

“Signs of Abundance”

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

South of the Border is a rest area along Interstate 95 just south of the North Carolina – South Carolina state line that advertises itself as “America’s Favorite Highway Oasis.” The area contains restaurants, gas stations, motels, a truck stop, souvenir shops, an amusement park, a video arcade, miniature golf, convenience and fireworks stores. It is also known for its billboards, signs which begin to advertise South of the Border for hundreds of miles before a travel arrives at the location. These signs have developed a reputation for their clever slogans which entertain travelers on the long trip to Florida:

- “You never sausage a place!”
- “Chili today – hot tamale.”
- “Keep yelling kids – they’ll stop!”
- “Pedro’s fireworks – does yours?”
- “Free air, water, advice”
- “Fill up your trunk with Pedro’s junk.”
- “You’re always a wiener at Pedro’s.”

As clever and eye-catching as these billboards may be, these signs don’t exist for themselves; like all signs, they focus our attention on the main goal or destination. The purpose of signs is to point toward something else, something that is worthy of our attention and for us to follow.

In the Gospel of John, the author uses the word “signs” to refer to Jesus’ miracles, because for John the significance of the miracle does not rest solely in the act of the miracle itself but in that to which the miracle points. The first of these “signs” in the Fourth Gospel is what happen at the wedding at Cana, a celebration that Jesus attends with his mother (who is always referred to in John as “the mother of Jesus,” never by her proper name Mary). The miracle at Cana is the inaugural event of Jesus ministry; *“Jesus inaugurates his ministry with a vivid enactment of the gift he has to offer.”* (Gail O’Day). The reference to “the third day” at the beginning of the story locates the wedding at Cana in the sequence of events begun in John 1:43 (*“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’”*). The suggests that the promise made by Jesus in John 1:50 would be fulfilled very soon: *“Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”*

In the course of the wedding celebration, a crisis occurs: the wine has given out. Anyone who has ever hosted a feast knows how humiliating this can be; but instead of reporting on the host’s response to this situation, we hear Jesus’ mother say to him *“they have no wine.”* (2:3). Mary asks nothing explicit of Jesus, but his response makes clear that she assumed he would somehow attend to the problem with the wine. His response, however, sounds quite harsh and even rude: *“Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”* (2:4); but in context they are 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). His question *“what concern is that to you and to me?”* may have been a common expression in the Semitic world that Mary would not have interpreted as being rude or disrespectful:

- “Elisha said to the king of Israel, ‘What have I to do with you? Go to your father’s prophets or to your mother’s.’” – 2 Kings 3:13.
- “But Neco sent envoys to him, saying, ‘What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I am not coming against you today, but the house with which I am at he

The second part of Jesus’ response to his mother – “*My hour has not yet come*” – refers to the Greek word *hora* that is used metaphorically in John to refer to the time of eschatological fulfillment and especially 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’ 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.

Mary does not respond directly to her son. Instead, she directs the servants at the banquet to “*do whatever he tells you*” (2:5); “*she continues to trust in his ability to act but will not curtail his freedom.*” (O’Day). John directs our attention to “*six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.*” (2:6). Stone jars, in contrast to earthen vessels, are free from the possibility of Levitical impurity (“*And if any of them falls into any 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, a rite that in other contexts led to criticism of Jesus’ disciples by his opponents: “*Why do your disciples break the tradition of their elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.*” (Matthew 15:2). A Jewish host would be expected to provide adequate water for his guests to perform this ritual washing; but that doesn’t explain why there was so much water at the wedding at Cana. The quantity that is reported would have held enough water to purify 200,000 people – certainly more than would have been invited to the feast. While John doesn’t explain why there was so much water, such extravagance become apparent when Jesus first directs the servants to “*fill the jars with water*” and then directs them to “*draw some out and take it to the chief steward.*” (2:7-8). The actual miracle is not reported, but the steward – who does not know the source of the miracle – indirectly verifies it when he calls to the bridegroom and says, “*everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.*” (2:10). In the Old Testament, an abundance of good wine is an eschatological symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God’s new age:

- “The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.” – Amos 9:13.
- “On that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, 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.

