

“A Symbolic Vintage”

John 2.1–11

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 18 Jan 04

“Aha!” The season of Epiphany is all about “Aha!” moments. The roots of the Greek word *epiphainein* mean to show or to reveal. So, when you see something for the first time, when a secret is revealed to you, when a truth becomes apparent to you, you just might respond by exclaiming, “Aha!”

So, when Matthew’s gospel tells the story of the Magi arriving to worship Jesus, the writer is telling the tale of three Gentiles who “got it” when most of Jesus’ own people were oblivious. The Magi had an “Aha!” moment, while the rest of us were in the dark. When Luke’s gospel recounts Jesus’ baptism, the story is all about God providing an “Aha!” moment for Jesus. And in this week’s lectionary reading the writer of John’s gospel tells us about another “Aha!” moment. This is one of those “signs and miracles” stories that describe “Aha!” moments for the people who witness them and get the idea that Jesus is someone extraordinary, who has powers that the rest of us don’t have.

So, if you’re one of the Magi, or Jesus, or someone who actually witnessed Jesus turning water into wine, you’ve had an epiphany. Well, what about the rest of us? Have you ever had a sudden realization about your faith? Maybe you have had the experience of things finally starting to make sense to you, or having someone tell you that it all doesn’t have to make sense. For me, I had an “Aha!” moment when I was reading John Dominic Crossan’s book, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. Suddenly, I was able to grasp the idea that Jesus was not a two-dimensional figure, but a real person who lived a real life and who has a message for humanity even today. These little epiphanies take on all kinds of forms, some dramatic and others very ordinary. And sometimes epiphanies don’t come with lightning bolts, but rather over time.

One of the tough things about epiphanies is that they are difficult to share with other people. I may want you to understand how wonderfully moving Dom Crossan’s book was. But, you may not “feel the earth move” while reading it. In the final analysis, we all have to experience these things first-hand.

Funnily enough, that’s what the gospel writers are often trying to do: to share others’ first-hand experiences with us. In fact, this story is used as John’s way of introducing the public ministry of Jesus: it’s not Jesus’ baptism, it’s not Jesus reading from the Isaiah scroll, or spending 40 days in the wilderness. It’s Jesus performing a miracle, which opens the eyes of the people around him.

And in terms of having an epiphany, glimpsing someone else’s experience doesn’t typically work; the miracle stories are just hearsay, until we are able to internalize them and apprehend them in a way that gives them meaning.

Do I worship Jesus because someone said he could turn water into wine or because another person said he could walk on water? No, that isn’t really convincing to me. I worship God and Christ because of their presence in my own life and experience, though I certainly find the testimony of others – whether they are gospel writers or people here at Plymouth – valuable and amazing.



So, what are we to do with this wonderful miracle story? We can take it in and interpret it to be factual: that Jesus really was a guest at a wedding celebration at which the wine ran out, that he saw large empty containers, asked the servants to fill them with water, and then he transformed the water into wine. And that’s the interpretation that you might just hear in some churches: that this is proof positive that Jesus had the ability

to change one substance into another. And if that's your interpretation, I'm not going to try to disabuse you of that idea.

But, I'd say that if you just leave the story there, you lose out of several dimensions of richness that this wonderful story can provide – a dimension that can add to your faith, not diminish it.

Likewise, if you write off the story as a naïve fiction, you lose out its meaning. I think that's a tendency some of us at Plymouth might have: to say the story just isn't historically accurate and to say it's irrelevant. That perspective okay as a way-station on your journey, but I wouldn't suggest staying there, because it's not growthful. I think this is also the place that a lot of the church alumni association, as Jack Spong calls them, tend to reside.

In Greek, the word *mythos* is much richer than our English word, *myth*. If I say to you that something is a myth, you're likely to think that I mean that it's a fabrication, that it's patently untrue. But, if I use the word in its earlier sense, in the sense of the Greek *mythos*, then I'm suggesting that it's a narrative that has layers of meaning that will unfold, though it may not be a historical/factual account of what happened.

The German writer Thomas Mann suggests that “A myth is a story about the way things never were, **but always are.**” So, is there an element of this story about the wedding feast at Cana that can be interpreted this way: that maybe these “things never were, but always are?” For me, this is a richer, more productive way to approach the miracle stories than to insist they happened just the way the gospel writers said they did. Does that mean they are untrue? On the contrary!



