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2 Epiphany/Year C  
John 2:1-11  
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### **Seeing the Signs**

I remember well the first wedding at which I officiated. I can still see it, still hear it, still feel it inside. But I imagine that will always be so, even some decades from now. It was the “first,” and “firsts” have a way of imprinting themselves on our lives. The first friend, the first love, the first kiss, the first job, the first child – and then, of course, for us clerical types, the first church, the first sermon, the first Eucharist, the first baptism, the first funeral, the first wedding.

This helps me a bit in pondering today’s gospel story. For it strikes me as a strange place for Jesus to begin his ministry – at a wedding. But then I think back to that Saturday in August of 2003, when I raised my hand over that starry-eyed young couple and spoke words of blessing and promise. And thus it all comes clear. John looks back over Jesus’ life and comes up with a series of “firsts”- the first disciples, the first healing, the first feeding, the first raising, the first wedding. Of course, now what could be more natural? This was indeed a momentous occasion, a thoroughly worthwhile first. This was Jesus getting his ministerial feet wet.

But wait a minute....Jesus was not playing rabbi at the wedding; he was playing barkeep at the after-party. How do we know for certain that Jesus attended the wedding at all? He was invited, John does tell us that, and so were his disciples. But did they show up? Or did they crash the reception? That’s where we find them in the story, you know, chugging chalices with the happy couple. If you read the story carefully, you’ll find that much is missing. It is indeed rather strange, not for what it says, but for what it leaves

unsaid. It is fraught with questions, with gaps, and with holes. We have covered them over and filled them in so it looks smooth and seamless to us. We think we know this story and we think we know it well. But do we really?

Jesus and his friends are invited to a wedding. But the story takes place at a party. We know there is wine there, because it runs out, and here the first gap appears. How long had the party been going? Wedding festivities in that place and time typically lasted a week. It fell to the groom to provide for the guests, seven day's worth of food, seven day's worth of drink – loads of lamb, heaps of hummus, and volumes of vino. But there was plenty of time to prepare. To run short would have been an enormous faux pas and the groom would have borne quite a burden. He could expect, at the least, a strong dose of chagrin, at least personal shame if not social stigma. Some scholars claim that in such situations the guests had the option to litigate. On what grounds, I wonder, might they have brought suit? Insufficient inebriation? But it matters, you see, when the barrels ran dry. Was it the first day? The third? The sixth? We should not assume that it happened too early – these were Jews, mind you, not Episcopalians. But the point is that John leaves us asking the question: Just how upset were the guests going to be? Just how much shame was the groom going to suffer? Just how big a crisis was this?

Jesus' mother, at least, must have thought it quite large, large enough to seek help from her son. But Jesus, it seems, did not see it so, did not see it worth his involvement. "Woman," he said, "would you get off my back. I didn't come do to tricks in the kitchen." But then how do we know that's what Mary expected, her son to make wine out of water? "Do whatever he tells you," she said to the servants. Did she expect him to tell them to go get some water? Or did she expect him to tell them to go get some wine?

Jesus was not alone at the party. His friends were right there beside him. Surely together they had enough cash to keep the festivities going – maybe not for a few more days, but at least for a few more hours. And who is to say that is not all that Mary expected, for Jesus and company to pool their funds and send the servants to the nearest Quick Mart.

Whatever she may have expected, we know what she got: Jesus in action. Now here is a gap the size of a canyon. Jesus, it seems, changed his mind. But why? Why did he decide to involve himself when his “hour” had not yet come? John gives us no clue, no hint, no help whatsoever. Having just told his mother to go take a hike, Jesus turned and took care of the problem. He pointed the servants to six large stone jars and told them to fill them with water. Then he said, “Draw some out.” And here is a hole. Draw some what? Some water? Some wine? Some mixture between? Whatever it was it went straight to the steward and it tasted like fine wine to him, the finest he’d had in a very long time. He had no clue something strange was afoot. But he did think it odd that the groom should hold back this choice vintage till late in the game. “Most people serve the cheap stuff at the end, but you saved the best stuff for last.” The groom was no more aware than the steward; he probably smiled and kept mingling. But the servants – the servants had filled up the jars. They knew where this fine wine had come from. But a gap and a hole – for so far as we know, the servants did not come to faith. Yet somehow the disciples, and it appears they alone, discerned something more in all this. They saw through the gaps, peered into the holes, and caught a glimpse of the master’s glory.

