

## **“Signs” -- Sermon 1: Lord of the Feast**

### **June 28, 2015**

Let's pretend. Pretend that God asked you to choreograph a “coming out” for Jesus. Now I'm not talking about the kind of “coming out” that's been all over the news last week. I'm talking about his debut, the launching of his mission. First impressions are so important. Whether it's a kick off for a political campaign, or the launching of a rock tour, or introducing Karl Anthony Towns to the Minnesota fans. First impressions are so important! Because it's easier to make a good first impression than to live a bad first impression down. So, you get to help God plan Jesus' debut – first impressions. Where would it be? What would he do?

I would choose a spectacular miracle, I think, maybe at the temple in Jerusalem. After all this is Jesus, the messiah, the Savior of the world. Maybe I'll go for a huge wow factor: raising a dead guy, or casting out some notorious demon. Or, maybe I would design something that would impact huge numbers of people: like feeding a huge crowd with a fish sandwich from Long John's, or maybe stilling a storm with a “shhh.” Or maybe I would choreograph something that showed his heart or his passion: like healing a paralytic, or some leper, or some blind guy. Or maybe I'd just get right to the point. What did Jesus come here to do? Maybe I'd recommend skipping right to the dying and rising part.

But I'll bet you none of us would start the story off the way Jesus did. It's just weird! Or maybe there is more to this miracle than meets the eye. Here's what happened:

The Bible says: The next day there was a wedding celebration in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the celebration. The wine supply ran out during the festivities, so Jesus' mother told him, “They have no more wine.” “Dear woman, that's not our problem,” Jesus replied. “My time has not yet come.” But his mother told the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Standing nearby were six stone water jars, used for Jewish ceremonial washing. Each could hold twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” When the jars had been filled, he said, “Now dip some out, and take it to the master of ceremonies.” So the servants followed his instructions. When the master of ceremonies tasted

the water that was now wine, not knowing where it had come from (though, of course, the servants knew), he called the bridegroom over. “A host always serves the best wine first,” he said. “Then, when everyone has had a lot to drink, he brings out the less expensive wine. But you have kept the best until now!” This miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee was the first time Jesus revealed his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Really? That’s how Jesus chose to make his debut, to reveal his glory? He has all this power and he uses it to restock a wedding bar? In Cana of Galilee of all places? It’s weird. What’s even weirder is that the apostle John, who wrote this book, doesn’t just call it a “miracle,” he calls it a “sign.” It’s supposed to point to something. It’s supposed to be a clue, a breadcrumb that will lead us to something very important. In fact, there are seven of these “signs” in the gospel of John. And that’s where we’re going for the next seven weeks: we’re going to follow that trail of breadcrumbs. So, let’s dig in and try to figure out what changing water into wine was a sign of. What’s it pointing towards? What does it tell us about Jesus, and what does it tell us about his mission? And what does it mean for me, and you?

(Jn 2.1) The apostle John, who was there when it happened, says there was a wedding at a place called Cana in Galilee. Now to tell you the truth, we’re not even sure where Cana was. It’s gone now. Just a little place; nowhere special – kind of a Millville, or a Waddy, or a Stamping Ground. We think it was just a few miles from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. So Jesus was probably pretty familiar with the place, and they were probably pretty familiar with him. (Jn 2.2) John says that Jesus’ mother, Mary, was there, and that Jesus and his disciples also had invites. Apparently the bride or the groom was a friend of the family, or maybe even relatives.

Now weddings today are a big deal. I googled the average cost of a wedding today: \$26,444! Now it said that most couples still spend less than 10 grand, but the average is \$26 thousand bucks! As a pastor I have participated in a lot of weddings. For some girls they are a really big deal. Sometimes guys too, but usually guys are more interested in the honeymoon. There are whole businesses built around weddings; TV shows built around weddings. Any of you guys ever watch “Say Yes to the Dress,” or “My Fair Wedding,” or “Bridezillas.” If you haven’t ... don’t; they are dumb as a brick.

Weddings are a big deal today. Back in the world of the Bible – even bigger. Because back then it wasn't just about the bride – it wasn't just her big day, or even the bride and the groom. Marriages were about family and about community. As families connected through marriage, whole communities were bound together. Today wedding are more about me and mine; back then they were about family and community. All the family was invited – even those who lived far away. And the whole community was invited. And we're not talking about 30 minutes at church and a reception afterwards; we're talking about a party that lasted about a week. Typically virgins were married on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of wedding week; widows were married on the 5<sup>th</sup> day. And the reception lasted a couple more days! If weddings were like that today ... I'd advise every one of you to elope.

