

Don't you love a good treasure hunt?! I do. Maybe that's why I have, over time, come to appreciate John's gospel—because it is written as a kind of “treasure hunt”... with careful (often cryptic) *clues* or “*signs*” laid out for us follow... to discover the “treasure” of the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ.

At some point over the Christmas season, you probably heard these words from the first chapter of John—*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...”*

In between this well-known poetic prologue and our gospel reading for today, the author of this gospel carefully sets the scene for Jesus' ministry—with stories about John the Baptist and the calling of the first disciples: Simon and Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel.

What immediately precedes today's reading is the calling of Philip and Nathaniel. Do you remember these call stories? First, Jesus calls Simon to be his disciple... then he, in turn, runs to tell Andrew. Then Jesus calls Philip to follow him... and he, in turn, goes to find Nathaniel. When Philip tells him that he has found the Messiah, Nathaniel responds with some skepticism, *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* Yet, he comes with Philip... and then is amazed when Jesus knows him... when Jesus seems to “see right through him” (although he's never met him). Jesus' response to Nathaniel's “wonder” is something like this: *“You think that's something?! Well, you haven't seen anything yet. You're going to see heaven opened up—the barrier between heaven and earth removed. There is much more to come! Just wait and see!”*

Now... in today's story, John gives us the first *clue* or “*sign*” of the “treasure hunt” that lies ahead... telling us that it's the first one so we know where we are / where we are starting from in our quest to discover the “treasure” of the gospel story. John writes, *“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee.”*

And John is going to tell us about the second one, too... in a couple of chapters – when Jesus heals the son of a royal official. He writes, *“This was now the second sign that Jesus did...”*

But from then on, we are on our own... and John invites us to use our own initiative / our own imagination to follow the *clues* to the very end.

The word John uses for *clue* is “*sign*.” What he is doing is setting up a series of “signposts” to lead us through the gospel story—from beginning to end.

**I'll give you a clue. The “*signs*” along the way are the key moments when Jesus does exactly what he promised Nathaniel he would do—moments when, to people who watch with at least a little faith, heaven is opened up... and the transforming power of God's abundant love and grace bursts in upon the present world.

Now, I know that some people have a hard time with miracle stories. They try to explain them away... or they choose to hear them only as imaginary “*legends*”—things that didn't *really* happen but which *illustrate* some supposedly deeper / more *spiritual* truth.

But... we lose so much when we do that. I don't think we have to—or are meant to, necessarily—*understand* or *be able to explain* the miracle stories that we find in the Bible. I think we are simply meant to hear them... to receive them / think about them... to see what we can learn from them—to see what God is revealing in and through them.

You see, the whole point of the miracles or “*signs*” in John's gospel is that they are moments when heaven and earth intersect with each other... moments that point our attention to a new / powerful reality – a heavenly reality / God's reality... revealing something important about Jesus (and therefore, about God).

However you think about this story (or any of the other miracle stories in the Bible)—whether you accept them / take them at face value or not—there is no doubt that what John wants to tell us with these “*signs*”—this one... and the others that follow—is this: ***In these signs / events, heaven comes down to earth... and the life that God intends breaks in upon the human experience.*** As I said, this is a key focus of John’s gospel—for “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...*”

In these signs we see / experience what God’s abundant grace is—in all its fullness!

What is God’s abundant grace like, according to this first “sign”? It’s like getting the best wine when you’re expecting the cheap stuff. And not just a little bit—huge jars filled to the brim... more than enough to go around.

Have you experienced that kind of grace?

To put it simply – this is a story about transformation... about the transforming power of Jesus... when, as Mary tells the servants, people do whatever Jesus tells them to do—opening the moment to God’s grace.

It’s interesting to note: this is one of only two times when Mary, Jesus’ mother, shows up in John’s gospel—here, at the beginning of his ministry... and the other, at the end... at the foot of the cross (ch. 19).

I think this is important to note... because Jesus’ strange comment in vs. 4: “*My hour has not yet come...*” points ahead to a time that is coming... it looks forward through many other references to his “time” / his “hour”... until, at last, his “hour” does come... when his glory is fully revealed—in his death on the cross. That moment, for John, is the ultimate moment when heaven and earth meet... when God’s abundant love and grace break through. That is the moment when it takes *faith* to see the power and glory of God... hidden in the shame and “weakness” of Jesus, the Word made flesh... dying... so that we might live.

