Malcolm Clemens Young Isaiah 62:1-5

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C3 Psalm 36:5-10

2 Epiphany (Year C) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Sunday 16 January 2022 John 2:1-11

**Party On Lord Jesus: An MLK Sermon**

Grant us grace, inspire joy, let your abundant love complete us. Amen.

Following a friend’s suggestion Martin Luther King called a young singer named Coretta Scott out of the blue to introduce himself and to invite her out. They had never met before. He seemed confident and she was doubtful. But soon they were seeing each other often. They would drive to the shoreline near Boston, eat clams and walk by the sea. They attended the Boston Symphony and heard Arthur Rubenstein playing the piano. They went skating, walking together through public parks and they fell in love.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Although Coretta Scott felt shy about his big city, upper-class background, in June 1953 the two were married on the lawn at her family’s house in Marion, Alabama. Because there were no bridal suites available to black people in the South, they spent the night at a family friend’s house. He was an undertaker so later King would say, “You know we spent our honeymoon at a funeral parlor.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

King was still researching Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Weiman for his Boston University theology doctoral degree but like me he decided to apply for a position in a church. He was nervous when he preached his interview sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. His title was, “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” on Revelation 21:16. People liked the sermon and they wanted to hire him as the most highly-paid African American pastor in the city, even though he was only twenty-five years old.

Neither King’s father nor his wife wanted them to move to the Deep South. The Supreme Court had just ordered the de-segregation of public schools through Brown vs Board of Education. The violence of the backlash among whites was horrifying. But ultimately he decided to go to Birmingham as a way to get practical experience.

Not long after this a forty-two year old activist named Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white person. Jo Ann Robinson the Women’s Political Council leader decided to rally around her case and nominated her church’s pastor as a potential leader.

Although it was intended to be a short term action, the Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted 380 days. Churches and homes including the King’s parsonage were bombed by white supremacists. But ultimately in 1954 the Supreme Court ruled that segregated public bus systems were illegal. And suddenly almost overnight Martin Luther King became a national civil rights leader at the age of 27.

This was the debut of Martin Luther King Jr.’s ministry. In many ways it could not have been more different than the debut of Jesus’ ministry as described in the Gospel of John. But I can imagine what it must have been like when Jo Anne Robinson went to invite King into leadership. Did he say to her, “what does this have to do with us?” Did he realize what he was saying yes to?

On Thursday our school chaplain Timothy Seamans preached an extraordinary sermon that begins with his observation that the season of Epiphany (which we began last week) is a woefully underutilized spiritual resource. As chaplain during non-COVID times he would invite strangers, dressed in outlandish three magi costumes, to suddenly burst into chapel. For him Epiphany is about the way that people from other nations, cultures, races and religions surprise and enlighten us.[[3]](#endnote-3)

But Epiphany also has other stories and meanings. Today I want to consider the ones around the first sign Jesus performed at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. This week I have been wondering about this question. What if the whole Bible only consisted in this story? What if all we knew about God came from this event?

The Gospel of John is arranged around seven signs that help us to understand what life with and in God feels like. At times Jesus suggests that the people he encounters care so much about the signs that they fail to seek what the signs direct us to – the presence of God. Near the end of the Gospel Jesus also says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (Jn. 20:29).

Cana in Galilee is a place unmentioned anywhere else in the Bible. It has absolutely no historical significance at all. It is literally “nowhere” that this wedding happens. In that time weddings lasted several days and guests brough wine with them as a gift to keep the party going. The Gospel of John only mentions Jesus’ mother twice. Each time Jesus calls her “woman.” I’ve read that this is a term of respect like Madam or Ma’am. I’ve also read others who thought Jesus is rebuking her with harsh words.[[4]](#endnote-4) The only other time John mentions Mary happens as Jesus is being crucified when he asks the Beloved Disciple and Mary to care for each other (Jn. 19:26-7).

Jesus’ mother sees that the hosts are running out of wine, and asks her son for help. He replies, “Woman, of what concern is that to you and me….” Then Mary tells the wine servers to follow Jesus’ directions. Jesus asks them to fill six massive stone jars with water. He then tells them to bring a sample of the jars contents to the wedding’s master of ceremonies. This prominent person declares that most people serve the good wine first, but you have “guarded” or “kept the good wine until now” (Jn. 2).

Neither the family nor the guests had enough wealth to provide the necessary wine. Then in the face of embarrassing scarcity Jesus in an instant provides the equivalent of 120-180 gallons of wine. That would be up to nine hundred bottles of wine.[[5]](#endnote-5) For a hundred guests drinking about 9 bottles of wine per hour that would be four straight days of wine.

From both my own experience and this Gospel, above all life in God is a life of abundance. Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). The hymn that begins this Gospel is about Jesus as God’s word and says, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (Jn. 1:16).

What does abundance like this really feel like? It feels like reconciliation after a relationship has been broken. It feels like freedom from fear so that we can have the confidence to love others.

