

“Didn’t You See the Sign?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 17, 2010

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 62:1-5

Rev. John Wahl

John 2:1-11

I’ve heard it said that every generation has its own soundtrack: the music that was popular during your most impressionable years that sticks with you for a long time. For your particular generation, you may know the song titles, the lyrics and the artists: details emblazoned in your brain that you don’t easily forget. You may have some of that music tucked away somewhere in your home – as records, tapes or CDs – again depending on your particular generation.

When I was in high school, I was a punk rocker: listening to bands like the Clash and the Ramones. But, then I spent a couple of semesters working the graveyard shift as a DJ for the college radio station. That was the era of glam rock: big hair, leather pants and metal ballads – I could probably still recognize the album jackets for bands like Poison, Skid Row, and Whitesnake.

One of the bands we used to play was Tesla, who covered a song called “Signs,” originally performed a generation earlier by the Five Man Electrical Band. While looking up the lyrics this week, I found that the song was covered again a couple of years ago by a guy named Fatboy Slim. So, if you’re familiar with song “Signs,” performed by one of these three fairly obscure musical groups: the Five Man Electrical Band, Tesla, or Fatboy Slim, it probably is not hard to pinpoint your particular generation.

One of the verses of the song goes like this:

*And the sign said anybody caught trespassing would be shot on sight.
So I jumped on the fence and yelled at the house, Hey! what gives you the right,
To put up a fence to keep me out or to keep mother nature in?
If God was here, he'd tell you to your face, man you're some kinda sinner.*

And the chorus follows:

*Sign Sign everywhere a sign,
Blocking out the scenery breaking my mind.
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign.*

In the gospel of John, Jesus is described not as a miracle-worker, but a sign-giver. Although he performs some of the same acts as in the other gospels – feeding the hungry, healing the sick, controlling the forces of nature – they are referred to by John as signs. And as with many signs, people view them in different ways. Those

who feel trapped may view them as signs of freedom; those afflicted with demons might see them as signs of release. Those who are looking for a change would recognize these signs of Jesus as God's presence in the world, but many others ignore the signs. Some are content with the way things are; others don't have the imagination to see a new way.

These signs function not so much as proof that Jesus is God, but as opportunities to watch for God's working in the world. They are signs of abundance, grace, and love: a love so strong that God came into the world to meet us and redeem us.

As we open the second chapter of John, we find the story of Jesus' first sign. The scene has shifted from Judea – where Jesus had been baptized by John and recruited his first few followers – to the region where Jesus had grown up, Galilee. Jesus and his new disciples have therefore walked about seventy miles to the north, going even beyond his hometown of Nazareth. And, as the text tells us, they arrive at the wedding feast in Cana on the third day.

This mention of the third day offers not only a sequential fact, but also a reference to what is clearly evident through the Gospel: the fact of the resurrection. Here – in this changing of water into wine – we see Jesus performing the first of John's numerous signs which point to the message of the Good News: the more powerful transformation from death to life.

We're not told why Jesus was at the wedding; what his connection might have been to the bride or groom. But, it's interesting that Jesus showed up at the reception with five seemingly uninvited and unannounced guests: Andrew, Peter, Nathanael and Philip. And while it was fortuitous that the newly-recruited disciples were present to be witnesses to the sign, they also may have contributed to the original shortage.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, seized the occasion of the shortage to inform her son, in a very frank manner, "they have no more wine." She does not ask him to do anything about it; she merely points out – as some mothers tend to do – that "they have no more wine." Some commentators have speculated that this was a hint that it was time for Jesus and his band of wedding crashers to leave. Others say that Mary did not expect a miracle because none had been recorded before this time.

But, Mary had always known, just as John expected his readers to know, that Mary's son was fully capable of this or any other miraculous sign. The six jars of water that Jesus changes to wine – each of which could hold twenty or thirty gallons – provided more than enough of a wedding gift to compensate for the presence of five guests. And so, instead of having no wine, Jesus provides more and better wine than they could ever expect or imagine.

