

Transformation

I. Great Expectations

- A. Tomorrow our nation celebrates the birthday of a modern day prophet, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
1. We remember one man who had a dream.
 - a. In his most famous speech, just before his assassination, King said that he had been to the mountain top.
 - b. There he saw a day when the people of America, black and white, would live together side by side with respect and dignity, brothers and sisters with justice for all.
 2. The spiritual depth of his dream was what enabled him to unite so many into a movement to lift up the poor and forgotten and reshape our national life.
 - a. His was a vision of freedom, and like all prophets it went far beyond himself to include all people.
 - (1. *"On the one hand," he said, "we are called to be the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act.-- One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highways."*
 - (2. As he often said, it was always God's vision, which he, Martin, could only serve and bring about to the best of his abilities.
 - b. His rock solid faith,\ his unflinching belief in God's grace,\ strengthened him as he endured the terrible trials of public life. ---
 3. We need new reformers like Martin Luther King Jr. to remind Christians of our fundamental belief in the dignity of all humankind and speak that dream to places of power.
 - a. Today and too often in our past Christian faith has been reduced to feed xenophobic fears of "the other."
 - b. Where, then, can such a dream germinate,\ take root,\ and grow, -- the dream of such a world and a dream of transformed people?
- B. These themes of great expectations and transformation unite the lessons for this 2nd Sunday of Epiphany.

1. In the first lesson we have the ringing words of the prophet naming the reality his people are facing and demanding that God do something about it.
 - a. *"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch."*
 - b. The words break forth at a time of deep despair in Jerusalem around 500 B.C.
 - (1. The exiles had returned to their homeland full of hope. They had new expectations for restoration in their land.
 - (2. But their hope was crumbling and their dreams fading.
 - c. The power of those opening verses of Is. 62. is that *"someone knows how we feel."*
 - (1. The prophet must battle his people's deteriorating morale and their feeling that God has turned away in indifference.
 - (2. The prophet speaks to keep the hope alive. God will do something new and wonderful.
2. The author lifts up the image of Israel as YHWH's betrothed wife.
 - a. He sees a return of those early years when YHWH first married Israel.
 - (1. YHWH rejoices in a rejuvenated Jerusalem, just as a bridegroom finds joy in his new bride.
 - (2. *"You shall be called by a new name..."*, says the prophet.
 - (3. *"You shall no more be called 'Forsaken' and 'Desolate' 'but you shall be called 'My Delight is in her' and your land, 'Married.'"*
 - (4. *"You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God."*
 - b. These are deeply felt images of hope and restoration.
3. The nuptial imagery is matched in the gospel reading from John with the first miracle of Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.
 - a. It is a story of remarkable transformation, an epiphany of the glory of God in Jesus' ministry.
 - b. At the outset of John's gospel we have great expectations for God dwelling with us.

II. Jesus' 1st Miracle

- A. The story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee comes to us from the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, unique to the Gospel of John.

1. John gives it the significance of an inaugural event, introducing Jesus to the people and to us the readers.
2. In the midst of the common life and circumstances of Galilee, Jesus begins his work.
 - a. The wedding feast is universally recognized occasion made up of basic human relationships: affection,\ friendship,\ neighborliness,\ love,\ marriage,\ home and family.
 - b. In the context of our natural lives, Jesus reveals the in-breaking of God, vitality to a 7 day Wedding Feast gone dry with the absence of wine.
 - c. And by implication, renewal to religion that has gone dry.
3. Of course, this wedding feast is famous, because here Jesus turned the water into the very best wine,--Jesus' first miracle, as John tells us.
 - a. We often stop here, but John would have us to see that this is not a simple tale with a super-miracle. John intends for us to go on beyond that.
 - b. He calls this the first of Jesus' signs.

B. In John's gospel Jesus performs seven miracles that are called "*signs*" because they point beyond themselves to convey God with us, revealed in Jesus.

