

“Saving the Best for Last”

Text: John 2: 1-11

Preached: January 14, 2007

Reverend Benjamin Broadbent

Morning Scripture:

You know the Word of God as it comes to us from the Gospel of John, beginning in the 2nd Chapter of the 1st verse.

“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 you and to me. 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 rite of purification, each holding 20 or 30 gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water,’ and they filled them to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out and take it to the Chief Steward.’ So they took it. When the Steward tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew, the Steward called to the bridegroom and said, ‘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.” May the Lord add his blessing to this reading of his word.

Rev. Broadbent:

It is the season of the Epiphany, Epiphany meaning manifestation, the time in the church calendar where Jesus’ identity is opened to us. In the lectionary readings, these follow a three-year cycle, and each of the three years follows one of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Then the Gospel of John was kind of sprinkled in there. So this is one of this sprinkle Sundays. And why this story from John?

One of the last verses that Joe read tells us why in this story during epiphany that Jesus did this, the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him. It is a revealing story, a revealing of the nature of the person and the ministry, and we are invited to join the disciples and to believe in him.

And yet this story is difficult because this manifestation of Jesus’ glory takes the form of a faux pas. He commits a major party foul, at a wedding. It makes me think of the first wedding that I ever conducted. It was actually not at this church. It was at the Broadmoor Hotel, and the first mistake that I made, and I don’t think she will mind my saying this, is that I took my wife. Now that is not because she is not a wonderful wedding guest. She is. But she is somewhat of

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an introvert, so to bring Brooke to a wedding where she knows not one person was not a very kind thing of me to do.

Not only that, but, you know, when you are about to do something for the first time, you would like to give it extra time. So we must have arrived two hours early. There was nothing to do but kind of wander around and see how the other side lives over there at the Broadmoor and anticipate this wedding that was happening. These were not members of the church. They contacted the church looking for a minister. I had met with them and enjoyed meeting them. I felt a little bit awkward though as the ceremony approached because I was hanging out with the groomsmen, and they were all drinking on the sly. And if you have ever felt awkward, try being a minister hanging out with the groomsmen while they are trying to get drunk. You know you are kind of killing the mood a little bit. They really want to let loose and have a good time, but they have this man of God standing there, who is obviously quite prudish and disapproving.

The ceremony itself went quite well, and since it was my first, that was pleasing. We had also been invited to the reception. We were shown to our seats. They did not have name cards for us. I think they still did not know what to do with us, and so they said, "Well, why don't you come and sit at this table." And so we took off our coats and sat down and started to get to know people around the table. Then somebody came and said, "You know, I'm really sorry, but we actually meant for these people to sit here. So could you move over to this table here?" So we went and found our next table. We got settled and maybe started in on the salad when someone came again and said, "You know, I, I'm really sorry to do this to you again, but actually we want to keep this family together, and most of them are at this – could you move? We have set up an extra table. It is not exactly in this room. It is just outside this room, and if you keep the door slightly cracked, you will be able to see everything that is happening." It was the kids' table.

So, needless to say, we did not stay very long. But the faux pas was that when it was time to say goodbye, I thought, "Well, I'm going to go find the couple, and I'm going to say goodbye to them." So I went and found the groom first and said, you know, "Congratulations and blessing. Going on a honeymoon?" And he said, "Oh, yeah. We've got this wonderful honeymoon planned. We're actually going to the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean. We're going to do deep sea fly fishing." And I thought, oh, that is incredible. "Have a wonderful time and a safe trip. I'm just going to say goodbye to your bride." He said, "That's just fine."

So I went over to her and said, "You know, you were radiant this evening, and I just want to congratulate you and blessings on a wonderful life together, and enjoy your honeymoon. The Seychelles should be really exciting." And she said, "The what?" And I said, "Good night."

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The only miracle there was that I was ever asked to do a wedding again, by anyone.

It was a wedding faux pas that was Jesus' first miracle in the Gospel of John. This is the second chapter in the Gospel of John. It is a long Gospel. You have a long way to go, and his miracle is turning water into wine. Well the difficulty with this passage is that we have to struggle yet again as modern people with the nature of miracles in how to explain them. What is a miracle? Well, let me use this as my working definition, which is that a miracle is a phenomenon that cannot be explained. As soon as it becomes explained, it fails to be a miracle.

Right now in the adult forum, our president of the congregation, Steve Kern, is leading a discussion on the relationship of religion and science. And I just made what I think is an interesting connection that while science seeks to discount the miracles claimed by religion, it also uses the word miracle to refer to those astounding advancements that science makes, the "miracles of science." I should think that is a misapplied word, because once it becomes science, namely that which can be rationally explained or understood or experimented or repeated, it fails to become a miracle. A miracle, whether you have experienced it or not, and I imagine there are some of us on either side of that, is that which happens and there is no reasonable, repeatable explanation for it.