But this wedding is in trouble, real trouble, (Jn 2.3) because the wine runs out. So Mary goes to Jesus, and she says, "They are out of wine." It doesn't say why. Poor planning, maybe? Wedding crashers, maybe? I don't know. Now I've always been kind of curious. It looks like Mary and Jesus are just guests. So it's not their problem, really. So why does she step in? And I really don't know what Mary expected Jesus to do about it. He hadn't "come out" yet, he hadn't done any miracles yet ... I think. At the end of this story John tells us this was the "first" of Jesus' signs. So what did mama expect him to do? Best we know, Jesus hadn't gone around turning water into wine as a kid, or turning broccoli into chocolate chip cookies or bacon – although if I'd had the power to work miracles, I would have tried.

And yet this is a big deal, a bigger deal than you think. Maybe this was their family; or maybe these were close friends. Running out of wine was a disaster. It was embarrassing. It was humiliating. This was a culture where people cared a whole lot about honor and shame. And this was a black mark on this couple and on this family that would shame them for a long time. Back then, no wine, no party (I guess for some of you it's still that way). So this party ... is pretty much over ... they think.

Now what comes next is really weird. Because, what Jesus says to his mom strikes us as ... rude. And being rude to mama just doesn't fit Jesus. We know lots of stories about Jesus. He is not easily irritated. He can get annoyed, but he's not thin-skinned. He never says things he regrets – like

we do. Even when he is mistreated he doesn't "lose his temper." So what he says here, to his mama, sounds weird, to us. And whenever Jesus says something that sounds weird, it's worth slowing down and taking a closer look, because something big may be going down.

Jesus says, literally, to his mama: "What to me and to you, woman?" Now occasionally I liked to call my mama "woman," just to annoy her. It didn't usually end well. Now it's hard to figure out exactly what Jesus was really saying, so Bibles struggle here. NIV: "What does this have to do with me, woman?" Or the Message: "It's not our problem, woman." Or the Good News Translation: "Don't tell me what to do, woman." Really? And then he says something that seems to be kind of irrelevant. He says, "My time," (literally "my hour") has not yet come." And here's the deal: I don't think he means, "It's not time for me to "come out", yet." Because whenever Jesus talks about his hour, he's always talking about his death. So Mary says, "Jesus, they are out of wine." And it sounds like he answers back, "Woman, it's not time for me to die yet." That's weird.

But it looks like mama just blows him off. She pays no attention to his protestations. Mamas are kind of that way. (Jn 2.6) She just turns to the servants and says, "You just do whatever he tells you to do. My boy will take care of things." Now I don't know whether she was expecting a miracle, or whether Jesus was just good at taking care of things.

Anyway, it says there were 6 stone water jars nearby. They liked using stone jars to store the water for their purity rituals. And these jars are big: about 20-30 gallons each. (Jn 2.7-8) And Jesus says, "Fill them up, to the brim. Somewhere around 150 gallons of water.

And it's weird. Jesus doesn't do anything odd, he doesn't say anything spooky. He just says, "Now take some out, and take it to the head dude." And ... some time between the time they put the water into the jar, and the time the head dude tasted it ... it transmogrified – from water to wine. I don't know exactly when; I don't know exactly how – except that Jesus told it to. But that's a pretty impressive metamorphosis, wouldn't you say?

And it says, (Jn 2.9-10) the head dude tasted the wine... He had no clue where it came from. And he calls the groom over and he says, "Usually a host serves the best wine first, so after a few glasses taste doesn't matter

as much. You saved the most amazing wine till last?!" ... By the way, some of you are probably a bit skeptical it went down this way. But if you believe in God, a creator God, a God who spoke the world into existence, changing some water into wine is pretty much child's play.

Now guys, think about it. Apparently this is Jesus' first miracle. Apparently this is his "coming out," his debut – he chose this moment, in this place, in this way to make a statement about who he was and what he came for. And he chooses to transmogrify about 150 gallons of water into about 750 bottles of wine. Are you serious? I mean, it is a rather amazing wedding gift. Even at \$10 a bottle, it's a rather astounding gift. And it did save face for a family that was about to experience some intense shame. And it was more than enough wine to make it an amazing party. But really: is this the way you would choreograph Jesus' "coming out"?

In fact, one guy says this incident is a proof of the trustworthiness of John's gospel. I mean, who would make this up? No one would make up a story about the life of Jesus and then kick it off with a miracle like this! Of all the miracles you could choose to get things going, why would anyone invent changing some water to wine to save a wedding party?

But ... John calls it a sign, a pointer. And there is way too much weird in this story not to look deeper. You see, I don't think Jesus altered the molecular structure of 150 gallons of water just to prevent a social faux pas. So let's look at what Jesus really did, and then let's look at why Jesus did what he really did, and then we'll try to explain how Jesus did what he really did. First the what.

(Jn 2.9) So there was this head dude: the master of the banquet, the master of ceremonies. In that time it was on him to make sure it was a great party. So here's what Jesus does. Jesus says, "This party is about to crash and burn. This party is about to devolve into disgrace and shame. So, how about I give you a peek at who I really am. How about I take over as the Lord of the Feast." Basically Jesus takes over, and he pulls off a party that blows away any other party. Just picture Jesus planning a party. Would you want to go?

