

Good News: Its Joy Catches Us by Surprise

First Sunday in Lent

John 2:1-22 Matthew 13:31-32
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Welcome to the liturgical season of Lent. Traditionally, Lent was a season of preparation for new converts to Christianity. Those preparing for baptism at Easter would spend these forty days studying what was central to the faith—what it truly means to follow Jesus, what the good news really is. It was a season of learning, reflection, and deepening trust. And so, in that same spirit, we will spend these weeks exploring some of the core, foundational concepts of Jesus' life and ministry, asking again and again: **Why is this good news?**

But I'll confess something. Perhaps you feel it too. It feels rather odd—almost contradictory—to begin Lent not with wilderness and temptation, not with repentance and ashes, but with two gospel readings full of joy, celebration, and surprise. We are used to Lent beginning in solemn tones. We brace ourselves for introspection. We expect seriousness. And yet, the Lenten resources from *A Sanctified Art* invite us somewhere unexpected. They remind us that **the good news is joyous—so good, in fact, that it catches us by surprise.**

In John's Gospel, Jesus' ministry does not begin with temptation in the wilderness, as it does in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Instead, it begins at a wedding. A wedding banquet. **It may feel a bit lavish to start Lent with a party. But perhaps that is precisely the point. The good news begins with joy.**

At Cana, a simple village wedding becomes the stage for something unexpected. Jesus, his mother, and his disciples arrive as guests. The rhythms of celebration are ordinary—laughter, music, conversation, shared food and drink. It is the kind of gathering many of us know well. Potluck laughter. Table fellowship. Community delight. And then, quietly, a problem arises: the wine runs out. It's not a life-or-death crisis. No one is ill. No empire is collapsing. But in that culture, it is a deep social embarrassment. The joy of the moment threatens to unravel.

And right there—in that small, ordinary shortage—God moves. Mary notices the lack. She tells Jesus. Jesus hesitates. "My hour has not yet come," he says. But Mary turns to the servants and speaks words that echo through the centuries: "**Do whatever he tells you.**" Joy, it seems, is invited. It is not manufactured. It begins with attentiveness. Mary notices the need. She names it. She entrusts it to Jesus.

And the servants? They do something remarkably simple. They fill jars with water. Large stone jars. Heavy jars. Practical work. Humble obedience. **Joy often begins like that—with small, faithful acts.** And then comes the surprise. Jesus transforms water into wine. Not just any wine—the finest wine. And not a single bottle, but an overflowing

abundance. Far more than enough. This is not a mere fix. It is extravagance. It is delight. It restores dignity to the hosts. It amplifies the celebration. **The good news begins not with scarcity but with abundance.** Not with shame but with restored joy. Not with quiet adequacy but with overflowing grace.

John calls this miracle a “sign.” It reveals something about who Jesus is. And what does it reveal? That divine glory is not only found in thunder and lightning. Not only in wilderness trials. Not only in solemn sacrifice. **Divine glory is revealed in joy.** Through delight and abundance, the disciples begin to believe. Joy opens their eyes. Joy becomes a doorway to trust. This is subversive. Because we often assume that holiness is serious. That spirituality must be stern. That Lent must be heavy. But the kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed—small, surprising, growing beyond expectation. It is like fine wine saved for last. It is like an unruly weed that refuses containment.

The good news is so good, it should catch us off guard. Which brings us to the deeper question. **When we speak of “the gospel,” what are we talking about?** We often think of the four books at the beginning of the New Testament. But the word **gospel simply means “good news.”** In a world saturated with breaking news—violence, division, injustice, fear—the gospel announces something altogether different. It proclaims that **God has not abandoned the world. God has not withdrawn in frustration. God has drawn near.** The good news begins here: **we are loved.** Not conditionally. Not provisionally. Not only when we get it right. **Before we earned it. Before we deserved it. Before we even recognized it—we were already held in the fierce and tender love of God. That is radical grace.**

In Jesus, we see that love embodied—touching the untouchable, forgiving the sinner, eating with the outcast, standing in solidarity with the suffering. **The good news is not first about what we must do. It is about what God has already done.** In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see a God who absorbs violence rather than inflicts it. Who forgives rather than retaliates. Who brings life out of death. The resurrection is not simply a miracle to admire. It is a promise to trust. Despair does not have the last word. Injustice will not prevail forever. Even the worst the world can do cannot extinguish divine love. That is good news.

And so perhaps it is not so strange after all to begin Lent at a wedding. Because **Lent is not a season of despair. It is a season of return.** A season of re-centering ourselves in what is most true. As we sink into Jesus’ teachings in the weeks ahead, we may not always be comfortable. We will talk about repentance. About justice. About sacrifice. But we can trust that these teachings are rooted in love and worthy of celebration.

The essence of Jesus’ ministry was meant to be good—as in beneficial, joyful, life-giving. Joy does not deny suffering. It does not erase hardship. But it reframes scarcity into possibility. It tells us that even in our shortages—of patience, of hope, of resources—God is still at work. Even in the valley of shadows, there is a Presence walking beside us. Even in seasons of loss, there is a hope that does not disappoint.

So I invite you this week to pay attention. Where might there be an opening for joy in your life? This afternoon. Tomorrow. In the days to come. What small act of service—like filling jars with water—might allow joy to emerge for someone else? Perhaps there is someone you can invite into your celebration. Perhaps there is a lack you can gently notice and name. Perhaps there is a quiet way you can make room for abundance.

The gospel is not good advice. It is good news. And it is good because it is true: God is with us. God is for us. God is not finished with us yet.

The good news is like fine wine saved for last. Like a mustard seed growing wild. Like a wedding banquet that refuses to end in embarrassment. It is joy—surprising, abundant, subversive joy.

Welcome to Lent.

Amen.

Resources:
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