

Sermon Notes for 1/17/16 (Epiphany 2)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: John 2:1-11

Theme: GOD’S PLAN: SAVE THE BEST FOR LAST

Hymn: LBW 88 (Oh, Love, How Deep)

The Point: God is a God who saves His best for last, surprising us around every corner, especially in the gift of His Son, by whom He brings life and salvation to all.

Introduction: I suspect that every last-born child would affirm this idea, that God saves the best for last. While I am not seeking to give you a commentary on birth order today, I would like to pursue this idea a bit, that God does save the best for last. God loves to surprise people – not to shock them like the latest horror film, but to amaze them by the greatness of His love and kindness, at the very times when they least expect it.

Today’s Gospel lesson pictures Jesus performing His first miracle – or, in John’s words, the first “sign” that pointed to Jesus’ Lordship and His person as Israel’s Messiah. A sign is something that points to a reality beyond itself. We are not to concentrate on the sign, or else the sign has not done its job. If I am amazed by the colors and layout and brilliant design of the sign – but miss the fact that it called me to turn at the last intersection, which I just breeze by unfazed – the sign has not been successful. If we concentrate on the signs themselves, the miracles that Jesus does, but miss the importance of what those signs point to about His person, life, and ministry, we will miss the point. This sign is important, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the One to whom it points.

This particular sign takes place in the context of an Israelite wedding celebration, one of those every-day events where people were expecting entertainment, enjoyment, festivity, and maybe even a little naughtiness – especially when people were consuming large quantities of liquor. Right there at the wedding celebration in Cana, God showed up. God often shows up in places where He is least expected. It was the third day of the feast – for whatever reason, the supply of wine had been exhausted. Too many guests? Too many heavy drinkers? Too little planning by the organizers? We don’t know more than what Mary reports to Jesus, “They have no more wine.” And she thought – perhaps hoped beyond hope – that Jesus might be able to contribute in some way toward a successful conclusion to this community event. The wedding hosts (and perhaps Mary herself, who may have been one of the organizers) stood to lose face, to be shamed at the lack of wine.

Jesus’ initial response to Mary’s request does not do a whole lot to encourage us about her presumed role as intermediary and intercessor with her Son, a role that some believe she carries out even today. “Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come.” Jesus would not be acting according to His mother’s expectations or plans – He was acting according to His Father’s plan to save a world. Despite receiving something of a rebuff, Mary acts to open the door for others to find in Jesus a Helper, a Savior and even their Messiah: “Do whatever **he** tells you” are her words to the servants, no doubt pointing to Him as she speaks with them. He may not do what she expects, and it may not come at the time that she thought best, but His decision would be worth following up.

There no doubt follows something of a delay. We don’t know how long it was or why this delay was important to Jesus. But we should probably imagine some elevator music (or the *Jeopardy* theme) in the interim. In the meantime we are told about a nearby supply of water in stone jars. These jars were vital for such a feast, because people needed to cleanse themselves ritually, and water was the basic tool for that cleansing. At some point Jesus came to the servants and instructed them, “Fill the jars with water,” which they did forthwith, obeying as Mary had encouraged them, filled those jars right to the brim.

Most commentators suggest there would have been something like 120 to 150 gallons of water in those containers. That's a lot of wine! Then Jesus instructed them to draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet. This would have been the person most likely to suffer shame and loss of face from the lack of wine, if it dragged on. No doubt he believed that the wine supply (or lack thereof) was his responsibility.

Tasting the wine, the banquet master was amazed. Calling the bridegroom, he commended him this way: "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." This wine was the best the banquet master had tasted. And he attributed this, not to his own (possibly diminished) taste buds, but to the bridegroom's shrewd plan. We are not told whether or not the bridegroom "fessed up", admitting he had not had this plan at all. Perhaps the bridegroom left that little meeting as confused and surprised as the master of the banquet had been. At any rate, there was now more than enough wine – and not just Boone's Farm, but the choicest of the fruit of the vine – to complete the feast, and then some! The best had been saved for last.

The presence of the very best wine signals the coming of the last days –the arrival of the Messiah and the coming of the Kingdom of God. The Old Testament had contained hints that wine would be a sign of the arrival of God's Messianic kingdom. Isaac blessed the trickster Jacob (who got the messianic blessing through his intrigues) with "an abundance of grain and new wine." On his deathbed, Jacob blessed his son Judah (through whom Messiah would be born), saying of that Coming One, "He will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes." Wine would be so abundant, it could even serve as the wash water for the weekly clothes cleaning. 150 gallons might be that sort of quantity! Isaiah spoke of "a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines." He also quotes God's invitation, "Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost." Joel prophesied about the Messiah's coming, "In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk."

Lots of wine equals the presence of the Messiah. Now in this sign carried out at the wedding in Cana, Jesus has "arrived." And in His arrival, the kingdom is also present. His first sermon said it clearly: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He has now started His great work which will culminate in His suffering and dying at Calvary. The very best is here, God's best and outstanding provision for our salvation, and it is signaled by the presence of the very best wine at this little family celebration in Cana.

