

THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE

PSALM 36:5-10; JOHN 2:1-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I want to begin with a comment about the texts I choose for my sermons. Occasionally, I receive questions about how I decide what to preach on and why I often choose two texts for my sermons.

Perhaps this is unusual.

For many, one passage is plenty. I grew up being accustomed to sermons on a single passage or a single theme with an assortment of passages used to support it.

As I've begun to pay more attention to the lectionary, I've noticed that some more ambitious preachers incorporate all four lectionary texts each week in their sermons. This seems a task too much for me.

So, I often choose two texts from the weekly readings, one from the OT and one from the NT. I don't *always* do this, but often this is where I end up.

In reflecting upon this pattern, I think the most succinct reason I can give for why I do this is this:

We are people of a long story.

And there are always echoes of the OT in the NT, always connections to be made between how God is understood in earlier parts of the story and later parts. It's important for me, at least, to make this clear.

So many people have the view that the OT is kind of the unpleasant part of the Bible, the unpleasant side of *God* even, and certainly the more difficult part of the Bible to understand.

Many people see the OT as kind of a necessary evil, a long prelude to Jesus. Kind of like the gross-tasting medicine that we have to take in anticipation of the time when Jesus comes and we'll feel a bit better about all this God business.

The OT *is* a prelude to Jesus.

But God's character comes through in the OT as well as the new. And Jesus is very deliberately, and very obviously and self-consciously a part of the story of Israel. We cannot isolate Jesus from the story he fulfills.

And so it's very important for me to always be living in both parts of the story, both in my own reading of Scripture and in my preaching.

Today, I've chose to go along with the pattern. We have a psalm (OT) and a story from the gospel of John (NT).

Both are texts that make me smile. They are texts that celebrate the character of God and the delight of human participation in God's goodness.

We need texts like these because there is much to despair about in our world.

Yesterday, I read a comment on Facebook from a pastor acquaintance:

My most common reaction reading the news: "Aaargh!" Second most common reaction: "Sigh..." Third: "Let me off at the next habitable planet."

I know the feeling. Maybe you do, too.

Violence screams from our newspapers every day. We read of wars and rumours of war. The refugee crises (in Syria and beyond) dominate our headlines.

We see fear-mongering and hateful speech from politicians. We observe nastiness and inhumanity in social discourse. We see a coarseness and vulgarity in entertainment and advertising.

We see the rich and the powerful abusing and protecting their privilege, while the poor and the powerless struggle with no one to advocate for them.

We see a listless economy, and many people struggling with crippling debt and lack of adequate employment.

We see desperate people around the world struggling to cope with addictions and relational dysfunction.

We see children being mistreated due to the choices of those who have been given the task and the privilege of caring for them.

We see people we know struggle with debilitating illnesses. We grieve the passing of those we love.

All around there is bad news. And the bad news can easily threaten to swallow up any rumours of goodness in the world.

And in the midst of all this, followers of Jesus claim to be people of “good news.”

What does this mean? For many, it has often mean that we have the news that will one day get us *out* of this place!

The hope of salvation has often been understood as something like, “One day I will escape all this badness and be with God!”

There is some truth to this. There are some things that we long for that this world as it presently is can never fulfill.

But in this long story we are a part of, salvation was never meant to be thought of as an otherworldly escapist ideology.

From the beginning of Genesis when God blessed the world he had created and called it “good” to the closing chapters of Revelation when we see the restoration of all creation, the themes of goodness and abundance and delight jump off the pages of Scripture.

Scripture is honest about the darkness. But it is equally clear that light and life are our destiny because light and life are what God is all about.

Life and light come through in both of our passages today.

Psalm 36:5-10 is a hymn of praise to the God of “steadfast love” and abundance. It is a song of David that simply celebrates who God is.

David praised God for his **faithfulness**, his **righteousness**, his **justice**, and most of all, his **love**.

Israel’s God is described as a “refuge for all people.” This word “refuge” is one that is front and center for many of us these days as we continue to help our new Syrian friends take their first steps in Canada. A “refugee” is someone who needs to be sheltered from the storm. This is what God provides for us.

Then we have this kind of summary statement of how God relates to his people:

For with you is the **fountain of life**; in your light we see light.

Psalm 36 is a song of thanksgiving for the gift of God’s love for his people.

In our second passage **John 2:1-11**, we have the famous story of the wedding at Cana. We see the God who inspired the praise of Psalm 36 in action in Jesus of Nazareth.

So what does God Incarnate look like in action?

When we think of the kingdom of God come near, we often think of Jesus’ acts of healing and deliverance and justice for the oppressed.

We think of all the things that are wrong in the world being put right. We think of the deaf hearing, the mute speaking, the lame walking, the dead rising. We think of the powerful and the arrogant being brought down low and the lowly being raised up (e.g., Luke 4:14-21).

We're used to Jesus arriving on the scene to declare that God's kingdom is about all that is wrong in the world beginning to be made right.

