

Sermon: Boom!  
Text: John 2:1-11  
Date: January 19, 2017  
Context: WWPC  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him,  
“They have no wine.”*

John 2:3

My first question about this story is how did Mary know? She appears to make a straightforward observation: *They have no wine.*

The statement also appears to have annoyed Jesus. “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” My guess is he hears Mary’s comment as a complaint, one that is somehow directed at him.

But it’s not a complaint, at least that’s not how I hear it. I think it’s request, a plea for help.

*This is a wedding, Jesus. A Jewish wedding. Mordechai and Naomi have paid a lot of money so that this big crowd could gather to celebrate their daughter’s special day. They have no wine. This is bad. Maybe even a crisis. Can you please do something?*

In John’s Gospel, this is Jesus’s first miracle. Up to this point he’s done nothing particularly noteworthy, or at least nothing out of the ordinary.

Well, unless you count being baptized as a gesture of solidarity with all the other unwashed riffraff coming out from Jerusalem to be washed clean by John in the waters of the Jordan River as ordinary.

So, how did Mary know to ask Jesus for help? Why did she nudge him to solve the wine shortage?

There is actually no way to know the answer to that question, apart from wild speculation. What was Jesus like as a child? A teenager? A twenty-something?

It's impossible to say because none of the gospel writers tells us much of anything about Jesus as a young man. He's born and -- apart from one short anecdote about Jesus as a twelve-year-old on a trip to Jerusalem with his parents -- the next we see of him, he's thirty-years old.

So we don't know how or why Mary would have cause to believe Jesus could do anything to solve the wine shortage.

What we do know is that this is Mary's first appearance in the story. We also know she will not turn up again until the crucifixion.

So it's safe to assume that, narratively, she's appears here, in this crisis moment, for a reason. So that's my second question. What's the reason? Why is she there?

The answer to that question is much easier. I believe it's because, ultimately, this is not a story about a wedding. It's a story meant to show the reader Jesus's identity, to give us insight into the nature of his mission.

It falls to Mary to prompt him to act, *to reveal his glory*, as the text says. That is, to reveal the world for the very first time the extravagant grace that fuels his mission, the lavish generosity that lies at the heart of his identity.

And that story, that mission, starts with a miracle of transformation and abundance.

Boom! Right out of the gate John shows us what that mission looks like.

For Jesus doesn't just make a little wine. He makes *a lot* of wine. And he doesn't just make enough to cover for Mordechai and Naomi, and the lucky couple, and their guests.

He makes enough for everyone in the entire region, whether they're at the wedding that day or not.

I believe I've mentioned before that this story always makes me think of what may be my favorite billboard of all time.

The top of the sign featured a picture of an old-fashioned spigot, with a stream of clear water running out of it. At the bottom stood a wine glass, half full of what looked to be a deep red Cabernet. Somewhere in between the spigot and the glass, the stream of water had turned to wine.

Off to the side, read a simple, two-word question: *Got faith?*

In the post-enlightenment world in which we live, it's taken for granted that seeing is believing. Even more than that, it's assumed that seeing is a pre-condition for believing. That if a given thing can't be seen, if it can't be proven, then it is not real.

It is further assumed that if a given thing is seen, or can somehow be measured or proven, then it is not a miracle. It's just part of the real world, the ordinary world that's governed by the laws of physics and chemistry and biology.

So that's what science teaches us. And that's fair enough. After all, the scientific method has itself transformed the world, from a place governed by superstition, to a place where it's possible to cure polio and leukemia. (Which is itself kind of a miracle, when you think about it.)

Faith tells us a different story. It teaches us that sometimes you have to believe before you see. Sometimes you have to get past your own fixed ideas, your own fixed assumptions, about what's possible, and what's not, before -- Boom! -- you have your categories remade.

But it's also true that sometimes you don't have to believe before you see the miracle. Sometimes you just have see what's right in front of you to realize you're face to face, nose to nose, with wonders so profound they reshape your understanding of the "ordinary" world.

Suppose you're out camping somewhere deep in the wilderness. It's January. So it's bitterly cold outside and a deep layer of snow blankets the world around you.

But you were born in Maine and raised in Minnesota. (Go Vikings! Anybody?) Not surprisingly, you're one of those hardy souls who actually likes winter camping.

Now, night is falling. It can't be more than two or three degrees above zero. You would love to be able to enjoy a hot meal before you crawl into your tent and zip up for the night in you down sleeping bag.

But you've brought no stove and you're at least ten miles from the nearest source of electricity.

Yet you don't care because you have a box of small little sticks of wood in your pocket. The tips of these sticks are covered with a glob of sulfur mixed with some oxidizing agents.

