

Sermon: Nevertheless, She Persisted
Text: John 2:1-11
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Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee,
and the mother of Jesus was there.*

John 2:1

Just a few weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, our observance of one of the most important seasons on the church year began with a dance.

If you were here that Sunday, you will remember that Allee Williams, in the role of Gabriel, danced for us the story of the Annunciation.

You will also remember that she partnered in the portrayal of that story with Anne Hamilton, who played Mary. It was not a speaking part and she did not dance, but Anne did an amazing job of conveying what this young maiden must have felt on that remarkable occasion.

A few weeks later, on the first Sunday after Christmas, we revisited this story. On that occasion, I told it a bit differently, imagining Gabriel to be several feet taller than Allee, with a considerably louder voice. More like a professional wrestler than a graceful dancer.

I mentioned to her mom that if Allee had any questions about these two different portrayals of the same story, or, worse, if she was troubled by the differences, if she was anxious about whose version was right and whose version was wrong, hers or mine, that she need not worry.

Because in the Bible, the Gospel writers all tell the story of Jesus very differently. Same exact story, but told by all four of them very differently, even when describing the same events.

It's the deep truth of these stories that matters, the truth the lies underneath the factual details is what we're after, not the facts themselves.

That is especially true of the Christmas story.

Indeed, John, the writer whose Gospel gave us our reading for this morning, doesn't even bother telling the story of Jesus' birth.

He announces the Incarnation in some of the most magisterial language in the New Testament--in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Then Jesus enters John's version of his story as an adult, is promptly baptized by John the Baptist, and then, boom, he performs his first miracle, turning water into wine, an episode that is unique to John's gospel.

Because there are no birth stories in John, I think it's worth noting that Mary nevertheless makes an early appearance in his story.

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there."

In the very best stories, every character matters, and everything they say matters.

Why is she there? What does she say? And why does she say it?

We'll focus on those questions in a moment, but we'll keep the lens wide for now.

Because this is no ordinary miracle. Not that any miracle is ordinary, mind you. By definition miracles are not ordinary.

But in John, this is the first one Jesus performs. It's the one John specifically intends to help reveal to the world who this man is.

It's a debut story as it were, meant to give readers and listeners a clear picture of this man who walks and talks and looks like us, but who also happens to be the Word of God Incarnate.

And what does he do? He turns six stone-jugs filled with ordinary well water into first-rate wine.

If you were raised to believe that Jesus is basically a moralistic killjoy, that he was all work and no play, that all he ever did was preach deadly serious sermons and that he never laughed, well, you are likely dead wrong about that.

Because it appears that he effects this miraculous transformation for no other reason than to keep the party going. To send the message that joy and celebration and pleasure are essential to life, sacramental in fact.

Oh, and also to give us a preview of what his whole show is going to look like, the main message he's come to reveal:

God's capacity to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary, the incomplete into the whole, the insufficient into the abundant.

Of all the stories in the gospels, if you had to pick just one to explain to a visitor from a distant galaxy what Jesus's intentions were, what his program was about, why this visitor should learn about him, you could do worse than pick this one. Because this is a short but remarkable story.

But if the story ends in joy, it starts out with a crisis, which brings us back to Mary.

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

In this story, indeed, in this gospel, these are the first words Mary speaks. It's a far cry from the story Allee and Anne brought to life for us, of that unforgettable conversation Mary has with Gabriel in Luke in which a peasant girl ponders how it can be that she, a young, unmarried maiden, can become, as the Greeks put it, *theotokos*, the bearer of God.

Now a grown woman, here are the first words she says in the gospel of John: 'They have no wine.'

It doesn't just sound mundane, it sounds like a snarky complaint, *You'd think Morty and Ethyl could have shelled out a few more sheckles, at least enough to make sure the wine doesn't run out.*

Or maybe you hear in it the voice of anxiety. *Uh oh, the wine's gone and there's a long way to go before this party is over, and there are a lot of people here.*

But I don't think it's either of those things. I think Mary is simply doing what women have always done. She's paying attention. She sees a need and she names it.

'They have no wine.'

In naming what's wrong, Mary makes this story a little more believable. A little more relevant. A little less lofty and little more down to earth.

A little more like the world we inhabit. A world that is frequently in crisis.

"They have no wine." "There is a need here." "Everything is not okay."

"There is no cure." *"They have no money."* *"They haven't been paid in a month."* *"They have no food."*

Mary notices what's wrong and she says something about it.

In pointing out this deficit to Jesus you might think that she has done exactly the right thing, told exactly the right person, the one guy who can actually do something to fix the shortage.

But in fact it does not go well: 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?' Jesus replies. 'My hour has not yet come.'

It's a disappointing response, for sure. Rude at best. Smug at worst. But important in its own way, I think, because it shows us that in fact Jesus is made of the same out of stuff as you and I, that he walks and talks and looks just like you and I.

Which is to say that he may be the Word of God Incarnate, but he is also fully human, a man whose focus is elsewhere, a man who doesn't want to be bothered.

Any of you ladies in the house today ever gotten a reply like that when you told your boss, or your husband, or even your pastor (at a previous church, obviously) that something was wrong?

What are you talking about, woman? Don't bug me? I've got better things to think about. More important things to do.

In fairness, we've all been there. Men, too. Silenced or belittled when all we were trying to do is help. At times perhaps you've even felt ignored by God, like your prayers are falling on deaf or indifferent ears.

What does Mary do in response?

Here's what she does not do. She doesn't slink off. She doesn't give in to her hurt feelings. She doesn't just go over into the corner and pout and wilt.

Jesus blows her off. Nevertheless, she persists.

Do what he tells you, she instructs the stewards.

She notices the need, names it, and points it out to the one person who can do something about it.

And then she delegates. She alerts the team who will have to be part of the solution to be ready to act.

Pray and advocate. Pray and organize. Pray and delegate. Pray and persist.

In this way, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a model for all of us ordinary humans.

Because here's the truth underneath the facts: even at the best of times, even in times of joy and celebration, even then the world can show signs of brokenness, even then the jugs can be empty.

And this not even one of those times. I don't need to tell you that the larger world feels about as broken as it has been in living memory, not a hint of joy in the land, not a drop of wine to be found.

And that may be true of your life too: underneath the surface it feels like something is missing, or not right, not the way you want it to be, not the way you need it to be.

So today, in light of this story, let me encourage you to take a page not from Jesus but from Mary, the young peasant girl who is now all grown up.

Pray and advocate. Pray and organize. Pray and delegate. Pray and persist.