I will never forget the first wedding at which I officiated. But truth is it doesn’t help me one bit in understanding this story. This story is not about weddings, not weddings as we’re prone to think of them. So what is it about? A miracle maybe? Well,

no, not according to John. In fact, John knows nothing of miracles. The word never appears in his gospel. But he does know something of signs. That's what he calls it, this gap-laden story, the first in a series of signs. And there is the clue, there is the hint, there is the help that we have been lacking. A sign does not ask to be pondered itself; it points to something beyond. It speaks, it directs, it communicates, or, as John would have it, reveals. A traffic light changes color as we approach it, from green to yellow to red. Do we wonder about it, move to examine it, muse on its peculiar photospheric properties? Of course not, we simply step on the brake. But why? A red light could mean any number of things. A bulb is encased within colored glass, surrounded by metal, and hung on a wire. That is it. That is all. Who's to say what it means? There are gaps, there are holes, there are questions, you see. Yet still when it glows we instinctively move, right foot to left pedal. We know what it means. It speaks, it directs, it communicates, "Stop." But this sign is not obvious. It only seems so to us because we've chosen to see through the gaps, into the holes, beyond the questions.

Signs can be wonderful, powerful things – can be, but aren't necessarily. Because signs are always ambiguous. They mean only what we allow them to mean. They have only the meaning we grant them. It could always be otherwise with a sign. A red light could just as well mean "Go" if the traffic authorities decided it so.

And the signs that Jesus performed were no different. Not all who saw them believed. There were some who looked but saw nothing. Others saw something, but doubted. Still others saw something and by it were led to encounter, engage, and believe. The servants saw water, the steward saw wine, but the disciples – the disciples saw glory.

What made the difference, you ask? I think the story itself holds the answer. It is unique among all of the signs that Jesus performs in John's gospel. All of the others are clearly explained by no less than Jesus himself. John tells us through Jesus just what the signs mean. A blind man is healed; Jesus says "I am light." Lazarus is raised; Jesus says "I am life." Five-thousand are fed; Jesus says "I am bread." But when it comes to the turning of water to wine there is no explanation, only the sign, full of questions, of gaps, and of holes. How are we to see and make sense of this sign? Look deeper, John says, look deeper. See through the gaps. Peer into the holes. Look behind the scenes. Read between the lines. The disciples did it, and that's what we are, disciples seeking signs.

So what if I told you this story is not about turning water to wine? What if I told you, instead, that this a third day story, a story about resurrection? What if I told you the party that Jesus attends is in fact the kingdom of God? Not the kingdom far off in some distant time, but the kingdom come here, in bread and in wine? And what if I told you the wine in the story is not really wine after all, but rather is life in its infinite fullness, life maximized and intensified? What if I told you the steward's comment to the groom is John's message to us: "Everyone else serves cheap stuff at the end, but God saves the best stuff for last?" What if I told you this story's about what it looks like to feast upon Jesus, to take in his life, to bask in his presence, to chug on the chalice of heaven?

There are other ways one might read this story, this puzzle, this wonder, this sign. Signs, remember, are always ambiguous. Yet that is what makes them such wonderful means of drawing us closer to God. For not unlike God, these mysterious signs, are elusive and yet ever-present. There is nothing in life that must be a sign; signs depend

upon us for their meaning. Yet there is nothing in life that cannot be a sign, if we're willing to open our eyes.

That is in part why we come here each week, to read and interpret the signs. We come to the table. We drink of the cup. We share in the fruit of the vine. It looks like wine. It smells like wine. It tastes like wine. But I invite you today to consider this sign. I invite you today to look deeper. See through the gaps. Peer into the holes. Look behind the scenes. Read between the lines. What is it there, within the cup? Is it wine? Or is it glory?

AMEN.