We're perhaps not as used to the kingdom of God being the announcement of party!

Each of the gospels tells the story of Jesus in a bit of a different way, and John's version of the story, in particular stands out from the others.

In John's telling, Jesus' very first miraculous sign is to provide more wine to keep a party going!

In John, Jesus begins not with focusing what's *wrong* with the world but with a miracle in the middle of one of the things that's *right* and worth celebrating.

The scene is a wedding. In Jesus' day and in Jesus' cultural context, a wedding wouldn't have been a few hours on a Saturday, but quite likely a week's worth of celebrations, full of dancing and eating and drinking.

The hosts run out of wine and Jesus' mother tells him to do something about it.

We're not sure what she expected, but Jesus tells the servants to fill up the six stone water jars that were used for ritual purification.

They fill them with water and when they take a sample to the master of the banquet, it's been miraculously turned into wine!

And not just *any* wine! Jesus doesn't cheap out and produce the equivalent of the stuff you'd find in a \$6 box. It's the best stuff.

The master is incredulous! They're at the stage of the party where he's accustomed to bringing out the inferior wine because the guests are too drunk to notice or care. And here's this mystery man from Galilee bringing out the vintage wine!

It's a remarkable story. And the story is not just about the miracle, is it? The miracle is impressive, of course. Anyone would be amazed at someone turning water into wine. Those present certainly were!

But this passage isn't just a demonstration that Jesus can perform some pretty cool tricks.

There's some symbolism and foreshadowing at work here, too.

We might think of Jesus' later words about new wine and wineskins as a metaphor for the inbreaking of the newness of his kingdom (*You have heard it said, but I say to you...*).

We might think of the reputation Jesus would later acquire of being a "glutton and a drunkard" (e.g., Luke 7:33-35). Jesus would regularly eat and drink with the wrong sorts of people, and this would win him few friends with uppity religious leaders!

We might even think about John's reference to the six stone jars for purification in this story itself. Why does John include this seemingly insignificant detail?

The law required frequent washing to avoid contamination or ritual impurity. The Pharisees and other religious leaders at the time were famous for going to great lengths to avoid touching the wrong things or eating the wrong things or doing the wrong things on the wrong days or any number of other things that they believed had to be avoided to preserve their "separateness" from others.

Might these stone jars represent the Jewish religious system of maintaining boundaries and keeping pure?

Might Jesus' filling of vessels ordinarily used for washing off contamination with the wine of delight and celebration be a symbol of what he would later demonstrate in his life and teaching? That those formerly thought of as "impure" and "unworthy" and "unclean" now had the same access as to God as those convinced they were on the right side of the fence?

Whatever we might make of the layers symbolism in this passage, we see Jesus here adding his blessing to *earthly* things like human love, and community, and celebration, and joy.

We see in Jesus that God is not some austere deity who's always keeping his eye on things to make sure no one's getting too carried away with things!

Jesus is right there in the middle of the party, saying, "It is good."

On this second week of Epiphany, we are invited into dispositions of gratitude and joyful celebration.

So often, the life of faith can be reduced to a rather grim list of things to *do* or things to *avoid* or things to *believe* about God. Discipleship can come to seem like little more than the exercise of grudging laundry list of duties to appease a harsh God.

It probably won't surprise many of you to hear that occasionally, at times, Christians can have the reputation of being killjoys ☹️.

Many people associate religion with the restriction of pleasure, the stifling of desire, and a generally joyless tramping through life trying to do enough right things to make God happy.

But our texts this Sunday remind us that this is *not* the God we serve.

I am grateful for texts like this Sunday's.

It's easy to focus on all that is wrong with the world or to become weighed down with the impossible burden of fixing it.

It's easy to give in to doubt and despair.

It's easy to uncritically adopt the assumptions of the culture around us—assumptions that say that religion is for teetotalers who can hardly afford to crack a smile as they make their way through life trying to chalk up enough good deeds to force God to give them a gold star on the final exam.

We need to be reminded that God actually delights in human pleasure. That God smiles when we smile.

As David says in Psalm 36,

“[All people] feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.”

There is a time for duty. There is a time for placing the needs of others ahead of our own. Discipleship *is* about allowing Jesus to reorient us toward others and to set aside our own desires in favour of the welfare of others.

But to be a disciple of Jesus is also to be invited into a party.

Faith in Jesus is about being welcomed into a riotous celebration where all are invited, where none are excluded, where God is present adding his stamp of approval to all that is full of light and life.

Our texts today remind us that we are children of a God of love, a God who delights in human joy, a God who overflows with generosity and abundance to his creation.

At the end of the story of the wedding at Cana, it says that Jesus' disciples "believed in him." And we are invited to do the same.

We are invited to respond to God in faith—for the first time or for the thousandth time. We are invited to come to the God who delights in us and who loved us before we ever loved him, and who is the fountain of life itself.

This is worth celebrating.

Amen.

