

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
January 17, 2010 – 2nd Sunday After Epiphany

Isaiah 62:1-5

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

John 2:1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but

you have saved the best till now." This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

We like to have guarantees for things. We want a sense of certainty for our choices. That is why we read reviews and ratings for products before we buy them, and that is why we get extended warranties after we buy them. We just want to make certain that what we have is the real deal, as they say.

This desire for guarantees even extends to our relationships. We like to have some guarantee that people like us and that our relationship with them is sure and steady. For example, that is why, when we were in third grade, notes would circulate among our classmates reading, "Do you like me? Check Yes or No." We did things like that because we wanted a sign from them to verify our relationship.

That is what the Gospel of John is about. The gospel writer presents a narrative of seven miracles that function as signs to verify the story of Jesus. In fact, in the words of the text of the gospel, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (20:31)

The first such sign in the gospel is the one in our New Testament reading for today. It took place at a wedding celebration in the town of Cana in Galilee. If you remember, one of the hymns we sang a few weeks ago, *Songs Of Thankfulness and Praise* (243) referred to this event.

The outline of the story is simple. Jesus and the disciples go to a wedding. After they arrive, Mary approached Jesus to explain a problem. There was no more wine for the guests. This was more than a minor social gaffe in the first century. According to some old texts, the guests could sue the bride and groom for this breach of etiquette.

In informing her son about the problem, Mary certainly suggested that

she wanted him to do something about it. Jesus, though, initially refused by saying that it was not the right time for him to do anything like that.

Despite this refusal of his mother's veiled request, Jesus did act. There were twelve stone jars off to the side, which held some 20-30 gallons each and were used for purification rituals associated with a wedding ceremony. Jesus instructed the steward to refill the jars with water. Then, the steward was to serve the guests from the contents of the jars. As the guests drank, they were amazed at the quality of the wine, and they were probably happy that another 240-360 gallons of wine had been found. According to the texts, the guests remarked, "Most hosts would serve the cheap stuff last, after everyone had already gotten drunk, but you have saved the best stuff until last."

Miraculously producing wine from water would seem to be a pretty big deal. Now, some people today would revise the story to suggest that the water in the jars did not really become wine, but these folks say the real miracle actually consisted of making the guests *think* that the water they drank was really wine. Evidently, these folks put Jesus in the class of people who can accomplish a mass hypnosis or something.

If we take the text seriously at all, though, we cannot buy this alternative theory. According to the gospel text, the miracle was self-evident – what was once water was miraculously and instantaneously turned into wine.

Even if we accept the gospel story, there are a lot of questions I have about the account in John's gospel. For instance, I find it intriguing that the wine supply was OK until the disciples showed up. Just after they arrived, the supply of wine dried up or was drunk up. Makes you wonder what their role was in contributing to the problem, doesn't it? Then, I wonder, why was Mary involved in the situation? Was she the wedding coordinator who felt responsible for the party?

And, I have more questions. Why did Mary think that Jesus would or could do something about the problem? Had he transformed water into wine at home? What did Jesus mean when he said that his time had not yet come? Did that mean that he should not do anything or did he fear that he could not do anything? If it was that he shouldn't do something, why not? If he feared he couldn't, why did he give those instructions to the steward? Finally, what was the purpose of using those particular jars in the miracle? Why did the gospel writer make the point of telling the reader about the jars and their normal function?

Really, though, the most pressing question for me deals with the nature of faith as woven into the story. You see, the gospel writer makes a point to tell us, the readers, that, as a result of this miracle, this sign, the disciples "put their faith in him." So, I wonder, does our faith require some sign from God, some divine miracle, in order to be confirmed? That is, should we expect God to show us something or to do something for us so we will know that our faith is valid? And then, if our faith has to be proven, is it really faith?

Throughout his ministry, Jesus dealt with folks who demanded some miracle as a sign of validation before they would believe. Just after the action in today's text, John's gospel described how Jesus chased the moneychangers from the Temple area. When he did that, the Jews demanded some miraculous sign to prove his authority. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law came to him wanting to see some miraculous sign. In Mark 8, following the account of the feeding of the 4000, the Pharisees demanded a sign from heaven that would prove Jesus credentials. These are not the only instances of such demands in the gospel, but they prove point. Each time such a demand was made to him, Jesus rejected it and refused to provide a miracle as a sign. The gospels, then, indicate that faith should not be dependent upon miracles as signs. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law and the scribes missed the point.

We can look at the other side of the equation as well. Seeing a miracle

did not automatically produce faith. The gospels proclaim all these wonderful things that Jesus did – healing the blind and the lame, raising the dead, feeding the multitudes – and most of the people who saw these miracles did not become disciples. Even in the gospel story for today, most of the wedding guests who witnessed what happened did not have faith. Those guests were just happy to have another 300 gallons of wine to drink.

All of this leads me to one certain conclusion. Faith cannot be proven or vindicated or verified. It is not based on some type of mathematical relationship where action “x” produces response “y.” How then are we to understand faith? Using the gospel text and the Isaiah reading for today, I would propose some simple suggestions.

First, faith comes as a result of relationship. You notice that the only ones whom John described as having faith as a result of this miracle as a sign were the disciples. They were the only ones who already had a relationship with Jesus. They had walked with him; they had heard him teach; they had observed the truth of his life. That was the foundation of their faith. The miracle of water into wine was merely an added benefit.

Second, faith results in a sense of joy. The Isaiah passage likened the return of God to the people to the joy experienced by a bride and groom on their wedding day. I have had the opportunity to observe this phenomenon many times. No matter how nervous or scared the couple might be, when I pronounce the words, “You are now husband and wife. You may kiss your bride,” the joy they show is readily evident. That is what the prophet was saying. The coming of God to the world results in joy for God’s people. That is what John communicated in his gospel. When we experience the presence of God, we should be as happy as we are when we are celebrating the marriage of close friends and toasting their future together as husband and wife with an abundance of the finest wine.

Dear people of God, I will confess to you that I often wish for some mir-

able to serve as a sign validating my faith and my ministry. Yet, I am content to base my faith upon my relationship with God through the ministry of Jesus the Christ and to be grateful for my joy. So may we all. AMEN.