

This Sunday's texts:
Habakkuk 3:17-19a
Romans 8:22-28
John 2:1-12

The Gospel from John 'Signs'
Pastor Jim Cords
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The holy gospel for this morning comes to us from the Gospel of John, the second chapter:

On the third day a wedding took place in Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants. "Fill the water jars with water;" so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "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." What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days.

The gospel of the Lord.

One of the things I've really enjoyed doing probably for the last decade in my Bible reading is to try to discern the truth of a text only from within that particular book I'm reading. Especially in the gospels, it's easy to try to create a harmony of the gospels, where you try to get them all to align with one another. What I found is if I listened more carefully just to the book that I'm in, I discovered things that go deeper than just the overview. I begin to hear the witness of that particular apostle. While the truths I discover there also probably apply to the other gospels, they may not be as emphasized in those gospels.

For instance, today, as we move into the sermon, we're going to look a little bit at our understanding in the Gospel of John for this thing he calls "signs." Now if John hadn't said it, we may very well as missed it because typically what John

calls “signs,” we call “miracles.” John's calling it a sign is a reminder to it that the miracle has significance. So we'll seek to see and discover what is that significance as we move forward into that.

First, we want to notice and hear from the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk is not completely unusual, though certainly unique with his message. Listen to verses 17 and 18 again from chapter 3 of Habakkuk. “Although the fig trees shall not blossom; neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls.”¹ Translation: bad times, like seriously bad times. I mean you can imagine farmers looking out and realizing we got no yield this year. Nothing's coming. The fruit trees are bearing no fruit. There's no milk from the cows or the goats. As a matter of fact, there are no cows or goats. This is a bad time.

Now I'm sure none of you have ever experienced a bad time. But it's instructive for us who are followers of Christ to hear these words of scripture, to recognize that it is not unusual. We are not alone when we go through times of hardship. Many of God's people at many places throughout scripture have gone through hardship. So I don't know about you, but often when I'm overwhelmed by what's going on in my life, I find myself asking what do I do now? By the way, that's *after* I get over the need to say “*why me?*” What I've discovered in my journey is often when I ask “*why me?*” I don't come up with very good answers. And, by the way, when I think I know the answer, I don't agree with the equation. Even though I may have done something that may have deserved some sort of punishment, this is too much. I don't deserve this. I get myself in that negative place until I finally get to the place where I just say “help.”

Habakkuk went to the next level. Habakkuk says this. “Yet, I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.”² Yet, in spite of the circumstances, in spite of what I can see in front of me, what is coming that yields no hope, no encouragement. In spite of that, yet, I will rejoice in my God. There's an instruction in this that's very difficult. By the way, it's an instruction that sometimes those who have been journeying in the faith longer than us may produce this kind of wisdom. That is in good times or in bad, I will find my joy in the Lord. I will trust in the faithfulness of God more than I trust in the faithfulness of my eyes or my ability to predict what is to come. I will trust in the faithfulness,

¹ Habakkuk 3:17, King James version

² Habakkuk 3:18, King James version

in the promises of my God and I will find courage and hope and strength for today, trusting in my Lord.

Hear more words from Habakkuk. “The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.”³ If you've ever been in the Holy Land or places like it, you see some of the deer climbing up cliffs that seem completely unscalable. There are videos on YouTube that often show the mom just climbing up on these little teeny cracks, just climbing up the side of a mountain and the babies following. Often the YouTube videos that get posted show the babies slipping a bit. Sounds more like me than babies, but slipping a bit and yet still maintaining their ability to continue on. I love the image because it reminds me that sometimes when the challenges before me seem unscalable, I find hope in those that have gone before me, who have managed it. I find hope in seeing that even those who slip, manage it. And I'm instructed that they've done so in the strength of the Lord who gives us security and ability and support and help as we journey forward.

Those times when I feel most hopeless in life are the times when I feel alone. The hard part of that is that very often I have this incredibly bad habit of when I'm starting to feel bad or overwhelmed, I isolate myself, which makes me feel alone. That is, I often cause to worsen the very thing I need help with. I need support. I need encouragement and instead, I isolate myself from those who would provide it. Like often as I hear in the Psalms, I do that long enough to come to the place where I just cry out to the Lord and say “what’s going on!?” And sometimes, he pushes me out of the room, and sometimes, he brings people into the room, so that I'm reminded that with Christ I'm never alone. In the body of Christ, I'm never alone. So there is encouragement and there is hope even when the circumstances have not yet changed and maybe even in circumstances where I still can't really see a way out.

Then there's this text in Romans which, I'll be honest, it's a two-edged sword. I mean I really like it and I rely on it a lot, but on the other hand, I really don't like it because I prefer God find another way. It says this, “And we know that in all things God works for good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”⁴ Even in those dark times, the scripture teaches in Romans and in other places, the struggle produces endurance and hope, and character. And I want to say “God, can we maybe find that at Disneyland?” I mean can we find out on a beautiful sunset at the beach? Isn't there another way, Lord,

³ Habakkuk 3:19, NIV

⁴ Romans 8:28

that you could bring the character building apart from struggle? And the answer is yes and no. God brings character and hope and strength into our lives and encourages us in faith in many, many ways, but it also includes the struggle. So we try to hear the words of Paul in the midst of the struggle to say God will use this to bring good in the future that I do not yet see. God is able in all things to bring good for us who love him and who he loves and for whom he has a purpose.