And yet in the Gospel of John, in this story, he does not use the word miracle. He uses, the writer of the Gospel of John, instead uses the word "sign." This is the first of Jesus' signs. And so he tells this story not as some form of proof as to who Jesus is, but as a sign pointing in the direction of Jesus' ministry. What is the purpose and the message of Jesus' ministry? Not to somehow prove that he is really good at magic tricks. It is not so much about doing something astonishing that makes everybody baffled and wonder how you changed that water into Kool-Aid smelling water. But it asks the questions, "Who is this one?" and "What is His purpose?" This is at the beginning of the Gospel. We need to begin to discern as we move forward what is the purpose of this man? Toward what is this signpost directing us – not a proof but a direction.

And I think the signpost is telling us this, that God saves the best for last. Now you might think that is all well and fine and that it applies to other folks, but for me, in my place in life, I can think back on what were the "golden years." Maybe you are a high schooler, and you are thinking, "Boy, it was so much more fun when I didn't have so much homework. When I could just play in my neighborhood after school."

Maybe you are a college student, and you are starting to think, "You know, as much as I like my independence, I miss my friends that I grew up with." Maybe you are just getting your life launched, and you are finding yourself becoming

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an adult and you are realizing, “Boy, all these adult privileges that I was groping for for so long are really not worth the heavy responsibility of paying bills and being responsible.”

Maybe your marriage or partnership is not what it used to be. Maybe your relationship with yourself or with another just does not have that same kind of fire or light that it once had. Maybe your body has been failing you, and you can remember those times when you would step out into a storm just like today and hike up to the top of Pikes Peak. No problem.

You know we do that. We tend to idealize and idolize the past. “Oh, it always was so much better. I used to have it figured out. What I would not give for that prior naiveté, when the world just kind of seemed all right.”

Now, some of you, maybe you are aware that now is better than it has ever been. And God bless you. But most of us are kind of constantly in this place, I think, of wanting to draw the best upon the past and just not quite convinced that the future holds the same promise for us as what the past did.

But here is the message at the beginning of the Gospel of John, which is that God saves the best for last. For you. God is saving the best for last, even if you cannot believe it. For this church, which has had so much to celebrate, can we actually believe that God is saving the best for last? For those of you who find yourselves in a part of life, post whatever – post career, post relationship, post your trip around the world – you think that you are now coasting in what should be a pretty kind of normal life? God is saving the best for last.

As a citizen of this country, where you think, “Boy, you know, things are just not the way they used to be. Why don’t we have a leader like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. now, speaking those kinds of visions and challenges to our society, the way we need to hear it now. Things just aren’t like they were back in the ‘60s,” or pick your golden era. Can we believe that God is saving the best for last?

I think what is the most difficult thing about receiving this possibility, that God is holding out and saving the best for last, is that we must find ourselves devoid of the resources we thought we once had. We actually must go to that place where we realize that things really are not the way they used to be. The wine has run out. The love, which I seem to possess, has seemed to just not feel quite as passionate. The former clarity that I used to hold onto is just not there. I am groping at fog now. It is as if we must be emptied of the resources, even emptied of the source of joy that is what the wine is. Emptied of the source of joy in order to allow God to come in and give us what we never thought we would ever taste or deserve.

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In the Bible, an over abundance of wine is always the sign of exceeding joy. In the Book of Amos, Chapter 9, verse 13, the prophet describes the mountains dripping with wine. Imagine that. It is like the hills covered and it is as if the grapes on the vine cannot help but ripen and burst and ferment and flow down the mountain sides, cascading over the foothills. God is saving the best for last.

Now we can try to rationalize how this would happen, but we, like the steward, will probably get it wrong. You will recall the steward thinks that it is because of the bridegroom's generosity that he tastes the wine so late in the party. But the disciples know otherwise. They know that the source of the joy, which is so incredibly abundant, is theirs and our Lord, Jesus the Christ. He is saying in this story that our structures, our stone jars, which are meant to hold the waters of purification, those things we do religiously and socially and in our families and in our own personal lives to basically keep things going and maintain the status quo, may now have a new purpose. And this is a lot of wine. Six stone jars, each holding 20 to 30 gallons. That is between 120 and 180 gallons of wine, more than anybody could ever need in a single wedding.

That would be like in a modern retelling at the Broadmoor saying, "And there was a reflecting pond that just happened to be there, and it was turned into wine." God's super abundance is our super abundance. God is saving the best for last. And when we taste it, and I am convinced that we will, we will find that it is the best thing we have ever tasted.

Amen.