

2025 Epiphany 2C

It's tempting to start today's sermon by demonstrating visually how much water, exactly, we are talking about in today's reading from John's Gospel. I would have six strapping young men enter the sanctuary, each pushing a dolly holding a 30 gallon jar of water so you could SEE what we're talking about. I did a little research, and the big bottles of water that go on dispensers are 5 gallons. So imagine a container five or six times as large. And then imagine 6 of them. Do you have a picture, yet? It's a LOT of water.

Most of us here today take access to water for granted, most of the time. We turn on the tap, and there it is. We may have had some limited experience of having to ration water, but few of us have ever had to spend much energy wondering where we'll get our next drink of water. Maybe we have had a day or two on a boil water order, but I doubt any of us have come close to real physical danger because we were so long without access to it. We cannot imagine having to arrange our entire lives around access to water. We can go a month without food, but a lack of water begins to take a toll on our bodies within a day, and we can't live for more than a few days without it.

One of the reasons Rome was able to be a "superpower" in its day was its ability to provide water to its citizens. But Judea was not on the Roman water pipeline, and so to fill those six huge jars with water was a time and energy-consuming task.

And this water was not for drinking.

This water was for ‘rites of purification.’ Basically, if you wanted to attend the wedding, you had to wash up—AT the ceremony. Can you imagine how that would go over today? Welcome to the wedding, here’s the soap and water! We don’t do much in the way of ritual washing in our Christian tradition. We have baptism, certainly, but that only happens once in a lifetime (at least in our Episcopal tradition). The only thing left, really, is the moment just before the celebration of the Eucharist when the acolyte pours water over my hands into the lavabo. And not all priests even do *that* anymore.

The 21st century environmentalist in me is horrified at what appears to be a waste of such a precious resource. All that water poured down the drain in a place where water was so scarce. (The environmentalist in me also notes that 180 gallons also just happens to be the average amount of water used per person in the US every day, and most of that goes down the drain as well.)

The point is that the servants had already done the hard work of filling those jars up once, before the wedding began. It was probably one of the most arduous tasks involved in the preparation. And in the course of the celebration, the jars were emptied as people washed in order to comply with religious law. All of that water, precious water, was used to meet an external requirement. Not a drop of it was consumed to meet an internal, physical need.

The servants have already filled up those jars. They have ticked that task off their to-do list, and we can assume that part of the celebration went without a hitch. But there’s a problem: they are out of wine. That’s what they were drinking—not water. They were drinking wine, as part of the

wedding celebration. Who knows how long the feast had been going on. In many cultures even today, weddings go on for days, even a week. And they were out of wine.

The mother of Jesus knows this. And she tells her son.

Now I have always assumed—perhaps incorrectly—that she tells Jesus in the hopes that he will do something to “fix” it. Jesus certainly hears it that way, and he tries to put her off. “My hour has not yet come,” he says. But she persists, and he caves in. (A friend in college once said, “Like Jesus could ever say no to his MOTHER!”) So he tells the servants to fill up those jars.

Can you just imagine the response?

One servant is wondering how a second round of baths is going to solve the wine shortage. Another is thinking, “the guests may be drunk but even they are going to notice they’re drinking water.” Another is wondering who this bozo is, giving them orders. And another is wishing he’d just keep out of it so that the guests would all go HOME and things could go back to life as usual.

But they did what Jesus asked. They filled up those jars, filled them up *to the brim*. Then they drew some out and took it to the steward, just as Jesus instructed.

The steward had not been aware of what was going on, all he knew was that he was presented with a cup of wine to taste. And he declared that this new wine was far better than what had been served previously, even though that went against tradition and even reason. The new wine was superior to the old.

In case you haven't figured this out yet, this story is not about the wine. It's not even entirely about the miracle, although John does point out that this is the first of Jesus "signs." "Signs" are not just about solving the immediate problem. The "signs" of Jesus are moments when the action points to a deeper truth about what God is doing through Jesus in the world.

Too often we see Jesus as some kind of "Superman" rushing in to fix the problem, without understanding that Jesus isn't actually all that interested in "fixing" things.

Jesus is interested in *transforming* things. The water used for purification was turned into wine used for celebration. Dealing with the internal rather than the external.

God is constantly transforming that which has 'run out'—that which has grown old and tired and ineffective—into something new and life-giving. It's not a condemnation of the past; it is rather a challenge not to get stuck in the old patterns or to look for new solutions in the same old places. Jesus doesn't tell them to fill the wineskins—he tells them to fill the purification jars.

As foolish as it may have made them feel, they did it. They filled those jars, even though it made absolutely no sense. In daring to look foolish, they participated in a miracle. They did what Jesus asked, and through their cooperation, Jesus was able to transform a bad situation into something good. Something better than good.

This story hasn't made it into the Gospel of John because of the presenting PROBLEM. In eternal terms, this feast running out of wine was ridiculously insignificant. The host family might have been embarrassed for the rest of their lives, might have lost some social standing—but the world wasn't going to end because of it.

The story didn't even make it into the Gospel simply because of the SOLUTION. This isn't about what happened in one place at one time to save that family embarrassment. Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead; we don't have any stories of Jesus protecting anyone from embarrassment.

This story made it into the Gospel because it is the first time that the GOOD NEWS is expressed. It tells us that even our insignificant problems can be occasions for the glory of God to be revealed. And don't we need just this reminder at this moment—that God can use whatever challenges we face as opportunities to make God's love known?

It's not change for its own sake. The story is about hope—God is always able to use the difficult situations of our lives, the hard times, the times when we feel like we're running out, running on empty, as a means for sharing the good news that God is making all things new. I don't believe God "planned" for the wine to run out. It just did. What's important is both God's creativity and power AND the willingness of everyone involved to do their part—from Jesus' mother to the servants to the steward.

When we trust in God's guidance, and follow where God leads us, we get to participate in the miracle. We get to be a part of the new thing, the word of hope, that God is bringing to a world that is feeling old and empty and worn out. God is

waiting for us to offer what we have, even if it is just six stone jars of water.

What are the stone jars sitting around in your lives, waiting to be filled up and used to new purpose? Offer them to God. Where are the places in your lives that you feel like you've run out, run empty, and you can see no sign of hope? Open your hearts to Jesus and ask, "What would you have me do?" Then listen, and do it. Don't discard the possibility for a miracle because it seems inconsequential or foolish. Remember this story from the Gospel, and realize that God can transform even the hardest moments of our lives so that they become vehicles for the Good News. God is making all things new.

Amen.