So as we think of those two ideas: of a time of struggle, yet rejoicing and of recognition that in struggle God is able to work. In that context, then we move to these signs, these miracles in the Gospel of John, and this morning, we simply look at the first one, the first sign which is turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. How do we understand this? Well, the first thing we want to understand is that there's a promise as we journey through with the people of Israel in the Old Testament. There's this promise of a time of fruitfulness. It's almost the exact opposite of what we heard in Habakkuk. That, while it is a time of scarcity, a time of fruitfulness, a time of abundance is coming. Envision the grapes so full that they're beginning to leak the juice. Now those of you who are vintners, which I am not, may know that may be a late time to pick them up. I don't know. The abundance mentality is what is often expressed, that the grapes and the wine are a time of celebration, a time of goodness, a time of abundance in provision, and that abundance is coming.

On the other hand, there's another question here. It's these jars in this story. It says that there are six and that they hold maybe between 20 and 30 gallons, between 120 and 180 gallons in the six jars. What are they used for? Ceremonial washing. My mindset might be a little tweaked here, but it seems to me if I am walking into an area and I see jars for ceremonial washing, it's like coming into church and seeing that the confession is first on the list. What does it remind you of? You need it. Before you go in here, you're not yet ready. You're not yet adequate. You're unclean. You need to cleanse yourself before you come in. Now in good theology, we're reminded that God provides the cleansing, but it's the movement between "Okay, you can come in now that you've washed yourself, now that you've been cleaned in the ceremonial washing" to that very same thing being turned into the celebration and the abundance of between 120 and 180 gallons of wine. Now again, I'm not a wine connoisseur either, but I've got to think that you can make a lot of cases of wine with 180 gallons.

It is also important that we back up and see the context of weddings. I don't know about you. When my wife and I got married, we did have a rehearsal and rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding, and then the next day, we had the

wedding and after the wedding, we had a reception. So let's say 24 hours of celebration, if you can call a rehearsal a celebration, which, by the way, at the dinner afterward, we did. So let's just say a wedding in our lives is 24 hours. It's a full day - the night before, getting ready and celebrating in anticipation, the next morning getting ready and getting dolled up and cleaned up and all that stuff, and then having the celebration and then partying with your friends until you go home exhausted. Not so in biblical times. It was a week of celebration. There was a week of partying. It was, generally speaking, the entire village that would be a part of this celebration, of this creation of a new family, this expansion of a loved family, with the addition of the new room on the groom's family home and a new person being brought into this new family that is the village. It was an incredible party. And it was also an incredibly shameful embarrassment if you didn't have enough. Now I wish that Anna-Marie was in the room (she should be here next service) because one of the things that Anna-Marie and I both know as her a current worker with youth and me a former worker with youth is you don't run out of food. Every once in a while, I'll hear someone like Anna-Marie or other youth workers that I've worked with in the past, say, "I guess I didn't estimate very well because there's a lot of leftovers." and my response is "no, there always has to be leftovers because you don't run out of food." Or wine at a wedding in Jesus' day. You don't run out of wine. It is a massive embarrassment.

So what was happening? Well, I read something that I had never really picked up on before as I was preparing for this week. It seems as though when Jesus called Philip to follow him in the last part of chapter one of John, Philip goes and finds Nathanael. Nathanael comes and Jesus proclaims Nathaniel to be an Israelite in whom there is no guile. And Nathaniel says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God"⁵ It almost looks like the first faith statement. There's this incredible reaction.

I bring up Nathanael because two of the commentaries that I read suggested that Cana in Galilee was Nathaniel's hometown. So right after Jesus finished his calling the twelve, including Nathanael, they come and they're invited to this wedding in Cana. Nathanael is, of course, with Jesus. This opportunity for incredible shame and embarrassment comes upon one of the people in that village, obviously known by Nathanael. Somehow, thanks be to God, although no surprise, Jesus' mother, Mary, picks up on it. By the way, ladies, that was an acknowledgment of the fact that sometimes you're a little bit more aware socially than some of us, males. Just want to acknowledge that in this story, we see that Mary is tuned in. She sees there's a problem, probably long before most of the

⁵ John 1:45-49

other people have seen that there's a problem. There's this interesting thing where Jesus says you know it's not the right time. Then Mary has this incredibly great response, "do whatever he tells you to do" like he's going to do the right thing. He may not think it's the right time but he's going to do the right thing. Then this miracle happens. Nathaniel, who has followed Jesus, sees almost immediately that Jesus cares about people, that Jesus is not one of those Pharisees or Sadducees that's going to point fingers and tell people what they've done wrong. That could easily happen here. How could you possibly run out of wine this soon? What were you thinking? By the way, some of us parents have a tendency, youth and children, to react the same way. I apologize when the first thing I noticed is the problem. Yeah, somehow that's the curse that my kids had to live with.

Instead, they learn that the Messiah and the coming of the Messiah is not only a day of judgment, but it is redemption. In that day of redemption is celebration. In that recognition that God has come in the form of the Messiah, the king, God's people can rejoice because God comes with a generosity beyond judgments. A generosity that will take care of the judgment. Not simply acting as if it doesn't matter, but paying that price so that God's people might rejoice. Our hope for Christ, our hope for the end is a hope that can sustain us and strengthen us, even in the midst of these times when we may or may not be able to see what is coming. We hear in the promise of God. We see in the faithfulness of God that when the Messiah comes, he doesn't just come to destroy. He comes to bring celebration and abundance. Grace is made visible as a sign to the apostles. Right after they're called, they see that Jesus is there to transform times of shame and embarrassment into times of hope and glory and promise in a God who provides. It's the hope I need today. It doesn't surprise me at all if it's the hope you need today. If your life feels dry, if these unexpected things keep getting thrown at you, where do we turn? We turn to the God of promise who has made visible in the signs. It is a god of generosity and a god of abundance who pours out his grace into our lives. When? You probably deserve shame and embarrassment, but instead are lifted up to continue the celebration of the goodness of God made to us and for us, and through us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.