

“God saved the best”

John 2:1-12

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The night had been filled with dancing and shouting, laughter, hugs, and sharing memories that had lasted late into the night. Our daughter Carlee knows how to plan a party, and her wedding was one long celebration. A few folks ran out of gas and started heading to the exits. Little did they know what they were missing. Just when it seemed like you couldn't add one more bit of excitement to what had been an evening filled with excitement, 25 boxes of pizza arrived. The party kicked into high gear. Our daughter Carlee saved the best till last.

We were at an outdoor wedding in a peaceful and tranquil setting near a lake in Austin, Texas. The buffet was a smorgasbord of satisfying and succulent sensations. Beautiful music filled the air. The sun set, the stars appeared, and then the Father of the Bride, our good friend Tim, said, “Dessert is served.” For dessert they had a smores bar. The seven-year-old child that lurks just beneath the surface of this 61 year-old-pastor raced to the dessert station and roasted about a half dozen marshmallows, squeezed that melted, gooey mess between two graham crackers, graham crackers adorned with Hershey bars and Reese's peanut butter cups, and I let it all ooze down my face as I said to Tim, the Father of the Bride, “You saved the best till last.”

But it would be hard for any wedding reception to top our oldest son Jake and Bridget's. From the get-go there was an abundance of food and drink. The band covered every hit that night from the Temptations to Sam Cooke, there was a dash of Smokey Robinson, and even Arthur Conley made a special appearance, asking the question that is of utmost importance, “Do you like good music?” Ya! Ya! I was hard at work on the dance floor when I noticed Bridget, our new daughter-in-law, had anticipated the challenges of dancing in dress shoes. She had a whole set of fancy flip-flops, so you could take off your dress shoes and dance in something comfortable. No sooner did I see the flip-flops than my shoes and socks were cast aside, and I was strutting my stuff. After one particularly strenuous set of dance moves Julie pulled me aside and said,

“Uh, you know those flip-flops are for the girls.” Oops. Didn’t know that! Didn’t matter. We were having a party. Again, just when it seemed like things were winding down, the wait staff appeared with trays of sliders and milkshakes. Right about that time the band unleashed a raucous version of that classic anthem from the rock and roll group Journey, and with sliders and shakes we all belted out the chorus, “Don’t stop believing in…” I mean to tell you they saved the best till last.

In Cana, a place that is about ten miles from the town of Nazareth, the town where Jesus grew up, a wedding was underway. Unlike the weddings I mentioned, where the plan all along was to save the best until last, at this wedding it looked like the ending was going to be a disaster, at least a social embarrassment and maybe even a disgrace for the whole family. The wine ran out. Every last drop was gone. They had no plan B. They didn’t have any champagne on ice that had been held back for a grand finale. There was no Claret in a cup, no Pinot Grigio in the parlor. They had simply failed to plan. And you probably know the saying, if you fail to plan you plan to fail. Someone had failed to plan, and the failure was imminent. The need was immediate. We have to have some more wine, or this wedding is going to go down as an epic failure and a humiliating embarrassment.

A wedding that has run out of wine. That is the backdrop for what the Gospel of John describes as the first of the signs Jesus did, the first of the signs that revealed his glory.

What happens with this first of the signs Jesus did, signs that revealed his glory, is described in John chapter 2. What happens is described, but it is not explained. This story leaves us a lot to think about. Here is what happens. At the wedding were six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing. Hmmm, that will do. Jesus instructs the servants of the celebration to fill the jars with water. The servants fill the jars to the brim, with water. How much water could those six stone jars hold? Each of the jars held from twenty to thirty gallons. Filled to the brim those six stone water jars might hold 180 gallons. And John tells us the servants filled the jars to the brim. Then Jesus said to the servants, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

What follows is a great reversal of fortune. Somewhere between the filling of the six stone water jars and the moment the master of the banquet tasted what was brought to him from those six stone water jars, a miracle occurred. Jesus turned the water into wine. Now, because of Jesus and his miracle, because of this first of the signs he performed, signs that revealed his glory, there is a great reversal of fortune. Instead of no wine, there is now an abundance of wine. Neither Cana nor Nazareth were big towns. One hundred and eighty gallons of wine is not just enough, it is an overwhelming abundance. People could drink to their heart's content and still take a jug of joy for their journey home. This first of the signs he performed show that when Jesus is in the house, there is abundance. With Jesus there is an abundance that overflows, so much so that it more than satisfies the need.