Now some of you guys are thinking that's almost sacrilegious. I mean it's scandalous enough to think that Jesus changed water into this amazing

wine. Can you really picture Jesus at a party? Or planning a party? Or taking over a party? My preaching partner, Randy, says that 30 years ago he preached a trial sermon at a church. He said something funny and people laughed – which is a miracle in itself, because Randy isn't nearly as funny as I am. Well this guy in the third row got up and he walked out. And Randy is thinking to himself, "Well, I guess the vote won't be unanimous." After the sermon, he says, Mr. Williamson was waiting for him in the foyer, and he was mad. And he said, "There's nothing funny about the cross of Christ." Well, that's true! But Mr. Williamson figured that meant there should be no laughter in worship! I guess he figured that Christians in church ought to look something like this ... or this ... or this ... or this ...

Well, I disagree (rather obviously). Yes, Jesus came to die on a cross, and that's wretched! Yes, he was humiliated and put through excruciating pain, that's awful! Yes, even before all that he lived a simple life of self-denial. But do you know why? Because, with his blood he was writing an invitation to the most amazing party ever. Because after the cross there will be a resurrection. And after the resurrection, someday there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And in that new heaven and that new earth there will be no more sin, no more death, no more tears. Instead, there will be a party you cannot imagine. And with his first miracle, his first sign, Jesus is giving us a preview of coming attractions. The Lord of all feasts is giving us a glimpse of what is coming. That's why John calls it a "sign."

And they knew it was coming. 800 years before Jesus a prophet named Isaiah told them it was coming. (Is 25.6-9) He said, "Here on this mountain, the Lord of heaven's armies will throw a feast for all the people of the world. It will be a feast of the finest foods, a feast with vintage wines, a feast of seven courses, a feast lavish with gourmet desserts. (Sounds amazing to me!) And here on this mountain, God will banish the pall of doom hanging over all peoples, the shadow of doom darkening all nations (the shadow of doom which still oppresses so many of you). Yes, he'll banish death forever. And God will wipe the tears from every face. (Guys, that's a party!) He'll remove every sign of disgrace from his people, wherever they are. (Can you imagine what that will feel like? No sin, no shame, no guilt, any more, ever?) Yes! God says so! And at that time, people will say, "Look at what's happened! This is our God! We waited for

him (we trusted him) and he showed up and (he) saved us! ... (Now) Let's celebrate, (let's party, let's) sing the joys of his salvation.

Do you believe that promise? Do you believe Jesus will be, and now is the Lord of the Feast? Timothy Keller writes, "At the end the reality will be so astonishing, the joy so incredible, the fulfillment will be so amazing that the most miserable life (here on earth) will feel like one night in a lousy hotel." Some of you guys need to know that. Some of you guys need to hang on to that. This is temporary; someday all the nasty will be removed and we will celebrate! And Jesus will be – in fact Jesus is -- the Lord of the Feast! So he pulls out His calling card at a nobody wedding in nowhere place and says, "I've come to bring joy!"

That's "what" he came to bring. Do you know "why" he had to bring it? ... So there are these 6 stone jars that are supposed to hold water to be used for purification. I'm not talking about physical washing; I'm talking about spiritual purification. You see they had all these rituals to purify themselves spiritually, because they knew they were a mess inside. These rituals drilled into their heads, and into their souls this fundamental truth: God is holy; we are not. God is perfect; we are flawed. If we are going to connect with God, there is some cleaning up to do.

You see, these jars were about sin. These jars were an admission that we are sinners. We don't like that part. We don't like admitting that we're a mess; we're sinners; we stand unclean, unholy in the presence of a perfectly holy God. But listen guys: you'll never understand real joy until you embrace the truth that you are a sinner and there is nothing you can do to fix yourself. You can't fix you. You can't clean you. But he can, and he does. If you have a lick of sense, you'll admit that there is this guilt and shame inside you, because you know you do what you shouldn't, you know you think what you shouldn't. They'll try to con you into thinking sin doesn't exist, that your shame is a sham. Guys, it's a lie. We can't fix our broken – we need help – which is "why" he came.

You ever wonder why you work so hard? You ever wonder why you are desperate to be right all the time? You ever wonder why you worry so much about how you look, and what people are going to think of you? Could it be because you know something's wrong. And you are trying to cover it up, you've trying to purify yourself, you are trying to prove yourself.

In the first Rocky movie Rocky is trying to explain to Adrienne that he doesn't need to win the fight, he just needs to go the distance. Because, he says, "I just wanna prove somethin' -- I ain't no bum... It don't matter if I lose... Don't matter if he opens my head... The only thing I want to do is go the distance -- that's all. Nobody's ever gone 15 rounds with Creed. If I go them 15 rounds an' that bell rings an' I'm still standin', I'm gonna know then I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood." And every one of us can feel what he felt. We want to prove to ourselves, and to people around us that we are not bums.

