

Manor Road United Church Epiphany 2C January 14, 2018
John 2:1-11 *On the Third Day*

As we begin this passage, we begin a portion of John known by Biblical Scholars as, “The Book of Signs.” With its first words, we already hear echoes of the past, and whispers of the future. We hear the words, “On the third day,” and know that these are words that we have heard before, and words that we will hear again -- words that are rich with meaning beyond what would be found in a literal reading of the text. We are entering a story, rich in symbolism, one to be read not as historical narrative, but rather as spiritual revelation.

We hear, “On the third day,” and recall the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, as light is separated from darkness, as land is separated from water, as, on the third day, life springs forth in creation.

We hear, “On the third day,” and we recall the story of Jonah... languishing in the belly of a great fish... until ‘on the third day’ he is delivered (actually vomited!) onto the shores of Nineveh... and again, as on another third day, as the inhabitants of that great city repent and experience the Salvation of God ...

We hear, “On the third day,” and we hear whispers of the future... of crucifixion, of death and burial, and then, “on the third day he arose from the dead”... new life, new hope, new promise.

Because these ancient stories run deep in the DNA of Christian memory, when we hear our story begin, “On the third day,” we can anticipate that we are going to hear something about the power of God to bring life out of death, order out of chaos, abundance out of emptiness, salvation out of desperation... and we wait as we hear again the story’s unfolding, and wonder what it might mean for our lives.

The occasion is a wedding feast, a time of covenant making, of new relationship, a new life in the making. In choosing a wedding as the context for the first revelatory “sign” of Jesus’ true identity to his disciples, John confirms the challenge as well as the love, joy and blessing to be found in the making and living out of covenant relationships with one another. We were designed it seems, to be a covenant making people. Often, it is only in safe spaces created by sacred covenant that we truly flourish and come into our own as human beings.

But there’s something more in the setting of the story. We also hear in it echoes and whispers from both the new and old testaments, of other wedding feasts, of brides and bridegrooms, pointing to the covenant-making of God with God’s people, of Christ with the Church, and of a great heavenly banquet at the culmination of history.

John has a way of bringing it all into his story... as we ponder the words he writes and dwell on the images he evokes... past and future seem to pulse into the present... energizing it with the life of God, and we wonder, “where next?” “when next?” “How, where, when will the transforming, life-giving love of God be revealed among us?”

When indeed! Often it seems it is only when we reach the end of our rope, when we are out of energy, ideas, and answers. Often, it seems it is only when our spirits and our resources are running on empty, that we finally turn our attention beyond ourselves and cry out, “How long, O God?”

And then, sometimes it happens that beyond the place of desperation and anxiety, we slowly move to a place of calm acceptance, emptiness, openness. Finally, we are ready. As we are quiet and calm enough to listen, we may begin to sense an answer forming, a sense of assurance, then inkling of a way forward. In those moments, we may notice our situation, and perhaps, more importantly, we ourselves being somehow changed—our inner lives being transformed.

An acquaintance of mine once shared with me a time such as this in his life. After much angst and deliberation, he had accepted a job transfer at a considerable distance from his home. Their house wasn’t selling, and he and his wife weren’t able to find a house in the community where he was working. He was spending long hours on the road, and they were both becoming increasingly distraught and upset.

Then one day (or as gospel-writer might put it, “When the time was right,”) on his way to work there settled within him a quiet understanding that their needs would be provided for. He calmed down. He began to trust. He shared his renewed confidence with his wife, and they decided to stop their anxious searching and wait. They had done their homework. It was time to trust. Within days (or as gospel-writer might put it, “On the third day”) my friend came across a new development in the area where they wanted to live, and a house that he thought would be perfect. He phoned his wife to tell her his news, only to learn that she had some news of her own. They had just received an offer on their house. (Sounds like a storyline from *Touched by an Angel!*)

Now, it is true, our prayers are rarely answered so directly, nor are they often answered in ways we might initially hope or expect. Still, there is wisdom to be found here. We can get so caught up in trying to manage and control every part of our lives, that in our panic, we blind ourselves to possibilities that are right there in front of us, or refuse to wait for the possibilities that may emerge given time. Sometimes we need to wait.

At Passover time, we used to sit around the table with my husband Michael's family. There was always an empty chair at the table for the coming of Eliahu (AKA Elijah)! Similarly, at the beginning of our time of worship, we light a candle to remind ourselves of Christ's presence with us.

I wonder how many of us at times of personal and family celebration think to leave an empty chair, or to light a candle as a way of anticipating, celebrating and honouring the presence of the Christ; and while we're at it, reminding ourselves of how Jesus loves a party!

Our story reminds us that ritual purity has never been a substitute for inspired, joyful lives—that stale religion has never been a substitute for the celebration of life. Fine wine in extravagant abundance, has long been a symbol of divine blessing, of new life, rejoicing, and the power of the Spirit to make all things new. In our story, the waters, which would have merely cleansed the hands have become a fountain of joy, welling up unto eternal or fullness of life. The celebration continues, and the bride and groom end this day of days, this night of nights, in fullness and in joy. With this story, John signals for us the spiritual transformation that happens with the coming of the Christ—from empty ritual into life giving celebration, from empty religion into joyful worship; from shame and disgrace to honour and esteem. The gifts of God for the people of God—for all who will receive!

Our story ends in this way: "This was the first of the miraculous signs which Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him." So it is that the gospel of John in the simplest of stories carries hidden within it messages of the surprising transforming power of the God revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and in so doing invites us to the living out of lives which will reflect the same glory!