

Now Is The Time For Joy

1- Life Is a Miracle

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 138

John 2:1-12

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Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer, essayist and poet, lifts up a delightful interpretation of a scene in Shakespeare's King Lear. Old despairing Gloucester is on the verge of suicide, and his son Edgar, comes along disguised as a madman. He does not want his father to give up on life, and at his father's request leads him to the supposed edge of a cliff, where the old man will end it all. But his son only seems to have left him at the cliff's edge. He has not really done so. The old man renounces the world, blesses his son Edgar, and according to the stage directions, "Falls forward and swoons." Actually, he falls only a few feet.

When he regains consciousness and discovers he is still alive, thinking he has survived a fall from a high cliff, son Edgar now speaks, in the guise of a passer-by, and says to him, "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again." That line, "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again," calls Gloucester back, as Berry says, "into the properly subordinated human life of grief and joy, where change and redemption are possible."ⁱ Wendell Berry states a truth which could easily have come from the lips of Jesus in the Gospels and adds, "To treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it."

I

Between now and Easter we are going to be focusing on the miracles recorded in the Gospel of John, and the miracle of our lives, in conjunction with this Jesus, and the indelible truth that God does not give up on any of us. These miracles in John are spoken of as signs. "This is the first of his signs." There are only seven of them, but each a deliberate, intentional, significant signs, pointing to something beyond itself. Each miracle offers an additional angle, another perspective, a further insight to the overriding miracle John is determined to get across to us: The miracle that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, who calls us, and enables us to believe in him, and so through him, experience fullness of life.

Many of you are aware of recent fads about Jesus. There was the "Jesus Seminar" Debunkers, then the fanciful fantasy of "The DiVinci Code," Jesus. There is the long scholarly "search for the historical Jesus, and the discovery of non-canonical gospels about Jesus, such as the Gospels of Philip, of Mary, of Judas. Found in Egypt, these offer us a number of stories about Jesus not in our four Gospels. As John ends his gospel book, he acknowledges in effect all this; overstating, he says, "There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."ⁱⁱ And he states succinctly just why he has included what he has. "Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his

disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”ⁱⁱⁱ

John’s Gospel is all about life, fullness of life, abundance of life - Life that has now come among us on earth in the person of Jesus Christ and life that is ours through Jesus Christ. John is all about Jesus engaging with real ordinary people in their ordinary lives; guests at a wedding, a Pharisee named Nicodemus secretly at night, a Royal official and his sick son, a paralyzed man at a pool, a hungry crowd, a man born blind, a dead friend named Lazarus and his sisters. Jesus engages more directly and personally with this limited number of persons in this Gospel than in any other, and demonstrates, through his signs, miracles we are expected to act on.

“Thy life’s a miracle. Speak yet again.”

Each of the four Gospels gives us as it were a different angle or perspective on Jesus. The Gospels have been compared to paintings by four well-known artists. Mark likened to a Grandma Moses- a very limited palette of colors, simple, straight-forward, no nonsense. Luke likened to a Rembrandt- with detail, rich color and vibrancy to his work. Matthew likened to a van Gogh- with bright, bold colors and authoritative images. And John, the most creative painter of all, has been likened to a Picasso- his portrayal radically different, filled with abstractions, sometimes with shocking and controversial perspectives. Whereas a photo may show more details of a person, a painting, in lifting up to the light certain more limited features, and stressing these, while keeping other features in the dark, may actually give a truer picture. Hence, these seven signs.

II

Like this one, for example, John’s decision to begin Jesus’ public ministry at a wedding with his disciples in tow. For John, time is not sequential but circular. For John, there is no gradual unfolding awareness, but Jesus is fully certain from the beginning who he is as the Divine Son of God and Savior of the world. John is both the most abstract and theological, and yet, at the same time, the most simple and straight-forward of the Gospels.

As John opens we are introduced to the Word that was in the very beginning of creation itself and became flesh. So upon calling his disciples, what does this Word who was with God, and was God do? Simply circles round and takes them to a friend of the family’s wedding in nearby Cana.

We would expect, you know, a visit to the Jerusalem Temple for a service of consecration and commissioning might be more in order. But Jesus takes his newly formed team to a small town wedding of some friends. “On the third day, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.” The third day, it would already be a highly symbolic charged term when John’s audience hears it. Yes, maybe it is the third day of the week, or the third day since Jesus has called his disciples. But more significantly, foreshadows it the day of resurrection. “The third day he rose again from the dead.” Something

special is hinted at in that opening line of where this is going - the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary.

III

That Jesus chooses to attend a friend's wedding in nearby Cana of Galilee and bring joy to this young couple, says mountains about where we find him these days. Jesus is with us in our life's joys and sorrows. He's not sitting alone in the garden, or in the sanctuary waiting for us to drop by. He is with us in the midst of life.

Once in Louisiana when I was a pastor there, I stopped by the home of a congregation leader on a Saturday night to go over some papers about a building project that was to be proposed the next day in a church congregational meeting. As I left, I said, "Gee Nelson, it is great being with you on a Saturday night. We should get together more often on a Saturday night." And he, the traditional Southerner old school gentleman that he was said, "Oh no, I can't be with my preacher on a Saturday night. Saturday is my drinking night." Well, this preacher is generally available on a Saturday night friends – if you want to take the risk, pick up the phone!

