

“Come to Jesus”
John 4:46-54
Wayne Eberly
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In biblical studies, *inclusio* is a literary device based on a concentric principle, also known as bracketing or an envelope structure, which consists of creating a frame by placing similar material at the beginning and the end of a section. (Found on Wikipedia) There is some debate about how to define an *inclusio*. Because of that, what I offer may or may not technically be considered examples of an *inclusio*, but I hope they give you a general idea. For instance...

- In the early pages of the bible, in the creation story set in the Garden of Eden, we are told that in the middle of that green and glorious garden is the Tree of Life. Then, when the Revelation given to John comes to its sweet and satisfying conclusion, way at the end of the bible, in Revelation 22 we read that in the new heaven and the new earth God brings into being, the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stands the Tree of Life. That *inclusio* serves to tie the entire story of the bible together. It probably would not surprise you to know an *inclusio* is often described as being a bookend. From Genesis to Revelation, what a bookend!
- The entire first chapter of Genesis, the first book in the bible, serves as a good example of an *inclusio*. On the first day of creation, we are told that when God saw what was created it was good. When God has finished the work of creation on the sixth day, God saw all that he made, and it was very good. That *inclusio* is hard to miss because all along the way as God is creating the heavens and the earth, we are told it was good, it was good, it was good...you can almost see it coming by the time the sun sets on the sixth day. Yes God, it is very good.
- Genesis has another *inclusio* that is not as obvious, and there might be some who would not classify it as an *inclusio*. But when the

book of Genesis comes to an end, when the passing of the generations has taken us from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and to the twelve sons of Jacob, the tribes of Israel, and those twelve sons have acted out the traumatic events of jealousy and betrayal, with Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, when those brothers are reunited with Joseph in one of the most moving scenes of reconciliation you can imagine, when it is all said and done, Joseph has one final thing to say to his brothers. The brothers are worried that Joseph might still harbor animosity toward them for their betrayal so many years before. Speaking to those brothers of his, Joseph says, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” With those words, I believe the biblical writer is intending for us to see that God’s goodness is evident not only in the perfectly orchestrated story of creation, God’s goodness is so far-reaching he is able to bring out of the chaos of family bitterness, rivalry, jealousy, and betrayal something that is good. Something that is very good.

The fourth chapter of John ties the events of the early ministry of Jesus together with the use of an *inclusio*. Chapter two in the gospel begins with a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Chapter four concludes with another event rooted in Cana of Galilee. The episode that takes place at the wedding in Cana of Galilee is identified by John as the first of the signs through which Jesus revealed his glory. The healing of the royal official’s son at the end of chapter four is identified by John as the second sign Jesus performed. When the water is turned to wine his disciples believe in him. When the son of the royal official is healed the official and his whole household believe in Jesus. John frames the events of chapters two, three, and four by beginning and ending in Cana of Galilee, with the first two signs Jesus performed, and with the result that people come to believe in Jesus. John’s use of an *inclusio* is very effective, tying a whole sequence of events together into a powerful package.

I first became aware of *inclusio* when I was teaching a class on preaching. I like the idea of bookends, and the way an effective *inclusio*

serves to pull the pieces of a narrative together. One of my favorite uses of inclusio are the final five psalms, Psalms 146-150. Each of those final five psalms begins with the words, "Praise the Lord!" Each of those final five psalms concludes with the words, "Praise the Lord." I don't think I am the first one who has referred to those final psalms of the bible as "Bookends of Praise." So yes, I am familiar with inclusio. But in preparing for this sermon on John 4, I came across a description of inclusio I had never heard before, one that never crossed my mind, but one that I will never forget. A fellow named John Niemela said, "Inclusio is just another word for sandwich." Now that's an image you can sink your teeth into. A sandwich.

If an inclusio is just another word for sandwich, what a bounteous blessing we have laid out before us. I don't know what to call it...the Cana club or the Cana Croissant? Cana Cordon Bleu or Cana cucumber and cream cheese sandwich. Cana Cobb Salad or Cana Caviar sandwich. Cana cheesesteak or Cana chimicurri, or chipped beef, chutney, Cana chow mein, or good old Cana Corned Beef sandwich. The choices seem endless, each one inviting us to taste and see how good the Lord is, with all the blessings that fill out this incredible inclusio. The name that best describes this sandwich for me is the Cana Come to Jesus Sandwich. Come to Jesus. That's what is squeezed into this wonderful series of stories that begin and end in Cana of Galilee.

- When the water is turned into wine, the disciples see that first sign that revealed his glory and they come to Jesus. They believe in him.
- That whole scene at the temple, where after using his self-made whip to clear out the moneychangers and those selling doves Jesus said to the religious leaders that if they destroyed the temple he would raise it again in three days...leading to misunderstanding because the religious leaders could only see the physical temple, whereas Jesus was talking about his very own body...after that...way after that...in fact after Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said and they had a come to Jesus moment. They believed in him.

- Nicodemus couldn't get there...not that night...not when it was dark. He came to Jesus, but he didn't "Come to Jesus." Nevertheless, Jesus left the sandwich out there with the invitation to take a big hearty bite. Be born again! When I am lifted up everyone who looks to me and believes will have eternal life. And those words that have fed the soul of so many through the ages, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life." Jesus put it all on the plate. Nicodemus, come to Jesus! Nicodemus came to Jesus that night, but he didn't "Come to Jesus." That's okay. Outside the bounds of this inclusio we have before us today the light eventually shines into the heart of Nicodemus. By the time we reach the end of the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is stepping out in broad daylight, demonstrating that in God's timing Nicodemus had finally "Come to Jesus."
- The Woman at the Well...talk about a sandwich...Jesus and her had such a power lunch that day at the well...Jesus said he was filled with food the disciples knew nothing about. With a banner boldly proclaiming that Jesus is the Savior of the World, the woman, the disciples, and the people of the town...those folks had a "Come to Jesus" moment.
- And now a ruler, a royal official, asking for help for his son who was on the verge of death, rushing home to Capernaum, a distance some 15-20 miles from Cana, rushing home with the promise Jesus gave that his son would live, finding out his son was alive, his son was healed, discovering that the healing happened at the same time Jesus had made his promise, realizing this all happened at the same exact time, the royal official and his whole family had a "Come to Jesus" moment. So yeah, if it's a sandwich you want, and it's a sandwich we get, let's call this inclusio sandwich the "Cana Come to Jesus Sandwich."

