



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 2 Year C

#### The First Sign

[RCL]: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Why start with this miracle?

In John's Gospel, the first of Jesus' signs—what the other Gospels call “miracles”—was turning water into wine. Jesus' first sign that inspired his disciples to believe in him was not healing a sick person, bringing someone back from the dead, forgiving sins, or exorcizing a demon. It was making gallons and gallons of excellent wine, about one hundred fifty gallons of wine, making a party last longer. Does this make Jesus seem like a more sophisticated savior, someone we would be less embarrassed about introducing to our friends than, say, Jesus the exorcist or Jesus who touches lepers? Or is Jesus' first miracle a little trivial?

Maybe it's not about Jesus loving a good party, although by all accounts he did. His opponents called him a glutton and a drunkard, and he often got in trouble for sharing table fellowship with the wrong kind of people.

And maybe it's not just trivial, or the evangelist John wouldn't have used one of his big words—“sign”—for it. The other things John calls “signs” that Jesus did include healing the sick, raising people from the dead, feeding a multitude on five loaves and two fish, and appearing, resurrected from the dead, among his amazed disciples. So “signs” are big, important, meaningful, reality-shifting events.

But how is making a ridiculous amount of wine at a small-town wedding reception on par with raising the dead, feeding the hungry, walking through locked doors to show the scars on his hands and feet and side and proclaiming that death has been defeated? As a “sign,” what does turning water into wine point to? What makes this wine so important?

A wedding or another big family celebration then, as for many of us now, was a time for good wine, a time to spend scarce money on the rarer things of life—a time to share food and drink that was special, not everyday. And because wine was something connected with special times and celebrations, it was a great sign in the Bible of the heavenly banquet, what's called the eschatological—or last times—feast at the end of time as we know it.

For example, listen to the prophet Isaiah's description of the age to come, the promised fulfillment of God's plans and dreams for the end of time:

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation (Isaiah 25:6-9).*

This is Isaiah's image for the end of time, when all is brought to its fulfillment: an end to tears, a clear manifestation of our God, and a great feast for all peoples, a feast of really good meat, rich, fatty food, and wine better than the best you've ever tasted.

Furthermore, as we heard in our first lesson, a symbol of God's joy over God's people, of God's deep love for people, is a bride and a bridegroom and the delight and rejoicing they share, like at a marriage celebration.

So, when Jesus makes gallons and gallons of wine at a wedding reception, it is a sign, pointing to the scriptural promises that God will bring all people to God's own self, that God will pour down God's love and the abundance of God's joy on all people, that the perfection that lies in God's great future is real. But more—that the future abundance and grace and joy has begun in Jesus Christ. The future is now, the glory and grace and love of God are available now.

That's why turning water into wine is the first of the signs Jesus did, and the rest of the signs follow. It's saying, look! God's future is breaking in now, has begun in Jesus. What else does God's future look like? It looks like hungry people being fed, sick people being healed, dead people being raised from death, death itself being defeated.

God's future is available now. In the present. In this life. We don't have to wait to experience hope. And we can trust that God will keep God's promises for the end of time, because Jesus already brought the possibility of joy and hope and new life now, even into this world. Perfection is not yet fully present; perfect wholeness still lies ahead. But trust Jesus—God will keep God's promises. God's future has already broken into the present in Jesus.

So, how do we participate in this new life, God's perfect, joy-filled future available now?

Mary gives the answer: do whatever he tells you. Seek life at its source. Seek joy at its source. Seek to know what Jesus Christ asks of you. This is the essence of discipleship. This is the key for joining Jesus in his new way of being in the world. This is the key: do whatever he tells you.

Notice that the people who knew where the water turned into wine had come from, the people who grasped firsthand, who saw with their own eyes the amazing thing happening in their midst were the servants. The ones who did what Jesus told them to do. While everyone else around them was caught up in whatever was going on at the party, the servants got to witness a miracle.

And they got to participate. They got to have a hand in Jesus' first sign. They just did what Jesus told them to do:

“Fill the jars with water” and they do.

No arguing, “We need wine, not water.”

“Now draw some out” and they do.

No complaining, “What’s that going to achieve?”

“And take it . . . So they took it.”

No, “Hey, Jesus, I have a better idea . . .”

They just do the simple, straightforward things Jesus tells them to do and they get to participate in a miracle.

Do whatever Jesus tells you. Water becomes the finest wine. The mundane becomes miraculous.

Jesus tells us all some very simple, straightforward things to do. There are lots of verbs in the gospels—commands, instructions that really aren’t even that hard to understand when it comes right down to it that are about simple obedience. Jesus tells us to do things: love, share, give, serve, listen, learn, worship, pray.

God even gives us particulars, contexts and jobs and families, a community, and a church family in which to be obedient. Love *him*. Love *her*. Love *them*. Share your money, your time, your particular gift, your ability with *that child*, with *that elder*, with *that family*. Worship with this parish family. Pray at your desk, at your bedside, with your teenager, for your spouse, your partner, your parent, this world. Listen for what Jesus tells you to do. Do it. You may participate in a miracle, you may get a glimpse, a sign of God’s perfect future, a sign of God’s heavenly feast, even right here, right now.

*Amy Richter is a priest who currently serves as an Episcopal Volunteer in Mission, working on the Galatians 6:2 ("Bear one another's burdens") project, focusing on theological education, and serving as a lecturer at the College of Transfiguration in Makhandla/Grahamstown, South Africa. She and her husband, Joseph Pagano, blog at [www.amyandjoegotoafrica.com](http://www.amyandjoegotoafrica.com). They have a new book coming out in 2019 from Cascade Books, a collection of personal essays by Episcopal lay people and clergy, fiction and non-fiction writers, poets, musicians, and theologians reflecting on experiences of worship.*