Our story ends with these words: “*...and his disciples believed in him.*”

And that is the key to the whole gospel story—that *is* why Jesus came—so that we (and all people) might “*have life, and have it abundantly.*” And that *is why* John tells about these “*signs*”—so that we (and all people) may believe and have life in Jesus’ name. As Jesus, himself, put it elsewhere in John’s gospel, that we “*may have life, and have it abundantly.*”

John tells us near the end of his gospel (20:30): “*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*”

So, what does this story have to do with us? What are we to take from this “*sign*” of water turned to wine?

Is it simply meant to show / *reveal* God’s generous love and grace—the abundant gifts given in and through Jesus? Or the transformation that Jesus can bring about? Or is it possible that *we* have a part to play in all of this?

I believe that we, as Christ’s followers, are called to be a part of God’s ongoing plan of transformation—of helping to make God’s abundant grace and love known...

That’s what today’s NT reading reminds us of. We are all called to share the good news of the God who comes to us in love and grace... the God who, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, seeks to transform... renew... and give life—abundant life—to all!

We do this by sharing the gifts we have been given through the Spirit.

We do this by building each other up in love... by BEING the church (NOT just going to church).

All of us have gifts to share—for the sake of God’s kingdom... for the sake of this world that God loves. Most of the time, we recognize that we have been given certain gifts. Most of us can even name at least one or two. But do we fully appreciate *their importance* in the ministry of the church? *Their need?* Of the *impact / effect* they can have on others?

Paul reminds us that we have been given our gifts NOT just for our own benefit / our own personal gain. What is important is what the body of Christ (the church) gains through the sharing of our gifts.

In the language of our day: It’s NOT about you. It’s NOT about me. It’s about the community that we have been grafted into—the body called “the church” (of which Christ is the head).

We receive gifts from the Spirit so that we can be part of the building up of that body... so that, together, we can be an active part of God’s plan to transform... to redeem... to bring life abundant to all. You see, the real point that Paul is trying to make in this letter is that, finally, WE are the Spirit’s gifts to the world!

As I thought about these two readings—the transformation / abundance seen in the Wedding at Cana... and Paul’s message about the gifts given by the Spirit (and their purpose)... I was reminded of a story that I heard long ago – an old folk tale.

Once there was a king who invited all of his subjects to a feast. To make the occasion more festive, each guest was asked to bring a small jug of wine that would be poured into a great vat for all to share and enjoy.

Ezra, who was neither rich nor poor, was one of the invited guests. He owned no grapes to make his own wine; and though wine was not expensive and he could afford it, he began to think of a way that he could avoid the expense altogether.

“What if I brought a jug of water, not wine, to the feast?” he thought to himself. “No one would know that there was a little water in the great vat of wine.” So that’s what Ezra did.

The day of the feast was a great celebration. Over a thousand guests were there, each pouring his/her wine into the great vat. All, that is, but Ezra. He kept his head down until it was his turn. Then, looking both ways to make sure no one was watching, he quickly poured his water into the vat. He walked over to his place at the table and sat down with the rest of the guests.

All the guests’ clay cups were filled with wine from the vat. The king spoke the traditional word of welcome... and everyone raised their individual cups for a drink. As they did, a cry of disbelief rose from the crowd. They were not drinking wine, but water. Each guest had decided, as Ezra had, that his/her jug of water would not spoil the vat.

This folk tale contrasts our hesitancy / unwillingness to share of ourselves... our resources... our gifts—with God’s extravagant and abundant sharing of gifts... as illustrated in the water turned to wine in our gospel story.

Dear friends, God’s gifts come to us – so that we might believe... so that we might have life (in abundance)... so that we might, in turn, be a blessing to others.

Let us not hold back what we can offer... even if it seems small / like it won’t make a difference...

- An ordinary hug can bear God’s love and blessing to someone in need.
- A small donation of food or money... a simple act of kindness can make all the difference in the world.

- A smile shared at just the right moment can shine a bit of light in the darkest of places.
- A simple prayer for someone we love can open the way to God's abundant love and grace.

In and through these blessings, we (and others) can see / experience the very presence of God—reaching out... drawing us closer... filling us with a deeper sense of who God is. God will use our gifts to bless us and the world around us—if we are willing to share them.

May we be a part of the work of the gospel that transforms water into wine... that forms us to BE the body of Christ—the church—reaching out in love.

May we be “signs” that point others to Jesus... to God's abundant love and grace... to the joy and blessings that await them. Amen.