The importance of John including this inclusio is almost certainly twofold. One, it clearly displays within the bounds of those two signs that were given in Cana, these stories clearly display what God was

doing through Jesus. From bringing the joyful promise of the Wedding scene that had been prophesied about when the Messiah came, to the claims Jesus made that he was the Living Water...in those divine words, “I am|”, to displaying his power to pull people back from the grip of the grave, this grouping of stories is a powerful call for people to come to Jesus, because Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Savior of the World. Jesus is the Great I Am!

And yet by bounding these stories through the beginning and ending in Cana, John is also preparing us for what comes next. As this wonder filled inclusio comes to a conclusion, we enter a new phase in the Gospel of John, a new phase that begins with John chapter five. In John chapter five and continuing through the Gospel, we will encounter a steady stream of stories where people do not come to Jesus. People doubt Jesus. People turn away from Jesus. People plot his death. One disciple in particular betrays Jesus. All his disciples turn away at one point or another. And ultimately, people put Jesus to death.

If this repeated resistance leads to the death of Jesus, doesn't that negate all that has happened in this inclusio? Some might arrive at that very opinion. But having included one inclusio, might John be setting the stage for a second, and greater inclusio? Friends, this inclusio we encounter at Cana of Galilee is not the final word John has for us. In the chapters following this second visit to Cana in Galilee, we have before us the opportunity to discover God's power over the enemies of Jesus, God's power over the devil himself, God's power over sin, and in a very real way, God's power over the doubts and disbeliefs that mark us as human beings.

- In the beginning of the Gospel, the light shines in the darkness. In the pages ahead we will encounter a deep darkness that rages against the Son of Man...but the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome the light.
- In the beginning of the Gospel, we are told Jesus came to his own, but his own did not receive him. As we will see, many will reject him. He came to that which was his own, and his own did not receive him...but to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. And we are among those who have believed in his name, who have been given the right to become children of God.

- In the beginning of the Gospel Jesus tells us temple of his body will be destroyed. And it was. Jesus suffered and died. Jesus was crucified dead and buried. But temple of his body that was destroyed was raised again in three days.
- In the beginning of the Gospel the image of a snake being lifted up, a snake the people looked to and found salvation, is compared to the day the Son of Man would be lifted up. And Jesus was lifted up. Jesus was lifted high on a cross to die. But instead of the cross only being about death, everyone who looks to the cross for salvation receives the gift of eternal life.
- And that man who believed because Jesus brought his son back from the grip of the grave, and Lazarus who came out of the tomb, those whispers of God's great power to conquer death that come to us in the Gospel of John, those whispers became a mighty roar of victory as Jesus rises again from the dead on the third day. Having conquered death that same Jesus stands before us even today saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." Like he asked Martha that day so long ago, our risen Lord says those words about resurrection and asks us, "Do you believe this?" What a "Come to Jesus" moment! Do we believe this, that he is the resurrection and the life?

What happened in Cana, from first to last, from sign one to sign two, from a wedding that had run out of gas to a father who was afraid his son had run out of life, all that happened in Cana and between these two times Jesus was in Cana, that little inclusio is a sign that what God has done here on a small scale, God will eventually do on a much greater scale. These three chapters are focused on Cana of Galilee. It's as if John's Gospel is telling us, "This time Cana...next time the whole Cosmos. Next time the whole world." This time from Cana and back to Cana. Next time from heaven to earth...and from earth to heaven...and

not stopping until heaven and earth become one and Jesus sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty and all the world joins together in worship and adoration to the Lamb of God who sits on the throne.

I love the sandwich that John serves to his readers in chapters 2-4. From the wine at the wedding to the joy of a child being rescued from death, and all the meaty messages and miracles that make up the inner workings, all the fillings that fill the space inside the sandwich, this “Come to Jesus Sandwich” that John serves is satisfying. This “Come to Jesus Sandwich” strengthens us. And this “Come to Jesus Sandwich” sets us on a course to experience and explore the many other blessings God has in store for us.

Imagine a deli tucked away on some corner in Galilee in a town called Cana. Step inside that deli. Make your way to that lunch counter in Cana. You order it the way you like it. Do you want to call it a sub? A hoagie? A hero? A wedge? Or are you a true New Englander? Are you ready for a grinder? Watch John take that bread. In one hand is the wedding at Cana. In the other is that miraculous healing for the son of the Royal official. In between those two slices John is going to pile it high with details from the life of Jesus that leave your mouth watering in anticipation. Watch John capture all the wonderful words and actions of Jesus and cram them between those two slices of bread. Let your eyes grow wide as he hands the sandwich to you. What else can you do? Take that sandwich. Sink your teeth into it. Chew on that! Savor every bite. And as you wipe the crumbs away from the corners of your mouth, I hope, I pray, I believe you will find yourself saying, “Now that’s a ‘Come to Jesus Sandwich’”! That’s why John gave us this inclusio. That’s why John gave us these bookends that begin and end in Cana of Galilee. That’s why John served up this sumptuous spiritual sandwich. John wants all of his readers to have that experience of coming to Jesus. May this day be the day we all come to Jesus.