

Third Sunday in Lent - Sunday March 7, 2021

WORSHIP FOCUS: "The Party"

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. - *Frederick Buechner*

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

SECOND LESSON: Jeremiah 33: 10-11

Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, "It is a waste without human beings or animals," in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD:

*"Give thanks to the LORD of hosts,
for the LORD is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!"*

For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD.

THIRD LESSON: John 2:1-12

On the third day [following Jesus' baptism] there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water."

And they filled them up to the brim.

He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward."

So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.

REFLECTION: “The Voice of Mirth”

In John’s gospel, Jesus’ ministry starts abruptly. We read a preamble about Jesus being the pre-existent word of God. Then John the Baptist baptises Jesus. The next day Jesus calls the sons of Zebedee. The day after that, he calls Nathaniel and Phillip to him. And, on the third day, Jesus goes to a wedding.

John’s gospel is very different than the other three gospels. It tells the story of Jesus very differently from the other three gospels. Everything is rearranged in John. For example, the very next story in John that we read, following the wedding at Cana, is the story of Jesus cleansing the temple – a story that in Matthew and Mark occurs much later in Jesus’ ministry. What is also different about the Gospel of John is the way that the writer includes stories that do not appear elsewhere. For example, the story about the wedding at Cana occurs only in John’s gospel.

John’s gospel is different because the story that John is telling about Jesus the Christ has a slightly different focus from the other three gospels. For John, this pre-existent nature of Christ, the alpha and the omega, means that the end is, in some way, truly also the beginning. And so, stories that appear at the end of the other gospels appear at the beginning of John, and stories that do not appear elsewhere anticipate the resurrection not merely as a foreshadowing, but in a way that implies that the saving action of Christ, and the triumph of Christ over death and the forces of evil, is already taking place.

Today, I want to talk a little bit to you about this special story in John about a wedding, as well as weddings and feasts as they occur in scripture, and discuss what, in John’s story, this wedding points to and shines a light on.

First, I want to talk to you a little bit about celebrations in general.

There is a tendency in the Bible and in some churches to consider work and struggle as our lot in life. Some parts of the scripture and some church leaders tend to take God’s admonishment to Adam and Eve that, because of our original sin, our life on earth will be full of pain, and toil and disappointment. East of Eden, we will, like the serpent, eat dirt. This theme of fallen humanity is a major theme in scripture. In this understanding, we can only permit ourselves parties and we truly enjoy ourselves if conditions are met, or a schedule is followed. For example, if we have confessed our sins, we can enjoy communion. If we take Lent seriously and engage in the correct spiritual practises, we can put on a new hat on Easter Sunday and march in the parade. This is the Baptist’s view, certainly. Repent, because the Kingdom of God is near. Make yourself ready. Be prepared for the party to come.

Isaiah, chapter 25, paints a picture of this great party when the garden will be restored and the party we are all waiting for will take place. “*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,*” writes Isaiah, “*A feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples. The sheet that is spread over all nations; and he will swallow up death forever.*”

This joy, however, is something that we have to wait for, to anticipate, and pray for. Isaiah writes: *“It will be said on that day, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited.”* Only in this distant future, may it be said, *“Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

Our reading from Jeremiah also talks about the party planning that we should all be doing for the future. *“I will restore the fortunes of the land, as at first,”* says the Lord. Again, there is that radical hope that we will go back to the party that was the garden, where *“there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD.”*

Do not doubt it for one minute; parties are very much loved by God. We are having a party. And we are certainly having an especially big one when things return to normal, when we conquer racism, and figure out how to reconcile with our First Nations people, and find a cure for cancer and Alzheimer’s, learn how to truly help those with addictions and mental health issues in our society, and fix climate change.

And yet, in our scripture, there is also evidence that the party is happening now, not just going to happen in the distant future. We celebrate the great things that have already happened. The Exodus. The miracle of their being enough oil for the lamps at Hannukah. The love between Naomi and Ruth. David’s triumph over the Philistines. Harvests. Graduations. Ordinations. And weddings.

The Song of Songs, for instance, turns every thought of grimly waiting for the joy to come on its end:

“The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes,” not in the near future, or far future, the poem tells us, but now, *“leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, now, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved is speaking and saying to me now: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”* Today! Not tomorrow!

