

January 16, 2022  
John 2:1-11

Epiphany 2  
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## **“Reading the Signs”**

*“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”*

The Ministry of Transportation recently announced that due to the backlog of persons waiting for to take their driver’s test that the parallel parking requirement is being dropped. When I heard this, my first reaction was “finally!” since parallel parking has never been one of my better driving skills; the announcement also brought me back to my high school days, when getting a driver’s license was a major rite of passage. In New Jersey, a person was eligible to get a license when they turned seventeen; the exception was for students enrolled in drivers’ education classes, in which a student could receive a learner’s permit at age 16 ½. Our high school offered driver’s education to all students in Grade 11, beginning with studying for the written examination and then getting behind the wheel for on-the-road classes. A major part of this preparation for the written and driver’s examination was learning about road signs; this included stop and yield signs, speed limit signs, directional signs (one-way streets, do not enter, etc.), school zone signs, and signs warning of sharp turns and slippery conditions. Learning how to read these signs was an important aspect of our training in becoming drivers, ensuring our safety along with the other drivers with whom we shared the road.

- “Traffic signs give you important information about the law, warn you about dangerous conditions and help you find your way. Signs use different symbols, colours, and shapes for easy identification.” – Ontario MTO Driver’s Handbook.

Signs play an important role in areas of life beside driving. They help us navigate our way through a hospital or shopping mall; they direct us to the proper office of apartment; they let us know if a building is a restaurant or shopping centre or bank. Signs in our church building help direct people to the sanctuary, the offices, the chapel, the parlour, and of course the washrooms. A world without signs can be a confusing place; we can easily become lost without the aid of signs pointing beyond themselves to the place that is important for us.

Signs also play an important role in the Gospel of John, including the story that is unique to the Fourth Gospel of the miracle at the wedding at Cana, which is the inaugural event in Jesus' ministry in which "*Jesus inaugurates his ministry with a vivid reenactment of the gift he has to offer*" (Gail O'Day). While the focus is usually on the miracle of turning water into wine, John has planted hints that this story is to be read as more than a typical miracle story. The references to Jesus' hour, his glory, signs, and faith point beyond the particulars of this story to themes of theological significance for the whole Gospel. "*The primary focus of the miracle at Cana is on Jesus as the one sent by the Father to bring salvation to the world.*" (Raymond Brown).

John reports that this episode takes place "*on the third day*" (2:1), locating the Cana story in the sequence of days that begin in the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel:

- "The next day [John] saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" – 1:29
- "The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus." – 1:35-37.
- "The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'" – 1:43.

This linkage suggests that John wants to show how the promise made by Jesus that "*you will see greater things than these*" (1:50) was quickly fulfilled. The setting for the miracle at Cana is a wedding feast at which "*the mother of Jesus was there [and] Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.*" (2:1-2). We are given no details about the wedding couple, nor about their relationship with Jesus, Mary, and the disciples. Wedding feasts at the time were elaborate affairs that could last for several days; this may explain why "*the wine gave out,*" which would be a source of great embarrassment for the host. This lack of wine is communicated to Jesus by his mother (Mary is never referred to by name in John but is always called "the mother of Jesus"). While all she says to her son is "*they have no wine*" (2:3), Jesus' response makes clear that her words carried an implied request: Jesus' mother assumed that her son would somehow attend to the problem. But his response to his mother is one that sounds very harsh and disrespectful: "*Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.*" (2:4). While his words may sound hurtful to us, they are in reality neither rude nor hostile. Jesus frequently addresses women with the greeting "woman" ("*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.*" – 4:21). "*What concern is*

*that to you and to me?*” is a formula of disengagement, nor rudeness. It may have been a common expression in the Semitic world, similar to words that Elisha spoke to King Jehoram: *“What have I to do with you? Go to your father’s prophets or to your mother’s.”* (2 Kings 3:13).

Jesus’ final statement in response to his mother may help us explain the true context of this exchange: *“my hour has not yet come.”* “Hour” (*hora*) is used metaphorically in John to refer to the hour of eschatological fulfillment and most characteristically to the hour of Jesus’ glorification – his death, resurrection, and ascension:

- “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” – 5:25.
- “Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.” – 7:30.
- “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you’” – 17:1.

Jesus’ reference to this “hour” establishes a link between what Jesus does during his ministry and his glorification. Jesus’ actions will be governed by the “hour” set by God, not by anyone else’s time or will. Not even his mother has a privileged claim on him. Any act of self-revelation by Jesus during his ministry is of a piece with Jesus’ self-revelation at his “hour.”

- “Once again he is giving her to understand that his mind must be upon the will of the Father. Despite the domestic setting of a wedding, Jesus has moved beyond the demands of his human family. It must have taken great faith for Miriam to proceed after she has heard her son’s negative, but her humility and complete submission to the will of the Lord underly her words to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ The simple words sum up a life of faith. And Jesus works his miracle and changes water into wine.” – Jenny Robertson, *Mary of Nazareth*.

Mary’s words to the servants echo Pharaoh’s words about Joseph in Genesis: *“When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, ‘Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do.’”* (Genesis 41:55). Mary continues to trust in Jesus’ ability to act, but she will not curtail his freedom.

