

When Religion Runs Dry

Isaiah 62:1-5

John 2:1-11

“When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’”

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited....” The wedding in Cana, a story found only in John’s Gospel, is what we would call an occasion! Now an occasion, in the first place and by definition, is a happening, an event. There are those occasions slipped into ordinary time that gather friends and family, require significant preparation and always include food: weddings and wakes, baptisms and birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, retirements, (and gender revel parties!) to name a few. In anticipation of these occasions, we take charge. In fact, we knock ourselves out to make sure every detail is under our control: each person properly seated, maps carefully drawn between church and country club, food and wine thoughtfully matched, gifts recorded.

But often within the planned occasion, something unplanned happens that turns out to be the main event. Later we will recall that *that* was the time Aunt Fannie fell and broke her arm after a few too many...or the time when Mary Elizabeth screamed the moment water touched her little bald head and then she threw up on the minister...or the time Uncle Richard came out of the closet and, to everyone’s surprise, Uncle Darrell received the news with grace and love. When a side event becomes the main event, a second definition of occasion comes into play: occasion as “a chance or opportunity; a situation that allows something to happen.”

You could say that the wedding in Cana of Galilee was an occasion in the first sense of the word, to which the mother of Jesus was invited as well as Jesus and his disciples. According to Johannine scholar Raymond Brown, “The usual festivities consisted of a procession in which the bridegroom’s friends brought the bride to the groom’s house, and then a wedding supper [was served]; seemingly the festivities lasted seven days” with the wedding taking place on Wednesday. Ka-ching, ka-ching, ka-ching!

Yet the wedding at Cana turned out to be an occasion in the second sense of the word as well: a chance or opportunity; a situation that allowed something to happen. Jesus likely arrived at the groom’s house on Tuesday evening or Wednesday morning, “on the third day” John says, meaning, perhaps, the third day of the wedding week or the third day after Jesus had called his disciples. Although, given the occasion the wedding is about to become, in the second sense of the word, the mention of three days has about it a whiff of eternal time invading ordinary time. On the third day, John notes, and we think resurrection! But alas, because we are still creatures of sequential time, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

No doubt Jesus and the disciples had already become the life of the party, a new experience for disciples who had previously followed a teetotaler and connoisseur of locusts and honey. Now they were free to fill their plates with lamb, veal, hummus, ripe olives, stuffed grape leaves, falafel, and--more to the point--to fill their wineskins with Cana Wine. In other words, the crisis of wine that became the occasion for Jesus’ first sign must not have happened immediately. Rather we can assume that the guests, including the disciples, were feeling no pain “when the wine gave out.”

Jesus learns of the crisis, the chance, the opportunity, the situation that may allow something to happen, from his mother who simply reports, “They have no wine.” This is the sort of observation one human being makes to another with an overtone of gossip or an undertone of alarm or with no tone at all. “FYI,” the mother of Jesus says, “they are out of wine.” Moreover her simple statement of fact gives us no reason to think she is expecting a sign or a miracle. Who knew Jesus was up to such things? Still interpreters have presumed a sense of expectation in her words given Jesus’ response. “Woman,” meaning no disrespect within the context of the culture “what concern is that to you and to me?” Literally the words translate “What to me and to you?” It is a Semitism meaning: “That is your business; how am I involved?”

Yet what Jesus says next reveals the true occasion of this story and the reason John includes it at the beginning of his Gospel. “My hour,” Jesus says, “has not yet come.” Hour is a word used twelve times in John’s Gospel to mean the hour of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. From the wedding at Cana until the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, it is said that Jesus’ hour has not come. Only when Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin does he announce that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

But in the beginning, at the wedding in Cana, Jesus says to his mother, “My hour has not yet come.” Nevertheless he seizes the occasion as a situation that allows something to happen, something that has to do with the uneasy relationship between religion and revelation. Please notice: I did not say the uneasy relationship between Judaism and Christianity, but the uneasy relationship between religion and revelation! The wine running out is a metaphor, some say, for the moribund institution of religion that had literally run dry, that continually runs dry, that will always run dry. The six stone jars set aside for the Jewish rites of purification--the ritual cleansing of diners before a meal or women after childbirth--become the occasion, on the third day, for God’s glory to be revealed in the abundance of good wine. I repeat,

the religion in question is not Judaism in particular but is religion in general. Think of religion as the codification and the certainty that comes from *our* seeking God. Think of revelation as God seeking us.