As wonderful as it is to know that Jesus brings abundance, 180 gallon of wine abundance, overflowing and almost beyond measure abundance, this first sign of Jesus also reveals something about the quality of Jesus. The quantity is obvious...180 gallons of abundance. The quality speaks to who Jesus is. What the water that is turned into wine reveals is that Jesus not only makes a lot of wine, Jesus makes the best wine. Having tasted the wine brought to him by the servants, the master of the banquet pulls the groom aside and says, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." The wine Jesus makes is the best.

Now what do you think about this idea of saving the best till last? Maybe all this sign from Jesus, the first sign he gives in the Gospel of John, maybe all this sign from Jesus is supposed to do is make us think of other situations, other weddings, where people saved the best till last? Maybe all this first sign from Jesus will trigger in us is a little bit of comparison. Let's see, the best till last...let's see...pizza...smores...sliders and shakes...and wine. I can see the value in each one. The mood I'm in might determine whether I want smores or whether I want wine...very interesting. Maybe that is as much as the master of banquet can take from this story. You see, for all his declarations that the best has been saved till last, the master of the

banquet doesn't know that the wine he is drinking is wine that Jesus has miraculously transformed from water. When the master of banquet offers his opinion about the wine, he doesn't seek out Jesus. He finds the bridegroom and shares what is really an inside joke. I see what you are doing...you pulled a great one on the guests. You didn't load them up on the nice wine and then sneak the cheap stuff in at the end. You saved the best till last. Classy move. Real nice. Although the master of the banquet thinks he is on the inside of this joke, we realize he has actually missed the most important thing. The wine was made by Jesus. And the wine was the first sign of his glory. All of this completely escapes the notice of the master of the banquet.

In a sense, the Gospel of John invites us to consider how many banquets and weddings and celebrations and family gatherings have all been blessed by the touch of Jesus. How many times, countless times, has Jesus been the one behind the blessing, and the ones who seem to be on the inside, the ones like the master of the banquet, have no clue the blessing came from Jesus? John's Gospel begins with this proclamation. ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. Without him, nothing was made that has been made.”***

All things were made through him. The water. The stone jars. The wine. It was all courtesy of Jesus. It wasn't provided meagerly or miserly. It was supplied in abundance. It wasn't second hand or cobbled together from some leftovers, it was the finest. It was the best. All that we have in our life that is good and right and beautiful and bright is from Jesus. But the master of the banquet has no clue. All he knows is that at the end of a long night of drinking and carousing, the bridegroom pulled out the good stuff. On one level that is true. But a story like this invites us to explore another level, a deeper level, a level that is not disconnected from Jesus, but rather a level that is intimately connected to Jesus...connected to Jesus and the signs of his glory. As we explore this wonderful miracle we begin to see how even at this wedding in Cana, John is helping us understand some of the mystery and marvel of

phrases like, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people” and “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Images of a wedding and wine can help us as we explore the deeper meanings John might intend for us. Both weddings and wine evoke images of the Messianic kingdom, the kingdom that will come when the Messiah arrives. In John chapter one, Andrew heard John the Baptist call Jesus the Lamb of God. Andrew asked Jesus where he was staying. Andrew spent the day with Jesus. At the end of that day with Jesus, Andrew found his brother Peter to tell him, “We have found the Messiah.” The Gospel of John, through Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, has already told us the Messianic age is here. “We have found the Messiah.” Now Jesus performs the first of his signs, the first of the signs that reveal his glory, at a wedding, and wine is involved. When water is turned into wine at a wedding, it is as if John is telling us, “Pay attention to this first of his signs. The Messianic kingdom is here.”

The prophet Isaiah gives a stirring description of what the Messianic age will be, what life will be like when the Messiah comes. Listen for images of a wedding.

“I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels...” This is a wedding scene, and the children of God will be clothed at that wedding with garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness. Now that the people are dressed appropriately for the Messianic age, the prophet continues, ***“No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”*** (Isaiah 61:10-12, 62:4,5) In the footnote that accompanies our opening sentences of worship this morning, we learned that Hephzibah means, “My delight is in her,” and Beulah simply means married.