This first sign of Jesus' ministry resulted in about 150 gallons of wine – and no matter whether you serve by the box or the bottle – that's a lot of *vino*. Not surprisingly, in the final miraculous act that Jesus performs in John's Gospel – in its concluding chapter, is also a miracle of abundance, as the disciples are let to catch over 150 fish: a huge catch that surprisingly did not cause the nets to tear. "These miracles frame the Gospel on both ends, and through them we are given to understand that in this man, God's new age has arrived and God's abundant blessings are poured out on believers."¹

And yet, it is passages like these about divine extravagance that make God's apparent absence in the face of poverty and suffering. Why, we wonder, would God be present at a wedding reception or a fishing excursion – providing enormous amounts of wine and fish – when millions in places like Haiti and the Sudan suffer from a lack of food and water?

As curious as Mary's words to Jesus about the depleted supply of wine seem to be, Jesus' response is equally ambivalent. When Jesus asks her, "what concern is that to you and me?" Jesus is distancing himself not only from her, but from the situation itself. "My hour has not yet come," he says to his mother. This does not mean that Jesus will not act – because he does – but that what he does will be misunderstood. When he changes water into wine, it is not out of obedience to his mother's suggestion, or out of obligation to cover the cost of his companions, nor out of a desire to save the groom – the designated host of the wedding feast – from the embarrassment of a wine shortage.

We have no reason to doubt that this story about the wedding feast in Cana was rooted in a real event from the earliest days of Jesus' ministry; or that this would have been the first or last wedding that Jesus attended. But, in this familiar setting, we can see the hand of John, the storyteller, crafting the text to reflect the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. John builds into the story multiple layers of meaning – different ways to read this first sign.

The first possibility is to look at this story as a contrast between what is offered in Judaism and what is being revealed in Jesus. The water in these six stone jugs is for the purpose of ritual purification. When transformed through Jesus' command into wine, it becomes not only usable, but allows the celebration to go on. As Jesus said, he came not to abolish what had come before him – in his own Jewish faith – but to fulfill the promise of the Law of Israel. Wine is created every day – it is a natural process given the right ingredients and proper conditions. But, what Jesus miraculously provides is of a better quality, even if it comes last.

As second meaning within the story focuses on the joy surrounding the emerging realm of God. The setting of a joyous wedding feast was designed to point

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 17

in a positive direction. Jesus had an opportunity to reveal himself in this midst of this happy occasion – the beginning of a new life together. His coming-out was a party within a party. The feast provides a glimpse into the future gathering of saints that will happen in the fullness of time, to all those whom Jesus has gathered and led to the feast.

The third and maybe most profound meaning is that Jesus is revealed in places and times that are beyond our expectations. Even in those times that we do not expect to find God present – whether because it is ordinary or extra-ordinary – we should still be looking for signs of God. Jesus, in John’s view, is the giver of extravagant gifts to human beings. He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. (Jn. 10:10)²

The proclamation of God’s goodness in the face of suffering is called theodicy. How is a sovereign God to be found in a seemingly chaotic world? How is does a God who seemingly can act in miraculous ways not intervene in time of tragedy?

The theological response is varied. One is that – as Jesus stated – the hour has not yet come. God can and will act in God’s time and we are meant to wait in hope and expectation. Another explanation is that God relies on human compassion to do the will of God. Therefore, for Haiti, God is revealed through the selflessness of rescue workers and generous donors. But, still others contend a third option: that God needs to heirs of Jesus’ mother to prod for divine generosity.³ In other words, our praying and pleading for God to act inspires God to bring about feeding and healing; physical and spiritual.

You’ll probably agree that there is truth in all three approaches: hopeful waiting, compassionate acts, and prodding prayer. Which of the three you choose to undertake will no doubt be seasonal and, in part, generational. The same sign may be for you at one time or another a signal to keep faith, to do mercy, or to pray diligently. None are wrong; all of them have their place.

But, when the water was changed into wine, only a few saw the sign. Sure, lots of people enjoyed the fruits of Jesus’ labor, but only the disciples understood what the sign really meant: that Jesus, the Messiah, was now in their midst. The presence of these new disciples at that wedding party may have been unannounced, but now they had been invited to an even greater feast, and they would journey with Jesus and see the other signs along the way. They would be asked to wait patiently, to act with boldness and to pray fervently, so that one day they might share the good news of that wonderful invitation with others. AMEN.

² Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 12

³ Carol Lakey Hess in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1