Or Adam and Eve, in the garden. They eat the fruit, they turn away from God, they feel this intense shame for the first time, and they feel like they have to cover up. They can't let God see them naked like that! So they cover themselves with fig leaves, as if that will fool God! You ever think of your success as a big fig leaf? Did you know that no matter how big the fig leaf, it will never be big enough to cover up what you know is wrong with you.

Adolf Eichmann was one of the Nazi war criminals responsible for the Holocaust. He escaped Germany, fled to South America where he was captured, and then taken to Israel for trial. They needed to find witnesses to testify, who had firsthand knowledge of his role in the horrors of the death camps. One of the witnesses they found was Yehiel De-Nur. When they brought De-Nur in to testify and he saw Eichmann, he broke down, falling to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. The courtroom broke into pandemonium. Sometime later Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes* interviewed De-Nur. Wallace showed him the tape of him falling down and asked him why it happened. Was he overwhelmed by painful memories? Was it hatred? Is that why he collapsed? "No." De-Nur said he was overcome by the realization that Eichmann was not some demon but just an ordinary man. Then he said, "I was afraid about myself... (because) when I looked at him I saw that I am capable of doing this... exactly like he." That is true for all of us. We want to deny it; but we know the capacity to do evil resides within us.

And Jesus knows that too – which is "why" he came. Later on in this same chapter John tells us something about Jesus, something that makes us

very uncomfortable. (Jn 2.25) John says, "No one needed to tell Jesus about human nature, for he (already) knows what is in each person's heart." He's not fooled by our masks. He knows us as we really are. So he knows what we really need. So He came to die, he came to take our place, he came to cleanse us, and to purify us from all that is wrong with us. He came for a cross ...

Doc talked about what Jesus did, when he took over as the Lord of the Feast. And he talked about why Jesus did it, because we can't fix ourselves. We can't come into the presence of the holy God without his help. I want to close it up by talking about a bit more about the how. How does Jesus bring the healing, the cleansing, the forgiveness we crave?

There is one more piece of the story. Mary tells Jesus there is no more wine. And Jesus says, "Woman" ... by the way, that wasn't as disrespectful back then as it sounds to us. He says, "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come." "My hour has not yet come." Listen guys, every time Jesus uses the phrase "my hour" in the gospel of John, he's talking about his death. So Mary says, "We have a crisis. We are out of wine." And Jesus says, "It's not time to die yet." Now mama didn't understand what he meant, but we can ... now.

You see, as Jesus is changing the water into wine, he's looking ahead to another feast. It's about three years later. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. He knows the cross is coming; he's been telling them it's coming. And he shares a last meal with his disciples – a Passover Feast. And the Lord of the Feast takes a cup of wine, and he says: This isn't wine any more. This is my blood. This is my blood poured out for you. So that someday we can sit together at that feast Isaiah the prophet told you about.

You see Jesus knew what he was going to do. He knew what he was going to do that good Friday, and 3 days later. And he knew what he was going to do one of these days in a new heaven, and a new earth. And he knew what it would take to get us there.

About 50 or 60 years later this same John, an old man now, would get a glimpse of what's coming. He says, in the book of Revelation, (Rev 19.9) "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." That's us! That's what's coming for us – if we follow him. But Jesus knew that if we were going to make it to the party of all parties, he had his own cup to drink first ... a cup of death – for you, and for me. So he changed the water into wine as his first sign. And three years later he turned the wine into blood. And every Sunday we pick up this cup – which represents Jesus blood -- and we know that something is coming that will be worth it all. Someday we will sit at table with the Lord of the Feast and everything will be as it should be.

One of the great stories of all time is *The Tale of Two Cities*. It tells the story of two good men, Charles and Sydney, who both love the same woman. She marries Charles, and they have a child. Well, near the end of the book Charles is imprisoned and he is sentenced to be executed. The other man, Sydney, knows that he looks enough like Charles to pull it off. So he slips into the prison, he knocks out his former rival, he puts on his clothes, and he takes his place. Later in the story we meet a seamstress who is also sentenced to the guillotine. She walks up to the man she thinks is Charles in order to be comforted, and then she realizes he's not Charles. Her eyes grow wide and she whispers, "Are you going to die for him?" "Shhh," Sydney whispers, "And for his wife and his child." And then she says, "O, will you let me hold your hand, brave stranger?" Because there is such power, and such strength, and such comfort in the realization there is a love that big – even though in her case that death was not for her. But ... His is for you! That's what the Lord of the Feast came to do, for you. He came to change water into wine, and wine into blood, so you can join him someday in the party of all parties.