

If I'm honest, I struggle a little bit with this particular Gospel story.

We're told, by the text itself, that this story of the wedding at Cana, when Jesus listens to his mother and turns water into wine, this, we're told, was the first "of his signs." But whenever I hear this story, all I hear, really, is the water into wine bit, and I struggle with this miracle, a miracle with which Jesus will forever be strongly identified.

A while back there was a meme doing the rounds on social media, a grocery store had stocked its red wine under a sign that read "water" – the photo was captioned, simply, "Jesus was here."

Back when I was a kid, I loved the movie version of Jesus Christ Superstar. In it, a highly stylized and sneering King Herod, reclining in the midst of his colorful entourage of sycophants and flamboyantly dressed hangers-on sings the memorable line: [So, you are the Christ, the great Jesus Christ, prove to me that you're divine, change my water into wine.](#) .. If you haven't seen it in a while, or at all, I'll link to it when I post today's sermon : )

It's interesting to me that, as a culture, we've gotten so snagged on the water into wine. I, too, get snagged on it. It seems like such an utterly frivolous miracle, surely this isn't the way the world comes to know Jesus is God. Of all the astonishing things Jesus could do, why, on earth, turn gallons of water into fine wine for a bunch of people at an anonymous wedding who, we're led to believe, are already a bit sloshed by the time it's served.

Unless, of course, the miracle really isn't *the thing*, unless Jesus turning water into wine, the fact that he could do that, unless this isn't the point of the story at all.

After all, for most of human history, reality was thick with magic and miracle: magicians, sorcerers, miracle-doers of all sorts were all over the place, and many of them had dedicated groups of disciples. Doing a miracle here and there wasn't that extraordinary. The metaphysical reality for folks in much of the world, for most of human existence, has been full of demons and angels and other-worldly creatures of all kinds, and with charismatic folks who could work with them or against them, do wonders and even bring folks back from the dead. Being able to 'do' a miracle might make you interesting, or popular, or even entertaining, but it wouldn't necessarily make you God.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the genius of the scene with King Herod, in Jesus Christ Superstar, is that he's clear he wants the showman-ship of a miracle, he's wanting the razzle-dazzle of proof. That's how he wants, or needs, God to show up, he wants to be impressed. And, I'm not sure he's alone in that. All through the Bible folks are looking for signs, or asking for signs – maybe it's a 'human' thing, that we look for something with impact to believe something is important.

If the miraculous is what we're looking for, maybe even longing for, it stands to reason it might be what we end up looking at in this story. But, if we look away from the marvel of copious amounts of water being turned to wine, what's left, what else is going on in this story?

Well, running in the background of this early episode in the narrative of Jesus' life is a bunch of stuff we can extract meaning from; there's a bunch of stuff, arguably, that holds ancient symbolic and enduring meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an interesting article with some background relevant to my comments here: <https://aeon.co/essays/early-christians-struggled-to-distinguish-themselves-from-pagans>

The reading begins, *On the third day*:

In the story of Creation in Genesis, on the third day, the world gets plants and vegetation of all sorts, there is now life where there was no life before.<sup>2</sup> In the Exodus story, at Mount Sinai, Moses consecrates the people so that they might directly encounter God ... on the third day,<sup>3</sup> and then they were given the law, which is fullness of life through covenant with God. And Jonah, the reluctant prophet, who ran from his call to confront the people of Ninevah, and was swallowed by a great fish, he was spat out *on the third day*,<sup>4</sup> in order to bring salvation to everyone in Ninevah who had turned away from God and so were close to death.

Next, we have, *the wedding*. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the marriage metaphor is used as a way to understand God's relationship with ancient Israel, it is covenant, it is binding and lasting, the forming of a household/family, within which there can be safety and security, trust, and mutuality, and love.

Finally, there's *the wine*. Again, in the Hebrew Bible quality wine, in abundance, is understood to be a symbol of God's blessing.

So, what we have here, behind the captivating distraction of the miracle, is an affirmation that *this* is the beginning of God's New Creation, God's new covenant, in Jesus there is newness of life, blessed, and in abundance, and freely available for all. And it is good! What began at Jesus' baptism is now flowing out into the world, and, with the help of others it is witnessed and experienced, tasted and understood, at least by his mother and his disciples; just as it was in the Creation story in Genesis, and on Mount Sinai in the Exodus story, at the wedding at Cana, God's glory is revealed in abundant life.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:9-13

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 19:16

<sup>4</sup> Jonah 1:17

Our response to the story of the wedding at Cana can expose our habits of attention, which maybe haven't changed much in 2,000 years. Our attention can still get snagged on the bling, we can't help but pay most attention to what's flashy or loud, surprising or impressive. And we get snagged on the ever-present bluster of the theatrics on constant display in the world around us. And, we can start to look for "signs," of God, or of what's coming, in all the wrong places, and we can jump to a heap of unhelpful conclusions based on what it is we're paying attention to. We have habits of attention, and these habits can have us miss the fuller story of what's going on, what's constant, always there, but can get lost in all the clatter.

We live in a world that's infused with meaning, and life, and possibility. But when we get caught up in the show, it's so easy to miss that; when we get caught up in the show of it all, it's so much harder to see hope in all the ways, always present, often in the background, all the ways that newness and fullness of life always remains possible. If we give our attention to the theater of the moment we're giving that our energy, giving our attention and energy to that which doesn't last, that which does not offer life in abundance for all, or freedom for all, or justice for all, and then we risk missing the real point of it all, living not in life-giving response to the glory of God but in life-leaking reaction to the pomp and circumstance of the present moment.

Let's not get snagged on the attention-grabbing drama or flashy spectacle of the noise-makers ... our God is ever-present in the barely audible whisper, grace flows in subtle constant abiding, God is in the often overlooked stuff, unnoticed in the midst of an attention-hungry world. So, let's keep our eye on love and hope, our minds on freedom and justice for all, and our energy dedicated to co-creating a world in which fullness of life for all people, abundant life, that's what has our attention.