Jesus, too, was available. He and the disciples seem to have been enjoying themselves immensely at this wedding. Some have even suggested that Jesus' bringing his new friends along to the wedding may itself have been the reason the wine ran low. In any case it did. Not exactly a cataclysmic problem. Not the sort of thing we associate with why Jesus came to earth. But because the wine ran out, it looked as if the party was going to be short-lived, the guests agitated, the host embarrassed. After all, a Middle Eastern wedding is the biggest event of a person's life, for which the family saves and spends all they have. The host would certainly have been embarrassed. Still, not the sort of crisis Jesus mostly concerned himself with. But his mother sees the problem and, the good Jewish mother that she is, says, off to the side, "They have no wine."

Jesus protests, "Woman, woman, (you ever call your mother that?) what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."^{iv} Jesus knows he was not sent by his Father to be a caterer. Though he protests, his mother goes right ahead, "You just do what my son says." She has every confidence in him. And through her persistence, his time does come. A need is presented, and Jesus acts to bring joy. Our time becomes his time.

A few weeks ago our son Stuart was home in the afternoon about to do research on his laptop on a paper due for an MBA class that night. As he sat down, he discovered our home computer internet link had shut down and he could not get online. He was hot! Gayle suggested he take his laptop down to Starbucks in Crestline and work from there, which, with some grumbling, he did.

Fifteen minutes later, he texted both Gayle and me with great excitement, "You'll never guess who is at the next table in Starbucks? Coach Saban." Nick Saban was there with one of his assistants, apparently doing some scouting in Mountain Brook. Stuart told us he went right up to Coach Saban, and stuck out his hand, introduced himself, told

him he had played for Joey Jones at Mountain Brook, and thanked him for what he had done for Alabama, and then added, “And thanks for letting my friend Hardie Buck walk on and be part of the team.” Saban replied, “Yes, Hardie’s been a great addition.”

But - Stuart would not have had that wonderful encounter unless he had had a need, an internet signal for his laptop, and gotten up and gone where he could make the connection. Same goes for Hardie Buck – he walked on at Alabama and now he wins the big gold ring! Friends, faith comes to us not when we have it all figured out, but as we, out of our need, are in the process of doing something about it - not waiting for full disclosure - not concluding an airtight philosophical proof of God’s existence - not resolving the inexplicable mystery of why evil and suffering, why the Holocaust or why Katrina or Haiti or why Bill Dallas in San Quentin - but daily, in the midst of life, amid all its suffering, all its joy, allowing Jesus to accompany us and show us the way.

IV

Calling for the servants to fill to the brim six stone jars used for ceremonial washings. Jesus tells them to draw some out. They do, and take it to the wine steward. This tells us this is a pretty up-scale wedding. They have an expert there in charge of the wine, and the expert is impressed. He tells the bridegroom, now you’re putting on a first class celebration, not serving cheap wine later in the evening as is the common practice, when people, after several glasses, are less discerning. But you have saved the best wine for now, 120 gallons of wine.

This first miraculous sign of Jesus says that now, now is the moment of joy and gladness. Now is the best time for you to experience fullness of life and the finest of wines. Jesus is offering you, even now this morning, even now in the midst of whatever challenges you are facing, (and I know many of you are facing immense ones, economically with a job, physically with an illness, relationally with a spouse or child), even now the miracle is at work- newness, fullness, joy, for God’s glory is being revealed to you in Jesus. “Thy life’s a miracle.”

One morning during our sabbatical this past summer, Gayle and I were staying for a few days outside of Florence, Italy, in a guest house of a vineyard and winery called the Fattorio Bacio. They grow their own grapes and make their own wine. It is some of the most beautiful countryside in the world. The last morning there I awoke before sunrise and decided to get up and go for a walk down among the vineyards, something I had not yet done. Walking in the grey shadows among row upon row of grapes that grew up and the down the hills, the sun peaked suddenly up over the horizon. I stood there watching as the gray landscape became sun-drenched in rich bright greens and purples and reds and blues as the beauty of another day in Tuscany unfolded. A glorious moment of joy!

Wendell Berry has written,

“Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater

and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.”

The upshot of this miracle is a very successful wedding reception, for one thing, and then a band of disciples who, though with incomplete knowledge and partial faith, are locked in, committed, are engaged, and on the way with Jesus. Through this, his first sign Jesus “revealed his glory” (his true nature, which will progressively unfold more and more throughout this gospel), “and his disciples believed in him.” Thereafter they are on the move with him, growing in friendship with him, coming to trust in him, sharing their deepest hurts and highest hopes with him. Living to the full in an ongoing relationship.

Jesus offers this new wine of his presence to each of us, meeting us now with the signs and signals we need. Our response? An exercise of faith, that grows, even as human friendship grows; through spending time, sharing experiences, and building relationships together. Jesus takes our wash water and transforms it into the finest wine of a life lived in mystical union with him, the Word made flesh. Now is the time. “Thy life’s a miracle. Speak yet again.”

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, great gateway to joy, grant us the fullness of joy of your presence, and the faith, hope and love to drink deeply of the best and finest you make of what we bring. Amen.

ⁱ Wendell Berry, Life Is A Miracle, quoting Shakespeare’s King Lear, p. 5

ⁱⁱ John 21:25

ⁱⁱⁱ John 20:30-31

^{iv} John 2:4