? Good! Now hold onto that as I read the story of the very first sign that John records in his Gospel. It's found in chapter 2 [from the NRSV]:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet." So they took it. When the person in charge tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), that person called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

This story raises all sorts of questions. Why does Jesus seem kinda rude to his mom? I'd have gotten timed out for talking to my mom like that! Who failed to order enough wine for the celebration? Fire that guy! What must the servants have been thinking of Jesus' seemingly ridiculous request to fill up those stone jars with water? And after reading this story why do Baptists still refuse to drink wine?

But, of course, the real question is, to what is this story pointing? Surly it's about more than the fact that Jesus has the power to change water into wine. And it is. All the signs that John records are meant to point us to Jesus' identity and his mission. In other words, they are meant to reveal who Jesus is and why He has come. Clearly, only the Son of God could turn water into wine. That's Jesus identity. But what does this story reveal about Jesus' mission? And I would suggest that it's this: Jesus has come to bring abundant joy into our lives.

People drank wine at weddings...and still do...to both express and experience joy, raising a glass to the love and the joy that the new couple of found in one another. But did you happen to catch exactly how much wine Jesus produced? Do the math and you'll discover that Jesus provided somewhere between 120-180 gallons of really

good wine for this wedding. Now, since we usually drink wine by the bottle and not by the gallon, I did a little math to put this into context. Jesus provided between 600-900 bottles of wine. That's an abundance of wine that's meant to point to an abundance of joy.

This life is filled with things that bring us joy. There's joy in the beauty of this creation. Proverbs 24 says that children bring joy into our lives. Proverbs 27 says that wise friends are cause for joy. And Psalm 104 says that good wine can bring us joy. But like a wedding that runs out of wine, the challenges of life and brokenness of our world can drain the joy out of our days, leaving us despondent and hopeless. Maybe you've experienced that, especially in the last few years. But Jesus has come to pour abundant joy into our lives. In Jesus we dare to believe that no matter how dark and difficult our days we are never alone. Never forsaken. Always loved. Always forgiven. God's Spirit dwells in us, and each one of us is a needed and gifted member of the body of Christ. Scripture doesn't command us to turn our frown upside down, to just suck it up, paste a smile on our face and pretend that everything is just fine... because in this broken world it isn't "just fine". But faith in Jesus empowers us to hold sorrow and joy in tension. St. Paul put it this way, "Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything."

But the story of the wedding in Cana points to even more. Did you happen to catch the very first words of the story? John tells us that this story happens "on the third day". And he doesn't tell us on the third day of what. He just says "on the third day." And you and I know what happens "on the third day", right? That's the day of resurrection. The day when every tear will be wiped away, when all darkness will be dispelled. No more death or sorrow or pain. Nothing but joy. This is John's way of saying that no matter how difficult a chapter you're living today, the end of your story has already been written. And it is an unending story of joy.

That, my friends, is what the story of the wedding at Cana is pointing to. It's not about changing water into wine. It's about Jesus planting joy so deeply

into our lives that nothing can uproot it. All of which begs the question, what could it look like if we lived into that kind of joy?

Maybe you're here today and your life doesn't feel like a joy ride. Perhaps it feels more like a wedding that has run out of wine. If so, let me leave you with this: like so many things in our life of faith, joy is both a gift and a choice. Galatians 5 says that the fruit or work of the Spirit is joy. The Spirit gifts us with joy, grows joy within us.

But joy is also a choice. Author Brennan Manning tells the story of learning that he had terminal cancer and didn't have long to live. He describes his experience on his drive home from that doctor's appointment. "Suddenly", he said, "None of the problems that I thought I had mattered. Not one. And suddenly, in light of what little time I knew I had left, everything that had once seemed mundane was precious and achingly beautiful and a source of joy. Every tree. Every person. Every breath I took. Even in the midst of my sadness, everything was a source of joy that I realized had been around me all along."

I don't want to have to be at the end of my life to live that way, to see and experience daily life, not as mundane but as precious and achingly beautiful and a source of joy. Because the love of God inhabits every molecule of this creation, and because we dare to believe that the love of God will fill every moment of eternity beginning with this very moment, we can dare to believe that every sign points to joy.