John reports that “*standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons*” (2:6). Stone jars, in contrast to earthen jars, were free from the possibility of Levitical impurity (“*And if any of them falls into an earthen vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break the vessel*” – Leviticus 11:33). The “Jewish rites of purification” probably refers to the ritual cleansing of hands at meals, which became a source of controversy when “*Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat?’*” (Matthew 15:1-2). The extravagant proportions here anticipate the extravagant proportions at the feeding of the five thousand, when “*from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets*” (6:13). Jesus instructs the servants to “*‘fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them to the brim*” (2:7). The actual transformation of the water is not reported; Jesus merely instructs the servants to “*now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.*” (2:8). The chief steward of the feast indirectly verifies the miracle, even though he does not know the source of the wine; the servants do know the source and function as witnesses to the transformation, similar to the neighbours who witness the miracle of a man’s sight being restored:

- “The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, “I do not know.”” – 9:8-12.

Knowledge of the source of Jesus’ gifts will be a step toward the knowledge of where Jesus himself comes from (“*The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?’*” – 4:11).

In the Old Testament, the abundance of good wine is an eschatological symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God’s new age: “*On that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Wadi Shittim*” (Joel 3:18). As well as the first act of Jesus’ ministry, this is also a fulfillment of Old Testament eschatological hopes as the inaugural act of God’s promised salvation. While the steward is amazed that the water that Jesus turned into wine is “*good wine*” (2:10), readers of this story may have recalled the words of the

prophets Isaiah that spoke of a time when *“on this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.”* (Isaiah 25:6). While the miracle solved the problem of a lack of wine so that the wedding feast might continue, John identifies Jesus’ act of turning water into wine as one that has far greater implications for those who read this story in every generation: *“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”* (2:11). John is unique among the Gospels in referring to Jesus’ miracles as “signs” (*semeion*), a manifestation of Jesus’ glory. It is the first of seven such signs in the Fourth Gospel, actions that point beyond themselves to the reality of Jesus’ identity and purpose:

- “Signs point us to something beyond themselves, as road signs point us to something that lies ahead of us or before us. The sign of Jesus changing water into wine at the Cana wedding points us to something far more valuable than the wine itself, as fine as the wine may be. It points us to the source of all life and joy.” – Elizabeth Johnson.

John refers to Jesus’ miracles as “signs” because these mighty deeds of divine power reveal or point to spiritual truths about Jesus through sensible means. As *“the glory of the LORD”* was revealed to Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:16-17), so too at Cana is Jesus’ glory revealed in this sign performed by the one who is *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”* (1:14). The first sign at Cana is a portent of things to come, because it points ahead to Jesus’ “hour.” It is also a visible indicator of Jesus’ authority because through it his glory is revealed. The sign at Cana is identified as the “first” because it begins Jesus’ self-revelation and models what is still to come. Jesus’ glory is continually manifested in his life and ministry, as when he announces upon receiving word that Lazarus was ill that *“this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”* (11:4).

- “The primary focus of the miracle at Cana is on Jesus as the one sent by the Father to bring salvation to the world. What shines through is his glory, and the only reaction that is emphasized is the belief of the disciples.” – Raymond Brown.

The response of the disciples to the miracle they have witnessed is that *“his disciples believed in him”* (2:11), faith that involves a person commitment to trust in God

himself. Jesus' signs point to the abundant life that God desires for all people; *"the abundance of fine wine is a symbol of the abundance of joy that awaits not only Israel, but all peoples on the day of God's salvation."* (Johnson). As these signs led Jesus' first followers to faith in him as the one who is *"life, and the life was the light of all people"* (1:4), John speaks directly to his readers toward the end of his Gospel so that the reader may recognize that he or she, too, can interpret the signs of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and also come to faith:

- "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." – 20:30-31.

It is not physical sight and signs that are decisive for faith, but the truth that they reveal; *"the truth of Scripture lies in its power to make the presence of God in Jesus available to the faith community in each successive generation."* (Gail O'Day).

The importance of road signs was taught to us when our driving instructor brought us to an unopened portion of Interstate Highway 78 to practice expressway driving. While the road was paved and lined, the highway department had not yet installed signs; without signs on the road, we had no idea how fast we were allowed to travel, how far it was to the next exit, or even where this exit would lead. A road without signs is impossible to navigate; and so is faith impossible without the signs that point us to Jesus as the *"Messiah, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16), to the son of Mary as the one who is *"the Way, and the Truth, and the Life"* (John 14:6), to the man from Nazareth who is *"true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary"* (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*), the one who God has *"highly exalted ... and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* (Philippians 2:9-11).

- "The extravagance of Jesus' act, the superabundance of the wine, suggests the unlimited gifts that Jesus makes available. Jesus' ministry begins with an extraordinary act of grace, a first glimpse of the 'greater things' to come (1:50). The story invites the reader to share in the wonder of this miracle, to enter into the joyous celebration made possible by Jesus' gift. The story invites the reader to see what the disciples see, that in the abundance and graciousness of Jesus' gift, one catches a glimpse of the identity and character of God. It is no

wonder that the early Christian community confessed ‘from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace’ (1:16).” – O’Day.

Signs play an important role in driving and in finding our way in so many aspects of life, but signs do not exist for themselves. Signs serve the purpose of pointing beyond themselves to our destination, the place we need to be. The signs of Jesus in the Gospels point beyond what happened in that time and place to what is in store for us in our relationship with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the one in whom we believe, the one who we place our ultimate trust and faith, the one who “*came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*” (John 10:10).

Amen.