

“They have no wine”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
2nd Sunday after Epiphany – January 17, 2010
John 2:1-11

When I first started this sermon, I had intended to make it a teaching sermon about Epiphany. I was going to talk about how, in the season of Epiphany, we hear stories about Jesus being revealed in the world. Each week in our scripture readings we hear about another revelation, another way that the divine presence is manifested in the world. Last week we heard about Jesus’ baptism. This week, in the story of the wedding at Cana, we witness Jesus’ first *sign* as reported in the Gospel of John. In this gospel, turning water into wine is not referred to as a miracle, but as a sign that points to something about Jesus. For John it’s less important how Jesus did what he did than what the sign says about who Jesus is. The sign speaks of the abundance of God.

With all these thoughts of signs, epiphanies, and revelations dancing in my head, I received word of the earthquake in Haiti.

At first it seemed impossible to combine the story of the wedding at Cana with the horror of the tragedy in Haiti. The story of Cana is a story of abundance. Jesus changed 6 jars of water, each holding 20-30 gallons, into wine. I’m not going to quibble over whether gallons were the same then as now. It was a heck of a lot of wine. Jesus provided extravagantly for the wedding. The only extravagance in Haiti right now appears to be an extravagance of suffering. What word do we hear from God in the story of the wedding at Cana that can speak to us in the face of such anguish?

I can't help but identify with Jesus' mother in this story. She sees a problem, and she knows Jesus can fix it. "They have no wine," she says. What's surprising is Jesus' answer, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" Jesus' hour has not yet come; he does not intend to do anything. But Mary doesn't accept that answer. She tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do, implying that she knows he will do something. She sees a need, and she points it out to Jesus. We do the same thing all the time.

As one commentator writes, "...just as the mother of Jesus saw her son as one who could – and should – meet need, so do many followers of Jesus. We see a world in need, and we believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. In a world where for so many there is no clean water – let alone fine wine – where is the extravagance of God? In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of thirty-gallon wine jugs, why the divine reluctance? In a world where desperate mothers must say to their small children, 'We have no food,' why has the hour not yet come? No matter how we rationalize divine activity, we still want to tug at Jesus' sleeve and say: 'they have no wine.'"¹

¹ Carol Lakey Hess, "John 2:1-11, Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: WJK, 2009) 261-162.

I want to tug at Jesus' sleeve and say to Jesus about the people of Haiti, "They have no water. They have no food. They have no shelter. They have no roads. They have lost their children, their parents, their families, their friends. They already lived in a place of poverty, unstable government, disease, corruption, insufficient infrastructure, and now even the ground under their feet has betrayed them. Jesus, they have no wine! They have no thing. Nothing."

I want to demand that Jesus fix this. I want death-defying miracles for the people of Haiti.

But what did Mary do after Jesus said that his time had not yet come? She told the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do. "Fill the jars with water." So they did. To the brim. Now this was no easy task. Think about how much time it would take to fill a 30 gallon jug from a water faucet today. It's not like they could just go over and turn on the hose or put the jugs in a shower. They had to go somewhere and get the water, gallon by gallon, lugging it from a well. I can't imagine how long it took them.

It was only after the servants listened to what Jesus told them to do and then hauled the water to fill the jars to the brim that Jesus turned the water into wine. We don't even hear about how he did it. The real miracle is how Jesus took what the servants had done and transformed it into something far beyond what they were capable of doing on their own. They couldn't turn water into wine, but they could fill jars with water. Jesus did the rest.

If we are like the servants in the story, then we too will listen for what Jesus tells us to do, and we will do it. Lauren Stanley shared a Creole proverb with us in her sermon yesterday. She said, “God says, ‘You do your part, and I’ll do mine.’” We as the church are the body of Christ in the world. We are the hands and feet of the risen Lord. We can no more turn water into wine than the servants of the bridegroom in Cana could. But we can fill empty jars with water. We can help the people rebuild their jars so that they might hold water again. Instead of insisting that it’s time for God to intervene, it’s our job to listen for what God is telling us to do, to open ourselves up so that God can empower us to take care of those who have nothing.

When Lauren spoke to us yesterday she challenged us not to give up hope for Haiti. “Don’t you dare give up hope,” she said. One response to tragedy is to become overwhelmed and give up hope in favor of despair. Another response is to turn away and forget because it’s simply too hard to continue to share the pain. In the case of Haiti it would be easy to look at what their situation was like before this earthquake and simply write them off as hopeless. But we are Christians, and we believe in Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen. We believe in God who redeems everything. We may cry out with our sorrow or storm heaven with our anger, but we know that even in the midst of our lament, God is with us. God came to be one of us and knows our pain. Just as Jesus suffered on the cross, so now he shares the suffering of those devastated by this earthquake. And the Holy Spirit sweeps through the suffering and calls for us to act: to pray, to give, and to hope. So that our hope will give them hope.

Here in the season of Epiphany, how are we seeing the risen Christ manifested even in the face of tragedy? We see members of the body of Christ working diligently, like Lauren Stanley, like the Bishop of Haiti, like the search and rescue crews, the aid workers, the doctors. We see them doing their part. Like them and like the servants in the story of the wedding at Cana, we have our work to do. It's time to do our part. Then we can stand at Jesus' side and watch as he transforms what we do into something much greater than we could accomplish alone. It may even look like changing water into wine.