Yesterday unusually perfect winds were blowing straight out to sea as 8-12 foot surf was firing at Ocean Beach. When I was young I could never have imagined the technology of today. We use the same device for typing out sermons that can be used to stare at surfing video cameras broadcasting from the beach. The surf was so good that finally my wife and I had to go see it for ourselves.

As we walked up to Kelly’s Cove we saw two broken surf boards. Far out toward the horizon a surfer was being swept away and kept signaling that he wanted to be rescued. Two other surfers had just been saved. Immediately I remembered a fundamental surfing truth. It is far better to be standing on the beach longing to be in the water than it is to be in the water longing to be on the beach.

Abundant life is that feeling of being on the beach again after you thought everything was lost. My friend the biblical scholar Herman Waetjen believes that this episode in Cana begins with “on the third day” because it tells us something about the resurrection. Yes this story is about the very end of time when all injustices will be made right and every goodness shall be restored.

Herman believes that Jesus’ whole ministry is contained in this moment when Jesus debuts in a nowhere place, with only the nobody servants watching or understanding what is happening. Jesus lives in a new understanding of time. He acts as if he had already died and been resurrected, as if he were already participating in a new moral order. And Jesus promises that in our best moments we can live in this confidence, in the shelter of God’s wings.

What is Epiphany? Epiphany is the Feast when we recognize the abundance and joy of living in God. At his best Martin Luther King, Jr. helped us to see the human condition in this way too. King’s enemies wanted to silence him completely but even his friends took issue with his message. Today they would have said that he lacked focus, because he cared about far more than just racial justice.

King’s message was a message of abundance. We can have racial equality and dignified work for everyone. We can alleviate conditions of poverty in America and end colonialism. We can have peace on the streets and in Vietnam. We can care for the well-being of every human being and for the life of this fragile planet. King would have been amazed and disappointed to know that in 2022 America plans to spend $768 billion dollars on military expenditures.[[6]](#endnote-6)

That sermon for the audition in Montgomery, he preached a version of that here. It is about the way God’s abundance will always surprise us as people of faith, when we live in the new reality of the resurrection.[[7]](#endnote-7) King says,

“Although we can’t see God he is around… So I say this morning discover him. Without him all our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrise to the darkest night… Something I’ve experienced in my own life… in the midst of the struggle in the South… is faith and belief in the power of God that can give you the kind of inner calm that helps face storms… of adversity that inevitably come.”

King concludes saying, if we love ourself, others and God…, “If we do this we will speed up that day when all of God’s children will live together in peace, the day when the morning stars shall sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.”

How are you and I going to get started? What vision of abundant life is God asking us to say “yes” to?

Production Notes:

MLK Wedding pictures
Rosa Parks

Herman Waetjen

King at Grace Cathedral

1. Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: Harper & Row, 1982) 41-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Unlike the ubiquitously celebrated seasons of Advent and Christmas, the Epiphany season contains some of the greatest but, in my opinion, least utilized spiritual resources available to Christians and spiritual seekers alike. As a school chaplain, to kick off Epiphany (when there’s not a surging pandemic), I normally arrange for students or teachers disguised as magi to come bursting into the chapel mid-service, startling everyone and asking if this is where the Christ child is to be found. Given that the magi come from radically different backgrounds than Jesus, I love emphasizing the fact that the international, interreligious, and inter-ethnic dimension of their presence is not accidental to Jesus’s story but an essential requirement for God’s revelation. God’s plan for human fullness is achieved, in key part, by Christian fellowship and reciprocity with a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, races, nations, and religions—all united around the incarnation of love, the promise of justice, and the sharing of our individual gifts and collective wealth.”

Timothy J.S. Seamans, “Epiphany Evensong” Grace Cathedral, 13 January 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “An idiom that expresses a difference in perception.” Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T & T Clark, 2005) 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Six stone hudrias holding 20-30 gallons each. 128 ounces in a gallon. 25.4 ounces in a bottle of wine. Googled “How much wine do I need for a hundred guests.” That would be 30-40 glasses of wine with four glasses in a bottle. That’s 8-10 bottles/hour. 9 bottles/hour for 100 hours is 4 days’ worth of wine. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Farhad Manjoo, “We Must Stop Showering the Military with Money,” *The New York Times*, 13 January 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/military-budget-build-back-better.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Although we can’t see God he is around. In all our new knowledge and scientific delving can banish God neither from the microcosm of the atom nor the vast unfathomable ranges of interstellar space…”

“So I say this morning discover him. Without him all our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrise to the darkest night. Without him the whole drama of life is little more than a tragic comedy played over and over again with slight changes in costume and scenery. But with him we are able to rise from the fatigue of despair with the buoyance of hope…”
“And I say this this morning not as some theological or philosophical display but as something I’ve experienced in my own life… in the midst of the struggle in the South. It is faith and belief in the power of God that can give you the kind of inner calm that helps face storms… of adversity that inevitably come.”
“If we do this we will speed up that day when all of God’s children will live together in peace, the day when the morning stars shall sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.”

”Martin Luther King, Jr. Sermon, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, California, 28 March 1965. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddEQMc4neWA> 40:04ff [↑](#endnote-ref-7)