It is time, the Song of Songs reminds us, for joy, for a party, for marriage, for two to become one, for the spiritual joy of sex and intimacy, not tomorrow, but now. Not in the dim future, but now!

When I was a boy, I remember my mother talking to my Aunt Rene about a wedding she had read about in a popular book of the time, in which a man and a woman got married during the war, and they were so poor and supplies were so low, that all they had for their wedding feast was Spam. I remember my mother crying, as she talked to my Aunt Rene, about this wedding.

“It was so sad,” she kept telling my Aunt, “It was pathetic. I don’t know how they could possibly have felt happy. But they were. It was happy. It was one of the happiest things I have ever read.”

In this unknown book, which I remember my mother being so challenged by, a joy was depicted in the middle of a terrible ‘now,’ that my mother struggled to comprehend. And yet, I know she got it. I know she did, because two years ago when my Dad was in ICU at St Mikes in Toronto, and we were pretty sure that he was not going to live, my Mom said to me and my brother and sisters at a crappy Chinese food restaurant on Parliament Street, “I am so glad to

have you all here with me today. I am so glad for this opportunity to celebrate and give thanks for this family.”

In the story of the Wedding at Cana, we find Jesus caught between his fixation on the future feast, on that future great feast Isaiah writes of -- on the joy that the resurrection and Christ's conquering over death will be -- and the humble 'now' which does not seem to have anything to do with that great, joyous occasion. At the party, Jesus' mother asks Jesus to do something. The wine is running out. And Jesus says to her, a little angrily, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

Jesus is, I think, fixated on the future, on his end that will be a beginning. But I think Mary challenges him. Mary gets Jesus thinking, "Why not now?"

We do not know who was getting married. But we do know that when people marry, two become one. Two people become one. Two families draw together. The friends of the two families draw together. In this loving, we get a taste of God's love for us. We taste and see that God's creation is good. And we get a taste of the great feast that is coming. Love -- is certainly a taste of the kingdom that Jesus comes to see is not just coming, but now.

I believe that as Jesus processes his mother's request, Jesus comes to see this. That we can't just celebrate in the future. All of creation is proclaiming God's glory now, and men and women should as well, even if the reality we are living in is not perfect. Even if the time is not right. Even if we are eating Spam.

"Jesus did this," says John, "the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory." The wine that usually is served last -- the good wine that our wider Christian narrative tells us comes at the end, after the resurrection -- comes at the beginning of John's story. We don't wait for glory, or the party. We recognize God's glory and celebrate it now.

This week, as I was walking to church on a very cold and blustery day, I was having a bit of an angry frustrated morning. I was worrying. I was a little furious with someone. I was unsure about how I should proceed with some very delicate and important matters. And I was grieving. There has been a lot of death in my personal life lately.

And as I walked up Church Hill, I felt the sun warming the back of my head, and turned to look at it, and was stunned by its perfect round impenetrable brightness. And I noticed the birds. They were crazy singing. They were so happy. I wondered if they had been eating fermented grapes or something. They seemed drunk and besotted with happiness.

"And why can't I be happy?" I asked myself. "Why indeed?" a still, small voice replied.

The Kingdom of God is coming. Vaccines are coming. And yes, I can't wait until things return to normal and I can start going out and meeting people and we can all meet together and worship together in the sanctuary. And yet, why am I waiting to celebrate?

The Kingdom of God is also 'now.' Why was I saving the good wine for the bitter end? And so, when I got home that night, I defrosted an expensive steak I was saving up for a special occasion and cooked it. I had asparagus and mashed potatoes with it. I made myself a baked apple and had it with ice cream for dessert. And I cracked open a bottle of champagne someone had given me.

God reveals God's glory every day, I told myself. So celebrate the glory. Instead of saving up my joy for special occasions, practise partying more often now. The Kingdom, as John tells us, is already here. We need to celebrate that now. We also need to celebrate now, in order to practise. Because, when the Kingdom is achieved 100 per cent -- when we all get our vaccines, and we tear off our masks -- we are really going to need to know how to party!