

THE HUNGRY FEAST
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Who is Jesus? That is the question that we are exploring during this Season of the Church year we call Epiphany. Last Sunday we read the story of the baptism of Jesus. We discover, in the waters of the Jordan River, that Jesus is God's beloved son. Thus begins his mission and ministry.

Today we read the story of the Wedding at Cana. It is the first miracle story in the Gospel of John. And I'd like to share that story with you once again, this time from a slightly different perspective.

It was a wedding that he had long dreamed of. Everything was carefully planned. Invitations were sent out. Among the invited relatives and guests were Mary and her son Jesus. Also invited were many of the townspeople and his business associates. It was a wedding no one wanted to miss.

The menu was carefully chosen. Only the best foods would be served. He checks his stock of wine and there is enough to start the festivities. If you add in the wine the guests traditionally bring to such an occasion, there should be more than enough. Everything is set and soon the guests begin to arrive.

All is going well. The ceremony takes place in his home and soon they sit down for the banquet. The food is superb, just as planned. The music is exhilarating, the atmosphere absolutely divine.

Then the wine steward comes and whispers in his ear that they are running out of wine. It seems as if not all of the guests brought wine with them. The wine would run out long before the banquet is scheduled to be over. The groom wonders if this will bring the festivities to an early end. This would be an extreme embarrassment. So he asks family members what he should do.

Mary hears the groom's concerns. She decides that something must be done in order to keep the banquet going. Something compels her to turn to Jesus and say to him, "They have no wine." This is one of those awkward moments between a mother and son. Jesus isn't clear as to what she expects him or why she has said anything to him at all. "What concern of this is to you or to me?"

Does Mary know that Jesus has the power to change the water into wine? The author doesn't really tell us what she knows about his power or why she tells him about the problem. Yet, there is something in what Jesus says next, that implies that there is more here than meets the eye. Jesus says to her, "my hour has not yet come." MY HOUR HAS NOT YET COME.

Clearly there is some reluctance, or concern on Jesus' part, that this is not the time to draw attention to himself. Perhaps the concern is that if people saw what he did here, then they would prematurely draw some conclusions as to who he was he really was. His ministry is not defined by one miracle or event. His ministry would not be fully understood until his death on the cross and his rising from the tomb.

Mary, however, persists and Jesus does not resist. He instructs the staff to fill six stone jars with water. These jars would ordinarily be used for a ritual of purification; their normal function was ceremonial. They could however be rather large, since each of them held twenty or thirty gallons of water. "Fill these jars to the brim", says Jesus.

The water jars are filled and he instructs them to draw some of the water out and take it to the chief steward. When the steward tastes the wine there is a sense of relief. Not only do they have more than enough wine, it is the best tasting wine of all. He assumes that the groom has simply kept this one wine hidden until this moment. It is a bit unusual to keep the best for last, but who cares? There is an abundance of wine and the celebration goes on.

We are not told how many people knew that Jesus was the true source of this new wine. What we do know is that disciples of Jesus witnessed this event and on the basis of this miracle some believed that he was the Messiah.

When we read this text, we often focus on the miracle as the core message of the story, but to do this is to do exactly what Jesus did not want his followers to do. The miracle itself is not the intended focus. Rather it is what the miracle teaches us about Jesus

To understand these messianic expectations, we need to go back to our Old Testament texts for today and discover what those scriptures say about the Messiah. By weaving our texts from Isaiah 62 and Psalm 36, we discover that the Messiah would be the one who would transform the lives of a people from an existence of scarcity to one of abundance.

In the 62nd chapter of Isaiah we read these words:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate.

This passage speaks of a very difficult time in the lives of the Jewish people. They have returned home from exile in Babylon. They were filled with hope and possibility. However, they soon discover the destruction and devastation that has occurred at the hands of the Babylonians. Homes and fields were destroyed. The temples and buildings

of their cities lay in ruins. This was not the homecoming they expected. They could only conclude that his was a continuation of their experience of abandonment by God.

The prophet assures them, however, that this experience will not last forever. The Lord will not keep silent. The Lord will not rest until Israel had received her vindication and she will be restored to a glory that will match or even exceed anything Israel has known before. She will be “a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of God.”

And in Psalm 36 we read:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

Here it is the steadfast love of God that not only gives the people *comfort* and *refuge*, but also gives them the experience of *abundance* and *delight*.

It is important to note that from the very beginning the intended relationship between God and his people is one of abundance and delight. The story of the Garden of Eden is one of abundance and delight. Man and woman had everything they needed – more than they needed! And they delighted to be in the presence of the Lord.

When the Lord establishes the covenant with Abraham he tells him to look up into the heavens and know that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. When the Lord delivers the people of Israel out of Egypt, he leads them with the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. These are images abundance. After those promises of abundance seemed broken by years of exile, the prophets lift up the vision of restored abundance that will be ushered in by the Messiah.

So all of the hopes and expectations of a Messiah that will bring about abundance to those experience only abandonment and scarcity converge on this moment when a wedding banquet runs out of wine. When Jesus turns water into wine, something begins to stir in the disciples. John says that on the basis of this one miracle alone, this first of many signs, some of his disciples believed in him.

What great comfort we can take in these passages. None of us is able to escape the kinds of difficulties life brings to us. We lose loved ones; relationships sometimes fail. Things may go horribly wrong at work, or we lose our jobs. Our finances may take a turn for the worse or our health fails. We may struggle with inner demons, or hunger for meaning and purpose. Any one of these experiences may cause us to feel hopeless, abandoned by others and even forsaken by God.

But scriptures assure us that God’s love is steadfast and eternal. God will lift us up out of the depths of darkness and despair bringing us back to hope and light. When we surrender to the power and presence of God the hunger in our lives will give way to the experience abundance.

That doesn't mean that we will be wealthy or experience the finest things that this world has to offer. The truth is that those things sometimes get in the way of the experience of God's abundance. God does not promise an abundance of things, but rather an abundant life. Through the lens of the abundant life we can look around us and say that God has given to us all that we need for a happy and healthy life. We have the love of God. We have the gift of God's grace through Jesus Christ. And we have the presence of God's holy spirit. And these three things are enough to experience the abundant life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.