This first sign that shows the glory of Jesus connects directly to the promise of a wedding to inaugurate the Messianic age. And the sign of

the Messianic age also includes wine. Isaiah draws on the image of the Mountain of the Lord several times as he speaks of the promised Messianic kingdom. **“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth.”** (Isaiah 25:6-8)

All the master of the banquet could see was a clever trick the bridegroom pulled, saving the best wine till the last. He missed so much. The fine and abundant wine was not an end in itself. The abundance and the wine were a sign that the Messiah was present, his kingdom was breaking into this world. In the front of the house, with the guests and the bridegroom and the master of the banquet, there was a lot of winking and poking each other in the side and slapping one another on the back as they all realized they saved the best till last. That’s the front of the house.

But in the back of the house, where the servants were, they were coming to understand that a much deeper meaning was attached to the wedding and the wine. The master of the banquet didn’t know where the wine came from. The servants did. The servants knew where the wine came from. The servants filled those jars with water. When the servants drew out the water, it had become wine. All because they did what Jesus told them to do. The servants knew about the wedding and the wine. And apparently his followers did too. Finishing the story John writes, “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” The servants knew. The disciples knew.

For those who know, for those who are servants of the Lord and followers of the Lord and disciples of the Lord, for those who are often in the back of the house, blessed by God with being able to see the mystery and the marvel, the phrase uttered by the master of the banquet takes on a profound and significant meaning. “You saved the best till now.” “You saved the best till last.”

In the synoptic gospels, a parable is told by Jesus about a vineyard. The vineyard is an image of the kingdom of God. A vineyard is directly related to the fruit that comes from that vineyard. Yes, a vineyard is connected to wine. Jesus tells a story about a vineyard. A man plants a vineyard. When the fruit is ready to be harvested, the owner of the vineyard sends a servant to get some of the fruit. But the tenants beat the servant and send him away empty. The owner sends another servant, and another with the same result. Finally, the owner decides that if he sends his son, the tenants will respect the son, and receive the son. As that parable is fleshed out, the understanding is that God planted the vineyard, his people Israel. He sent his prophets, prophets like Moses and Elijah, he sent his prophets to the people, but the tenants, the children of God, the people of Israel, they did not receive the servants. As Jesus tells this parable, with the owner finally saying, "I will send my son," it is obvious Jesus knows that he, the Son who has been sent from the father, will be rejected, that he will suffer, and that he will be put to death.

Certainly, there is an aspect of the suffering and death of Jesus that is foreshadowed even as the wedding roars on in full celebration mode, fueled by the fine and abundant wine. Wine. The finest wine. Wine, the symbol of the lamb of the Passover. Wine that Jesus will one day speak words over. "This cup is the new covenant...sealed in my blood...for the forgiveness of sins." In the front of the house, they are drinking up the wine, slapping backs, trading jokes, and laughing about how the best has been saved till last. In the back of the house, among those who know the wine came from Jesus, among those who know Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, in the back of the house there is a reverent realization that this first sign will be directly linked to the last sign that displays God's glory, the suffering and death of the cross. But...and this is so important...but, and this is the blessed gift those in the back of the house come to know, and this is what brings such great joy as the glory of God is displayed in Jesus. Jesus will not only suffer and die. Jesus will rise again from the dead. When the gospels end with the resurrection, when the Messianic age

fully bursts upon this world, nothing could be more true or more meaningful than these words, “God saved the best till the last.”

Who knows, maybe this is just a story about Jesus saving a bride and groom from great embarrassment. If that is all it is, it is a great story about Jesus. When our lives have run out hope and our spirits are dry and we have come up empty, Jesus is in the house. Jesus supplies our needs abundantly, and with the finest of what God has to give.

But if there is more to the story than this already good news about God’s abundance and God’s blessing, there really could not be a better opening line to a story than this: “On the third day.” That’s how this all starts in John chapter 2. “On the third day a wedding took place in Cana of Galilee.” And the ones in the back of the house, the servants, the followers, the disciples, they hear that introduction, and they hear so much more than a wedding in Cana. “On the third day...”

When God sent his beloved Son Jesus to this world, he saved the best till last. And on the third day...on the third day...on the third day Jesus rose again from the dead. Oh yes, on the third day the ones in the back of the house rejoiced in the richness of the words, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The ones in the back of the house found every fiber in their being surging with hope for now they knew Jesus truly was the resurrection and the life. When Jesus rose again from the dead, the ones in the back of the house watched in wonder as the darkness of night was chased away and in the full light of that resurrection day, they heard Jesus saying, “For God so loved the world he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” When God sent Jesus into our world, God saved the best till last. And on the third day...on the third day...and on the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead.