In this context, Jesus’ miracle can be read as the fulfillment of Old Testament eschatological hopes, the inaugural act of God’s promised salvation. The miracle is a sign of the abundance of God’s blessings that will be continually showered upon God’s people.

- “These jars that hold far more than is possibly needed are nevertheless filled completely. And when the miracle occurs, it is not a miracle to make ends meet, to help the couple manage. It is a miracle of abundance. Gallons and gallons of good wine, wine that impresses the steward. Wine that reveals the glory of God.” – Joanna Harader, *The Christian Century*.

John concludes the story of the miracle at Cana by reporting that “*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*” (2:11). The sign at Cana is the “first” because it begins Jesus’ self-revelation and models what is still to come. God’s “glory” (*doxa*) is continually manifested in Jesus’ life and ministry throughout the Fourth Gospel:

- “And the Word 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.
- “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 glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, and we are one...” – 17:22.

The ultimate moment of glorification for Jesus occurs at his death, resurrection and ascension: “*So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.*” (17:5).

- “The transformation of water into wine is significant because, in showing forth the unprecedented grace of Jesus, it reveals the glory of Jesus and anticipates his ultimate moment of glorification, his death, resurrection, and ascension ... 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.

The abundance of Jesus’ blessings to which the sign at Cana point can be witnessed throughout John’s Gospel. It is present at the feeding of the Five Thousand, when the people who had been fed “*saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’*” (6:14). It is present in Jesus’ declaration that “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*” (8:12). It is present in Jesus’ revelation of himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who “*lays down his life for the sheep,*” who has come “*that they may have life and have it abundantly.*” (10:10-11). This “abundance” (*perissos*) to which the sign at Cana points is rooted in the image of the age of God’s salvation as one of superabundance. In the Torah, God promises the people of Israel that “*if you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.*” (Leviticus 26:3-4). Isaiah prophecies of the day in which “*on this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich foods, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.*” (Isaiah 25:6) and proclaims God’s promise that “*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*” Paul’s teachings are also rooted in this proclamation of the new age of salvation that is one of abundant blessing in grace and the Spirit: “*But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*” (Romans 5:20). Grace increases thanksgiving, which overflows to God’s glory: “*Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*” (2 Corinthians 4:15). The abundance of grace that God has poured out upon God’s people in Jesus Christ give the church the ability to “*accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*” (Ephesians 3:20), giving us the assurance that

“God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

The miracle at Cana was, like all miracles, a twofold blessing: it provided the people at the wedding feast with abundant wine so that they could continue their celebration, and it served as a sign that pointed to the abundant life that Jesus offers to all who believe in him. As we gather at the Lord’s Table this morning, we once again come into the presence of our Lord and Saviour who provides us with his Holy Supper, blessing us both today with his real presence and giving us a sign that points beyond this meal, giving us a *“foretaste of the feast to come,”* that day when *“the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.”* (Isaiah 25:8).

- *“The Lord’s Supper is not an escape from this world, but a continuing source of comfort and strength that enables us to live in this world. Yet, this life is a pilgrimage. The Sacrament reminds us of that as we get our glimpse of heaven and our foretaste of the feast to come. We haven’t reached our heavenly home yet, but in his meal we get a taste of that life to come. And with the psalmist, we joyfully proclaim, ‘Taste and see that the Lord is good.’ (Psalm 34:8).” – LCMS Worship, Fall 1998.*

Motorists who enjoy the South of the Border signs along I-95 usually don’t confuse them with the famous tourist stop; their function is to point towards the attraction, not to be confused with the attraction itself. The miracle at Cana allowed the wedding celebration to continue; but its function for us is to point beyond itself to the abundant life that is ours in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the blessed life that is ours in our Lord and Saviour who has come that we may have life and have it abundantly. Amen.