So, let's work a bit with the images and the underlying truths of the story of Jesus turning the water into wine. First, let's look at the symbolic meanings of water for the people of the first century. In the Jewish tradition of that day, water was the tool of purification. And that's why these large vats are at the wedding: to hold water for purification, as John's gospel tells us. It's kind of like holy water in a Roman Catholic church, but on a bigger scale. And weddings weren't just small, intimate occasions that might last an afternoon; it was a several-day-long celebration at which a family would put their all into the celebration, so running out of wine wouldn't be a good thing. But, back to the idea of water. While it's abundant on our planet, and it's essential to life, water is just common, nothing too out of the ordinary, except that it can be used to make things and people ritually clean. Water in this story can be seen as a representation of the old school of religion: the Judaism of Jesus' day, which depends on ritual purity as a path toward holiness.

On the other hand, we have wine. In the Hebrew Bible, wine is a symbol of spiritual joy. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do.”¹ And it's a symbol of God's abundance, as when Amos and Joel both prophesy that “the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.”² Wine, of course, is also intimately connected with Jesus and the last supper. The wine is the cup of blessing, the cup of the new covenant, the lifeblood of the messiah. It is no accident that this symbol of spiritual joy, the representation of God's abundance is central in the story of the joyous wedding feast, which also echoes life and love. And the wine that Jesus creates is an icon for Jesus himself as the **new** way: as a new path toward spiritual awakening.

¹ Ecclesiastes 9.7

² Amos 9.13 and Joel 3.18

What kind of wine do you think Jesus would be? Would he be a delicate, pale pinot grigio, or a deep, swarthy cabernet sauvignon? A tart, little Beaujolais or a complex, scintillating merlot? My guess is that vintage Jesus is on the bold side: not afraid to disturb the palate of those who dare to taste him.

So, clearly the story has deep symbolic meaning. And the metaphorical meanings of the story come forth across the millennia into our own day. Jesus is the one who is able to turn water into wine, to make the mundane into the extraordinary, to turn scarcity into abundance, to fill the empty spaces of our lives with wholeness, to bring life from death, to add flavor, color, depth to life here and now.

The act of changing water to wine is the act of transformation. But the power of the messiah is not limited to changing the nature of wine: he has the power to change us, too. The story wouldn't have much impact if Jesus had said, "Oh, well...the wine is gone; somebody make a run to the liquor store." And the life of faith wouldn't have much impact if we said to ourselves, "Oh, well...my life is what it is, and I'm not going to change." Following Jesus by definition is a life-changing process, a pilgrimage that necessitates both personal and societal transformation. Most Christians overemphasize the personal and neglect the societal, but it's just the reverse in the United Church: we tend to focus on social justice, sometimes to the exclusion of personal faith and transformation. But the way of Jesus is the path of transformation: **both** in our own lives **and** for the society in which we live. On this weekend when we celebrate the life of Martin King, we need to remember the dimension of social transformation that King's Christianity inspired. It was the type of Christianity that changed hearts and minds, public policy and private thoughts, that changed water into wine.

The other symbolic dimension of the gospel story involves the community of John's struggle with Temple Judaism in the first century. This community was a group of Jews who had been ostracized because they recognized Jesus as the messiah. It wasn't a friendly separation: it was much more akin to being thrown out of the family. So, the first-century Jewish ideal of ritual purity is closely identified in this story with the image of water: *the water that Jesus transforms*. But, in a strong, metaphoric twist, Jesus is identified with the wine, as the one who fulfills the messianic expectations of the Jews. And as if to thumb their noses at the Jewish establishment, John has the wine steward question why the best wine – that is, Jesus – was held back and the cheap stuff was served first. It's not a very pleasant image, really, and John's gospel is full of occasions when the writer denigrates the Jewish establishment. The tragic dimension of that theme is that it has woven a strand of anti-Semitism into thousands of years of the Christian tradition, that this was never its intended effect.

One can also make the argument that Jesus was taking the ideal of ritual purity and replacing it with God's abundance and compassion: a theme that certainly runs through the other gospels.



I wonder if there are ways in which some aspect of your life is rather flavorless and bland right now. What would it take to turn bland water into a crisp, zesty wine in those parts of your life? What parts of your life do you need some help in transforming?

One of the close analogies we use in our own day also involves a beverage: have you ever taken the lemons you've been given and used them to make lemonade? Perhaps bringing your faith into the recipe might help. Just knowing that you are God's beloved daughter or son might add some flavor and sweetness to the mix. And know that you have a congregation behind you in your quest to be transformed, not perfect.

My hope for you is that you won't simply write off the miracle stories, but rather that you'll work with them to see what they meant in context and what meaning they can add to your life today. And that you'll drink deeply from the symbolic wine cellar of the stories of our faith.

I'd like to leave you with some vintage words from W.H. Auden, from piece a piece called "For the Time Being." Hear the richness of the metaphor that Auden derives from the refrain from John's gospel:

"He is the Way. Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness; you will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.

"He is the Truth. Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety: You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

"He is the Life. Love him in the World of the Flesh: And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy."

Amen.