God is a God who loves to save the best for last. God saved the best for last in His creation of the world, if Scripture is to be believed. For as the crowning achievement of that creation, on the tail end of the sixth and last day of creation, He brought Adam and Eve into the world. Human beings were the crown of His creative work, and after their entry into the universe, God proclaims everything "very good."

Abraham's attempts to get God's promise fulfilled (a son through whom nations would come) were utter failures - the adoption of his servant and his union with Hagar. But at long last, when it seemed clearly impossible, God provided the promised son, Isaac, the son of laughter. The best was saved for last.

Joseph's brothers looked down on him. You can probably imagine the names he received from them. Besides being called "Dreamer Boy," you can be sure they called him "Daddy's Favorite" and "Housebound Sissy" or other similar flattering titles. He was not the youngest of the twelve, but he had come along pretty far down the line. His older brothers even sold him into slavery and thought they were rid of him once and for all. But God had other plans, didn't He? For this one who was known as the "Dreamer Boy" became second in command to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt – and his brothers came bowing down before him, just as his dreams had predicted. The best was saved for last in Joseph's life.

This matter of the importance of names is something that Isaiah dealt with also. Listen to his words again

from today's reading: "No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah [meaning "my delight is in her"], and your land Beulah [meaning "married"]; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you." Though it is perhaps not as predominant a practice as it used to be, quite often the bride takes the name of her husband. Connie has identified herself as "Connie Press" for twice as long now as she was known as "Connie Baedke." When God gives a name, it shapes a person's life. Abram became Abraham, father of nations. Sarai became Sarah, princess. Jacob, the heel-grabber, became Israel, the God-wrestler. God named Jesus ("God saves") because He came for that very purpose, to be our Savior.

Samuel went to Bethlehem to celebrate a sacrificial meal. To this meal he invited Jesse and his sons. God had told Samuel that He would identify one of Jesse's sons to be the successor to Saul, Israel's first king, who had made shipwreck of his relationship with God and of his vocation as king. As seven sons of Jesse marched before Samuel, he indicated that God had not chosen any one of them. He had to ask, "Are these all the sons you have?" Jesse indicated that there was the youngest, out watching sheep – and of course, that was David, whom Samuel did anoint as Israel's next king, long years before that promise would be fulfilled. Jesse did not imagine he had saved the best for last. But God made the last first. And in that little town of Bethlehem God would bring about the very best that He had to give, His Son for our life.

God did some marvelous things for His people Israel – made them a nation in the call of Abraham, delivered them from bondage in Egypt by the hand of Moses, raised that nation to be a world power in the days of David and Solomon, brought them back from the Babylonian Captivity. But in these latter days, He outdid Himself, sending Jesus to be the faithful Son that Israel had never been and could never be.

Some years ago, I heard the story of Larry Walters, a truck driver from California who at the age of 33 decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. One July day in 1982, he went down to the local army surplus store and bought forty-five used weather balloons. Later he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends helped tie the now helium-filled balloons. He took along a six-pack of beer, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land. Walters cut the guide line that held the chair to his pickup. He had assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air, but the chair rocketed up more than 15,000 feet– smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport.

Initially too frightened to shoot any of the balloons, Larry stayed airborne for more than two hours, forcing the airport to shut down its runways for much of the afternoon, causing long delays in flights from across the country. Soon after he was safely on the ground and cited by the police, reporters asked Lawnchair Larry three questions: "Were you scared?" "Yes." "Would you do it again?" "No." "Why did you do it?" "Because," he said, "you can't just sit there." (*Leadership*, Summer 1993, p. 35) Maybe more of God's people need to capture a bit of that spirit, without the craziness Larry attached to it. "You can't just sit there," in a church pew and expect that will win your way to heaven. "You can't just sit there" while people around you are in need and living without God's peace and grace. "You can't just sit there" once the tasty wine of God's kindness has touched your lips. "You can't just sit there" when God's call has appointed you to be a servant to others as part of His kingdom force in this world.

Conclusion: Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe." And not only has God spoken to us by His Son. In these last days, He has also acted to rescue us in His Son. He walked through His life as the very best God could have given. He lived totally obedient to His Father. And we who walk by faith in this Son of God know His power at work in our lives. We know that He saves the very best for last. You

probably know the story of the woman who asked to be buried with a fork in her hands. When they asked her why, she said, “At our dinnertime as the meal drew to a close, my mother would tell us, ‘Keep your forks. The best is yet to come.’” For us as God’s people, we may know a bit of joy and blessedness in this life – but the best is yet to come. God saves the best for last for us – the feast at His banquet table, the heavenly wine that never runs out, the everlasting presence of the One who has given His very best for us that we may live, now and forever. In Jesus’ name, AMEN!