Having no inkling of what is about to take place, Mary says to the steward, in the subjunctive mood, the mood of wish and hope and supposition, “Do what he may tell you.” Certainty is not her lot. The steward obeys, then tastes the water that has become wine. Not knowing where it has come from, he assumes that the bridegroom has kept the good wine for the third day. He assumes that the one he thinks is in charge of the occasion has provided. The party resumes.

We are no strangers to such occasions. There have been crises in our lives when time has run out, occasions when human control and certainty no longer avails. We pray for a miracle and sometimes, for reasons we cannot fathom, the crisis is averted and we are returned to our daily lives as those who have been saved from what seemed to us a disaster. We do not know how. Chance? Dumb luck? A turn of events that we eventually will be able to attribute to some reasonable sequence of events, if we can simply figure out how one thing led to another?

This is not the case in Cana, for in Cana, according to John, not only did revelation come up against religion: eternity entered the sequence of time. The Word that was in the beginning with God and was God, the Word that was and is and is to come, entered successive time, mortal time, sequential time running toward the grave. Having become flesh, Jesus assumes the circumscribed time of a human life. Yet at Cana, Karl Barth says, “his time acquires, in relation to [our] time, the character of God’s time, of eternity, in which present, past and future are simultaneous.”

Three days having passed. Easter time breaks in on our drear captivity to sin, to loss, to scarcity, to death. The occasions of our lives that seem to be not much more than one damn thing after another are given a taste of God’s time—which is like a wedding where the best wine never runs dry. Wine in astounding abundance, new wine, the best wine: wine that calls to mind Jesus’ blood, poured out to purify sinners once for all, is poured for the guests. This, John says, is the beginning of a story, a love become flesh that can only end in death and resurrection.

To wit: we will soon see that the religious professionals, the men who are accustomed to arranging and ordering occasions having to do with God, will oppose revelation in the name of religion, will privilege their certainty about God over the Word of God become flesh, will use the moral law within them to counter the grace upon grace made known in Jesus. So it is that the seriously religious of every age—Muslim fundamentalists; Calvinists, for sure; though the bishops of the Anglican Communion come most immediately to mind this morning—proclaim this time before the “end” to be a time of narrow judgment, of a feast fenced to exclude, of privation and prohibition, thereby missing the true occasion, the party, the messianic banquet breaking in where all the stops are pulled out! The headwaiter’s announcement that the finest wine has been kept to the end becomes an announcement of Christ’s return amid a religious tradition (even and especially the Christian tradition) gone dry and barren.

I believe with all my heart and with as much of my mind as I can muster, that the One who was and is and is to come is both present and on his way to the time you and I have been given to be human in. In his presence, I believe that every moment, no matter how mundane, is an occasion for the fullness of time to be revealed, is a situation that allows something extraordinary and unexpected to happen because Jesus lives. For those whose sequential time is open and vulnerable to such occasions, for those whose every crisis has been met by the bright blows of God’s grace and glory, for those who have put all their trust in the promise that death no longer has dominion, then all of human existence becomes an occasion in the second sense of the word: a chance, an opportunity, a situation that allows love and hope and joy to happen.

On the night before his murder, Martin Luther King spoke of how the sequential time of his human existence had been transformed by the glimpse he had been given of God’s eternity: “Like anybody,” he confessed, “I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned with that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. (I’ve seen the eternity of God in time.) I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. That is to say, they followed him. Thanks be to God!