So, following the lesson your father taught you, and his father taught him, you search out the nearest evergreen tree, reach down underneath its protective boughs, and harvest a bounty of old, dead branches, and a handful of powder-dry moss.

You carefully lay some kindling on top of the moss in a perfect pile, like your father showed you how to do. And then you take out one of those tiny little sticks from your pocket. You strike it on the dry underside of a nearby rock.

That little blob of chemicals on the tip instantly bursts into flame, turning this small piece of wood into wild and living thing, like a tiny little dragon with a life and energy all its own.

You touch the flame to the moss and, instantly, this dry old tuft of fuzz also bursts into life, hot orange flames dancing up from its once dead fibers.

Slowly you add more wood to the flames until a good-sized campfire has lit up the night all around you. Five minutes ago it was completely dark. Five minutes ago you once were blind but now, well, now you see.

Because now light and heat radiate from old dead logs, brightening up a cold winter's night that was so deep.

Suddenly -- boom! -- you realize you caused this astounding transformation. You did this by just striking a tiny, inert match stick against the bottom of an old, cold rock.

You stop and ponder what a remarkable thing, what a stupendously wondrous thing, this transformation is. Sure, science can *explain* what just happened. Science helped make it possible by inventing the match that started the fire.

But as far as miracles go, on this cold dark night, light and heat from cold dead logs stands on a par, in your mind at least, with turning water into wine.

You would be happy to ponder this wondrous thing, this fantastic transformation, for hours, except you realize how hungry you are.

It's your first night out, so you break out the fresh food you brought: the packet of mushrooms to add to your can of potato soup, and the lemon to add zest to the final mix.

You plop it all in a pot and place it on a hot rock next to the fire. Within minutes you begin to smell your dinner. And then -- Boom! -- you realize you're party to another stupendous transformation.

The simmering food is sending out little molecules into the air, like the sparks from the wood in your fire, only these are sparks of scent, not flame. Not things you can see, but rather things you can smell.

Their energy hits not the rods and cones in the back of your eye, but the sense receptors in your nose.

These receptors then fire and send electro-chemical impulses to your brain. These impulses bear no resemblance to the molecules wafting up from your pot of stew. The direct connection to the mushrooms and potatoes and the lemon has been completely lost.

Because these impulses are no longer molecules wafting through the air. They are electrical things running down the neural pathways from your nose to your brain.

And yet, somehow, when they reach your temporal lobes, these electro-chemical bursts are transformed back into something you can experience, something you can smell.

Again, you'd be happy to ponder how this could possibly be, except now you're ravenous. You put a spoonful of stew in your mouth and -- Boom! -- you realize that yet another miraculous transformation has occurred.

Molecules from the lemon and the mushrooms and potatoes kiss the tiny little taste buds on your tongue. Which in turn fire and send yet more electric-chemical signals to your brain. Only now these signals are not transformed into an experience of smell. They are transformed into the experience of taste: mushrooms, potatoes, lemon.

And you think, world of wonders. Light from logs, smell and taste from tiny molecules hitting your nose and tongue. You ponder why hymns are not written about such astonishing transformations.

And you would be right to ponder that. Indeed, that's why you come to church every Sunday, to find a place to focus your awe, a sacred space to worship and give thanks to the God who created a world that is both governed by the laws of science and chocked so full of wonders as to blow your mind.

And then -- Boom! -- you realize that here in this place we are all party to still more miracles. Because every week the cash and checks and pledges you place in the offering plate are turned into ministry.

Twenty dollar bills are turned into light and heat. Thirty dollar checks are turned into the bread and juice we use for Communion. Fifty dollar pledge payments are used to buy baby wipes in our nursery and the paper for our bulletins, and sheet music for the choir.

But more than just things you can taste and see, things you can touch and hear, these gifts are turned love. Into collections of food for our hungry neighbors.

They allow groups to form which then advocate for the rights of immigrants and refugees. They allow us to host meals for hungry students who have nowhere else to go over Thanksgiving. And to light candles of joy and concern, as we offer up our prayers together.

This wondrous transformation from money to ministry is yet another sign that the world is brimming with wonder, another example of God's extravagant grace and lavish generosity.

But not just God's generosity. Yours, too. So on behalf of the 2017 stewardship team, it's my duty and my privilege today to thank you for your incredible generosity. As you'll hear in more detail in just a few minutes, we finished the year in the black. And we exceeded our challenge budget for 2018.

Which means we won't just be able keep the lights on and the heat running.

We'll be able to continue turning your pledges into ministry, your cash and your checks into tangible expressions -- things that you can see and hear and touch and taste -- tangible expressions of God's love made manifest for us and for the world.

Amen.