

December 30, 2018
The First Sign of Something New
John 2:1-11

Christmas is just the beginning of Jesus' story. This morning we look at who this baby grows up to be. John begins the tale in Cana: *"This is the first of His miraculous signs ... He thus revealed His glory, and His disciples put their trust in Him"* (John 2:11). What did Jesus do? Bring someone back from the dead? Healed a cripple? Restore sight to a blind man? No! He saved a wedding!

Let's back up a bit. Jesus has not stayed in the manger (though some people are content to leave Him there). He has grown up. He has just met Nathaniel, a farmer from Cana (John 21:2), a hill town 7 km northeast of Jesus' home in Nazareth. When we meet Nathaniel he is sitting under a fig tree (John 1:48). Jesus sees Nathaniel's heart: Jesus describes him as a person *"in whom is no deceit," "of complete integrity," "without a false bone in his body"* (depending on your translation).

Nathaniel is quite taken aback by this and exclaims, *"Rabbi, you are the Son of God — the King of Israel!"* (John 1:49). Nathaniel gets it. He gets Christmas!

The story would be all neat and tidy except for what Jesus says next: *"Do you believe this just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this. I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man"* (1:50-51). What's this all about?

A Stairway to Heaven?

This is not the first time that a link, or a stairway, between heaven and earth has been mentioned in Scripture. Way back in Genesis 28, Jacob is on the run. He has stolen his father's blessing from his brother, Esau (the last in a long line of schemes and attempts to cheat, steal, and lie his way to the top). He's out in the wilderness. He hasn't a penny to his name. He only has the clothes on his back. One night, as he sleeps, he dreams of a stairway that reaches from the earth up to heaven. And he sees angels of God going up and down the stairway. At the top of the stairway stands the Lord, who promises Jacob He will bring him back to this land in peace and prosperity. Both the dream and the promise seem incredible. Too good to ever be true.

What is this vision about? ***First, it reminds Jacob that God is there with him,*** even in the wilderness, even when – due to his own stupidity – his world is collapsing. It's good for us to remember that God is always with us – no matter what our circumstances – even if they are self-inflicted. God never leaves us or abandons us.

Second, God has plans and purposes for Jacob, and despite Jacob's continued attempts to scheme, it all will come to pass, exactly as God promised. It is good to remember that God's plans and purposes ultimately will come to pass, even despite us.

Third, Jacob also has the blessing of seeing heaven opened. Like the shepherds, or the magi, Isaiah, Ezekiel, or John (in Revelation), Jacob is blessed with a glimpse of the glory of God. The details are frustratingly vague. Probably because words could never begin to do justice to what they actually saw. Imagine having lived in a small Prairie town all your life. Imagine your first trip to Calgary. How would you begin to have words to describe what you saw? Now imagine going west and seeing Lake Louise. You wouldn't have any vocabulary to talk about it. *"It was like ..."* That's just a fraction of the problem folks who glimpsed of heaven had writing their memoirs.

Fourth, Jacob is changed forever. Jacob's whole life is transformed. He goes from being a rebel running from God to being a faithful follower, from being a family outcast to being a patriarch, from being miserable to finding joy and fulfillment.

Back to earth

On the third day (we would say two days later), Jesus is at a wedding in Nathaniel's home town of Cana. Chances are Nathaniel, Philip, Andrew, Peter and John (assuming he is the other disciple in John 1:35+) are all there, too. So is Jesus' family.

The host runs out of wine. This is a serious problem. It's a social disaster. The steward would be disgraced, the host would be disgraced, the bride and groom would be disgraced ... After a conversation with his mother, Jesus miraculously turns ordinary well water into the best wine anyone has ever tasted.

What is this story about? If we were to read this story as simple and straightforward as some people read the Bible, we might say that it is a story about party favours. The Bible is promising us that if we are surprised by people eating and drinking more than we expected, we simply have to pray and God will miraculously provide.

This is not really what John is trying to say, is it? It is wonderful Jesus has compassion on this family. But there's a lot more going on here ...

This, John says, is the first of Jesus' miraculous "signs" (2:11). John only records seven of Jesus' miracles (the other gospels include many more). In John's gospel, each of the seven chosen examples of Jesus' divine power are "signs" showing us who Jesus is –the One through whom God is at work bringing life, hope, and salvation to the world.¹ This story, then, is very carefully selected to help us see something about who Jesus is, and

¹ *"The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name"* (John 20:30-31).

how God is at work through Jesus in our world ...

It's significant that John records it right after Jesus' promise to Nathaniel that he will see heaven opened. As Jesus turns water into wine in Nathaniel's backyard, this is, in fact, one of those "*you shall see heaven opened*" (1:51) moments. It's a lot like Christmas – as Jesus comes among us. It is one of those times when ...