1. Miracles shatter conventional explanations and expectations.
 - a. At their very heart is the power to unsettle us enough that we begin to see a deeper meaning.
2. We could liken these signs to one of the 35 mm slides we used to use.
 - a. You don't lay it out on the table and look at it flat, you have to lift it up to the light, to see through it.
 - b. Then it reveals much greater dimensions.
3. What might it mean to lift up this miracle to the light and look through it?
 - a. John intends us to see it alive with significance.

III. Lifting this story to the light

- A. In the ancient Eastern world every Oriental reading John's words, "*There was a wedding*" and "*they have no wine*" would have sensed immediately John's purpose and meaning.
1. To the Oriental - a wedding meant several days of joyous feasting.
 - a. The whole village put on a gala festival.

- b. There was eating and drinking, \ music and dancing.
 - 2. So, to John's readers, "*there was a wedding*" meant "*there was a celebration.*"---
 - a. "*They have no wine*" meant "*there was no joy*" for wine was the ancient symbol of joy.
- B. The setting of the wedding feast is an echo of the background of the people of Israel.
- 1. For the Hebrews their relationship with God is often described in the scriptures as a marriage covenant.
 - a. God "*espoused*" Israel. - God called Israel his bride.
 - b. We saw this in the first lesson where the prophet says, Jerusalem shall no more be called "*forsaken*" or "*desolate*" but, "*as the bridegroom rejoices over his bride so shall your God rejoice over you.*"
 - c. John's story of the miracle at Cana connects this ancient expectation with the coming of Jesus, called, the Christ.
 - 2. At the center of this miracle is the abundance, \ extravagance, \ transformation \ and the offering of new possibilities.
 - a. Six water pots used for ritual cleansing, hold a total of 120-180 gallons of water.
 - b. Jesus will fill these with eschatological wine, a rich symbol in the biblical tradition inferring prosperity, abundance and good times.
 - (1. The old world of Galilee was one of frugality; a society of too little rather than too much.
 - (2. Joel (9:13) and Amos (3:18) see abundance of good wine as a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age.
- C. And it is not only the quantity of wine but the quality.
- 1. The steward concludes that the host has "*withheld the best wine till the last.*"
 - 2. It is the disciples alone (and the mother of Jesus) who understand that Jesus is the source of this wine, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age.
 - 3. The point of the miracle for John's readers is to free us to receive the extraordinary gifts this miracle offers.
 - a. Often we are like the steward in the story.
 - b. We recognize God's good gifts without recognizing their source in the Creator's love.

- c. We have a three-dimensional understanding of life in this world, with its painful limitations.
- d. The miracle at Cana tells us that our iron-clad world has been unpredictably invaded by grace.
- e. Often, the fact is that when that happens, we may not recognize it.

4. Notice too that the pots of water were there for the Jewish rites of purification – the washing of hands, and vessels.
- a. In other words, the water was for no exalted purpose.
 - b. In this John shows us how Jesus takes something ordinary and makes something extraordinary.
 - c. We might reflect on our lives when the wine runs out in various ways.
 - (1. Joy, the wine of life can go from us.
 - (2. It can go from a job, a relationship, a marriage, from anything in which we are involved.
 - (3. At such a time we may realize as Mary does in this story, that there is a guest in our presence who has the capacity to take what we have dismissed as ordinary in ourselves, gifts whose value we have never realized, and to turn these things into rich resources.

[Herbert O'Driscoll, The Word Today, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 79]

5. There are Eucharistic overtones here too as Jesus calls himself in John's gospel the "*true vine*."
- a. The wine at the Last Supper symbolizes the New Covenant.
 - b. Wine becomes the symbol of Christ's blood, his very life given up to God at the hour when Jesus' glory is fully revealed.

D. What is the light behind this story?

- 1. With the disciples we are invited to see the abundance and graciousness of Jesus' gift and in seeing that catch a glimpse of the identity and character of God.
 - a. At the end of John's gospel the writer says,
 - (1. "*these things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in his name.*"

