

Isaiah 62:1-5
John 2:1-11

The Lord's delight

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gotch

The last time I led worship here we read the texts for All Saints Day, which included the raising of Lazarus from John, chapter 11. The lectionary finishes at verse 44, but it's actually the following verse which informs us about the purpose of the story: 'Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.' Scholars recognize this story as the seventh and final sign in the fourth gospel, which concludes the first half of John's narrative, known as the 'book of signs', and leads into the second half, the so-called 'book of glory'.

Today, we've heard the gospel narrative that John declares to be the first of Jesus' signs. As the church discovers during the season of Christmas, the Gospel according to John is deeply interested in exploring the meaning of Jesus through vivid images and metaphors. The gospel opens with a prologue that recalls the creation story of God's Spirit giving form to the void and God's Word speaking light into darkness. The prologue declares that the source and destiny of God's creating is God's Word, the Word which becomes flesh in Jesus Christ and dwells among us in glory, grace and truth to make God known. Jesus is the form and light of God's creating; the living one through whom all things came into being.

With the prologue having set the scene, the gospel then features the witness of John the Baptist: The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared: 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed: 'Look, here is the Lamb of God.' The gospel then indicates that the next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee, bringing us to the passage we've heard today, which begins: 'On the third day ...' Of course, this reference to the third day already anticipates something significant about how the life of the crucified Jesus is made available to the world.

In John, chapter 2, the third day is the occasion of a wedding in Cana, to which Jesus, his mother, and his newly called disciples are invited. This wedding occurs in a culture in which it's common to serve the good wine early, and replace it with poorer wine as guests become too drunk to notice the difference. Good news perhaps for wedding hosts, since celebrations typically lasted several days. And yet, inexplicably, on this occasion the supplies don't last the distance, and we're left wondering about the dismay and embarrassment of the hosts. At this point, Mary informs Jesus that 'they have no wine.' To which he replies: 'What concern is that to you and me?'

This seems like a fair response. After all, it's not his responsibility to cater for the wedding. But Mary is anticipating something of far greater significance than this celebration. And this is precisely what Jesus is thinking when he adds: 'My hour has not yet come.' This references a narrative thread that appears later in the gospel. In chapter 7, some people attempt to arrest Jesus, but no one lays their hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. In chapter 8, after proclaiming himself as the light of the world, he again avoids arrest, because his hour had not yet come. Finally, in John chapter 12, Jesus declares that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Now we discover that the hour he speaks of to Mary is the hour in which he's to be lifted up on a cross to draw all people to himself.

This explains his initial reluctance at the wedding banquet, which now hints at another significant theme we must explore. In John chapter 3, the Baptist speaks of Jesus as the bridegroom, and of himself as the bridegroom's friend whose joy has been fulfilled. Then in John chapter 4, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, noting how she's had five husbands and her current partner is not her husband. Is Jesus being presented here as a groom, and if so, what is the identity of the bride and indeed the nature of the pending nuptials? Those who know the Scriptures may recall the prophetic Hebrew imagery about God as a husband who courts Israel as a wife, or the eschatological imagery of the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19.

Which brings us back to Cana, as Mary advises the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them. At his command, they fill six stone jars to the brim with water, and then draw out wine of the finest quality. These six stone jars set aside for the Jewish rites of purification had been empty, just like the wedding supplies, but now they contain the abundance of a new dispensation. Jesus attends the wedding as guest, but then becomes host, the one who embodies the hospitality of God, deconstructing cultic demands as the water of the old covenant becomes the wine of the new, a new covenant sealed in his blood and signed in his cup. His hour has not yet come, but he is anticipating a banquet set for all humanity. The wedding celebration of an unknown and unnamed couple presents any and all moments in which eternity enters the mundane as a sign of God's revelation and offer of life.

Our world is in the midst of precarious times: deadly wildfires around Los Angeles hint at what's to come as global temperatures rise; a tenuous cease fire in the horrific violence between Israel and Hamas; Donald Trump to be inaugurated for a second time as President of the United States. It remains to be seen how these events will play out, and the world will look like in four weeks, four months and four years.

What is certain, however, is the church's faith and hope in the one whose glory is revealed in death, and whose life is the light of the world. As bridegroom, Jesus recapitulates the prophetic promise to vindicate the forsaken and desolate, gathering them as a bride in whom the Lord rejoices and delights. Here is the table of the Lord, a sign of the wedding feast in which all things are consumed in his honour and service. Our Lord's hour presses in on us.

Here, we are made welcome by hospitality that is not of this world.
Here, the Spirit of devotion shared between Father and Son is poured out upon us.
Here, the exhausted old wine is replaced by the water of life.
Here, we are fed by the bread of heaven and cup of eternal salvation.
Here, we receive what we are and become what we receive.
Here, we are enlivened by the Spirit to be the body of Christ.
Here, we are sent by Christ and with Christ into the world.

And now to the God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.
