

“Wow!”

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 20, 2019 (Year C, BCP)
The Church of the Ascension
The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. John 2:1-11

A website for an Episcopal parish in another city includes some quotes, set off at the side of the screen, that convey members’ experiences of the place. One quote that stood out for me was colloquial and short. It said, *“When I walked in, I thought ‘Wow, maybe God lives here!’”*

I have observed a few souls who have been similarly struck here at Ascension. The *Wow!* may not have been conveyed so much by words as by sudden, quiet reverence. Alertness to details. Lingering. One first-time visitor couldn’t stop herself, at the end of a mass, from going forward to the Mary shrine, where she knelt, and prayed, and lit a candle. On the way out she said to me, *“I’m Catholic ... but I haven’t been to mass in years.”* And then she gestured to Mary and said, *“I’m not sure what came over me ...”* It seemed as if she had had a *‘Wow, maybe God lives here!’* moment.

Imagine if more people more often walked into Ascension and had that *Wow!* It might be due to the candles, the shrines, the incense, a perfect chord on the organ, a sublime line in the chant. Maybe even a sermon! Or what if it was because of the apparent quality of relationships? Genuine warmth. Faith – taken and lived seriously but also sprinkled with joy and laughter. Evidence of forgiveness, not as a reassuring abstraction but as a courageous way of life. Any or all of those together might result in a *Wow!*

In any case, what that parishioner in another city experienced, or what our own guest may have felt at the Mary shrine – that moment was common to many who encountered Jesus for the first time, or as they saw him in a new light for the first time. As conveyed in John’s gospel, the *Wow!* moments were often sparked by what are now commonly identified as ‘signs.’

Many scholars divide John’s gospel into four parts, the longest of which spans eleven chapters and is known as the Book of Signs. As we are plainly told in this morning’s text, the first of the signs that Jesus performed took place at *“a wedding in Cana of Galilee.”*

This particular sign actually elicits two *Wows!* the first of which we hear from the wine steward, when he tastes *‘the water that had become wine.’* It’s a remarkably personal moment as the party swirls around him. He smells and tastes the wine. His eyebrows rise, followed by the dawning of a delighted smile. And then he goes public with his *Wow!* to the bridegroom, *“... you’ve saved the very best wine for last!”*

We should stop and relish that moment—and similar moments of astonished and delighted wonder in our own lives. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. A moment of pleasure transports us beyond the pleasure itself. A tingling insight or connection.

These signs of Jesus from the Book of Signs in John's gospel often include a surprised or delighted *Wow!* And these signs are ultimately about more than the *Wow!* They hit their mark when some or all who witness the sign, and later some or all who will read the gospel, encounter and contemplate Jesus and respond, "*Maybe God lives here.*" That conclusion is where today's gospel reading takes us. We could call it the second *Wow!* in the story. "*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*" The 'water into wine' resolves a social crisis and satisfies the mother of Jesus and delights a wedding steward – and what you and I are meant to at least glimpse or wonder about in and through all of that is the divine origin and nature and mission of Jesus and then, also, our own belief in him.

The intention of revelation and belief in the signs of Jesus is reinforced in an epilogue to John's gospel which explains: "*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.*" (John 20:30-31)

In response to today's gospel or other signs of Jesus, some of us may be led to wonder about the veracity of our own faith. Why has the *Wow!* that was once so dazzling lost its shine? Or maybe we have never seen or felt or been touched by the signs as others have. Maybe the water still tastes like water. Maybe we feel like we're still drinking the dregs of the old, lousy wine, the habitual fare downed in the dark night of the soul. The tidy wrap-up at the end of today's gospel could leave some of us doubters or stumblers feeling left out.

But the theology of the Book of signs is not nearly as neat and tidy as my brief overview of it. And if I've led you to believe that the path of faith that results from the signs of Jesus is a straight path, then I've misled you. I'm drawn to the more complex view of one commentator who explains the relationship between signs and believing as follows:

*"The gospel makes it clear that faith travels a rocky road. An intense moment of faith may be followed by a groping in the dark. Faith lifts the believer out of the chasm only to stand by as [we] sink back into the abyss for rescuing anew (e.g. John 6:6, 18, 66, 68-69; 14:5; 18:17). No single ground of faith settles [our] plight ... once for all ... The vicissitudes of faith are ... the ultimate reality of humanness."*¹

Some of us here may be aware of our own Book of Signs. Chapter 1 may feature Jesus performing the first of his signs that revealed himself to us, in glory, as the Messiah. Other chapters, beautifully rendered, would describe other moments that we can only understand as divine. Miracles. Signs.

Still other chapters would account for those seasons in which we had become faint-hearted or hard-hearted or empty-hearted—until another sign was given, shaking us, or shining Light on our path, or restoring our hope. The water became wine. Again.

What people are allowed to read our Book of Signs? Most of us, I gather, vigilantly guard these intensely private records. We may rationalize, in part: '*My hour has not yet come.*' But what if others were welcomed to read our Book of Signs? Imagine those in whom divine curiosity might be awakened, those for whom reading our Book of Signs might be life-changing, lifesaving. Closing the book and reflecting on it, they respond, "*Wow! Maybe God lives here.*"

¹ Johannine Studies: XI. The theology of signs in the Gospel of John, at www.studyjesus.net