1. ***We are reminded God is always with us.*** God is not just with us in the "spiritual times" in our lives – when we're at church, in Bible study, or we're praying. God is with us always – at the wedding AND the reception, at worship AND when we're out with our friends (or alone), when we celebrate AND when we mourn, when we laugh AND when we cry, at Christmas AND through the dog days of winter. Sometimes we limit God to the "religious" times in our lives. But God is with us always. The message of Christmas is "Immanuel" – God with us.
2. ***We are reminded God can take care of us quite nicely.*** We stress, we worry, we obsess, we pull out our hair ... We scheme, we plan, we weasel our way, we trick ... And quite often God quietly does His own thing despite us. Maybe we need to slow down. Maybe we need to ask God for wisdom. Maybe we need to pray. Maybe we need to listen. Maybe, like the shepherds and wise men, we need to ignore the power politics going on around us, and simply worship, be faithful, and obey ... Maybe we need to hear Mary's words to the servants: "*Do whatever he tells you*" (2:5).
3. ***We are reminded God is good.*** This is a glimpse of "heaven opened." Words have failed everyone who has tried to describe what heaven is really like. One of the metaphors frequently used to describe heaven (in both the Old and New Testaments) is that of a great banquet, a wedding feast, a place of joy and celebration. We may have visions of heaven as cherubs on clouds playing harps, but the actual images Jesus gives us are more earthy: a really good wedding reception, a party, a nice house (John 14:2-3), a place where we have really important things to do (Matthew 25:21-23).
4. ***We are reminded God changes us.*** This sign is a study in contrasts: ordinary water as opposed to vintage wine. Life without God is likened to tepid well water. If we know nothing better, it's OK. We're alive. But after we experience God's power and presence, it's like drinking a bottle of 1787 Chateau Lafite (the world's most expensive wine: \$200,000 per bottle at auction). His will is that we have a "Chateau Lafite faith," not a "stale water" faith. Has God made ***that much*** of a difference in your life? Likely not; we all struggle to relate to God as purely and completely. But that is God's desire for you.

It begins now ...

This connection between heaven and earth Jesus promised Nathaniel will be fulfilled when Jesus is revealed in all his glory as He dies upon the cross and rises from the dead. Christmas is just a foretaste of something much more amazing. One day, some day, we will be with the Lord. But God is here and at work in our world right now, too, in all sorts of incredible ways – if we only take time to notice.

After our Cuba mission trips, folks have shared their “God moments” – times when they say what was clearly the hand of God at work in other people, in their circumstances, and in them. If we were to stop, think, and pray, what “God moments” might we notice in our own church? Community? Home? Our own lives? We, too, can see

1. God is always with us
2. God can take care of us quite nicely.
3. God is good and opens heaven to us.
4. God can change us.

How is Jesus challenging you to change? Jesus came, He says later, that we might have life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Jesus wants the best for us.

How do we move forward into this new reality? Jesus told his followers, *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth ... you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you”* (John 14:16-17). Immanuel – God is with us always! That’s good news.

But real change only happened in Cana when people took Mary’s words seriously: *“Do whatever He tells you”* (v.5). The caveat that goes with this Jesus’ promise of His Spirit is the same: *“If you love me, obey my commandments ... Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me ... All who love me will do what I say”* (John 14:15, 21, 22). Only when we really get to know Jesus, love Him, and follow Him does this become real. Then things change. And how they change.

How do we get to know Jesus?

1. From *the Bible*. We’re reading through John’s gospel in 2019 study guides.
2. Through our *prayers* (study guides can help).
3. By seeing *opportunities to see and be His love* every day – and taking them.

As we begin a new year, how do you see Jesus at work? He is inviting you into life in all its fullness, full of hope, peace, love, and joy. On the cusp of 2019, what is Jesus saying to you? *“Do whatever He tells you,”* Mary says (v.5). Will I do that?

*Eternal and ever-blessed God, who makes all things new,
we thank You that You have allowed us to begin a new year.
Here in Your presence we make our resolutions for the days to come.*

*We resolve to be faithful and true to those who love us,
and loyal to those who are our friends,
so that we may never bring worry to their minds or distress to their hearts.*

*We resolve to live in forgiveness and in kindness,
that, like our Master, we may go about ever doing good.*

*We resolve to live in diligence and in effort,
that we may use to the full the gifts and the talents which You have given us.*

*We resolve to live in goodness and in purity,
that we may resist temptation,
and that we may be a strength to others who are tempted.*

*We resolve to live in sympathy and in gentleness,
that we may bring comfort to the sorrowing
and understanding to the perplexed.*

*We resolve to live in serenity and in self-control,
that no anger and no passion may disturb our own peace and the peace of others.*

*We resolve to live in full obedience and in perfect love to You,
that in doing Thy will we may find our peace.
O God, our Father, who has given us grace to make our resolutions,
grant us also strength to keep them all this year:
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

William Barclay