

January 19, 2025

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Isaiah 62:1-5 & John 2:1-11

Who is Jesus? One Who Performs Signs

We continue our worship in this season between Epiphany Sunday and Transfiguration Sunday. It is a season that marks the end of Christmas and prepares us for the beginning of Lent. It is a season when the incarnation of the Christmas story – Jesus with us in the flesh – becomes real as we begin to understand the person and work of Jesus. It is a season which will prepare us for the journey we take in Lent that leads to the cross and the fulfillment of the person and work of Jesus Christ with his death and resurrection.

As you entered the sanctuary this morning, you walked through the waters of baptism. We will keep these waters up through this season as a reminder that our first understanding of who Jesus is and his ministry is shaped by his baptism. He was baptized, sharing in our common humanity, as we are all invited to be baptized as beloved children of God. At his baptism, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove – a sign of his divinity.

Most of our season between Epiphany and Lent will be spent in the Gospel of Luke hearing how the message we heard in the scriptures leading up to Jesus' birth and just after his birth is manifest. We will consider what it means that Jesus, this one born in Bethlehem is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. This morning, however, the Revised Common lectionary, our three-year cycle of readings we are following, has us take a jaunt into the Gospel of John. Following his baptism, Jesus is in the region of Galilee and has just called disciples to follow him in ministry. We pick up Jesus' story now in the beginning of John chapter 2:

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 me and to you? 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 person in charge of the banquet." So they took it. When the person in charge tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), that person 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. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

I am an aficionado of church signs. When people ask me about what I miss from the 18 years I lived in the south before moving back north, I usually mention the sun, the ocean beaches, and the seafood. But honestly, one of the cultural things I miss are really provocative church signs, especially if there is a good pun involved. When Brian and I would go exploring through the little bayou towns of Louisiana and East Texas or the Lowcountry hamlets in South Carolina, a highlight was always the variety of theologically-interesting church signs we would see. I was so taken by the signs, that I even bought a book "Church Signs Across America."¹ The book is now almost 20 years old, but I still pull it out when I need inspiration. A couple favorites:

- From Emmanuel Baptist Church in Monroe LA: "Long Before E-mail, God Answered Knee-Mail. Send Him A Message Today. Come Worship With Us."
- From Victory Baptist Church in Estherwood, LA: "Our Sundays are Better than Dairy Queen."
- From Gethsemane Baptist Church in Nashville, TN: "WalMart Isn't the Only Saving Place in Town."
- From First Baptist Church in Lone Grove, Oklahoma: "If God Had a Refrigerator, Your Picture Would be On It."

I'll note that not all of the signs in the book are from Baptist churches in the South. There were a few scattered Presbyterian churches and the book did include two from Michigan, but honestly they were more about programming and less about God. And that's the thing I love about a good church sign - it points to God. It points to something about our understanding of who God is and how God came to earth in the flesh as Jesus Christ. About our relationship to God through prayer, about our relationship to God through the community we form at church, about how God cares for each one of us.

And that really is the take-home message for our scripture this morning. So if you are still recovering from the Lions game last night and zone out a bit... the wedding feast in Cana is the first of the seven signs, recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus enacted that point to God - or more specifically that point to Jesus as God incarnate, God in the flesh, God who came to walk among us, sharing in the celebrations of our life, as well as the most difficult moments.

When we hear about the signs in John's Gospel, like the turning of water into wine, we sometimes refer to them as "miracles." Yet Biblical scholars make a distinction between signs and miracles. One of my study Bibles says it succinctly: Miracles refer to the act themselves. Signs are acts that point to something meaningful beyond the acts themselves.² Delving into the Greek gives us an even deeper appreciation. The Greek word for sign is "semeion." One definition of "semeion" I find helpful is that it is "an event which is regarded as

¹ Steve and Pam Paulson. *Church Signs Across America*, Overlook Press., 2006; p74, 78, 125, & 140.

² *Westminster Study Bible. New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*. Westminster John Knox Press. p1853

having some special meaning ... an event with an unusual or even miraculous type of occurrence.” The Louw and Nida Dictionary further explains that “for the Gospel of John, however, a “semeion” is not simply a miraculous event but something which points to a reality with even greater significance.”³ It is from this Greek word “semeion” that we get the English word “semaphore,” devices that send visual signals over a distance – like flags or lights or even arm motions. Across the distance, Jesus is signaling that he is someone different.

One of the other characteristics of the Greek word for sign is that “semeion” also connotes something unique “by which a person or a thing is distinguished from others and known.” Looking back historically in the Greek, “semeion” referred to a distinctive mark or sign that noted something of significance. The *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* gives the examples of “semeion” being used in these contexts: “this marks the burial place” and “I sold the female camel whose distinguishing feature is described.”⁴

We are going to take an aside here for a moment – because it is too good of an opportunity to pass up coming back to something I asked two weeks ago. For those of you who here on Epiphany Sunday, I received a question during the Children’s Sermon on how to tell a male from a female camel. I asked for help from the congregation. Sarah Mayhew was the first to respond sharing an article from the *Journal of Applied Life Sciences International*. Long story short – literally – is that camel cows (female) weigh less than camel bulls (male) and for portions of their life between 4-9 years of age, they are smaller in most of their body dimensions⁵. Or at least one-hump camels in Nigeria are. Not long after Sarah shared this, Eunice Creswell sent me some information she garnered. It is easiest to tell the difference during mating season, because the male has a throat pouch (called a dulla) that swells and hangs out his mouth to attract females. And if you catch a mother camel nursing her baby, which can be up to 18 months, pretty good bet it is the sign of a female. Thank you Sarah and Eunice for giving some practical examples of “physical signs” as distinguishing features.

As the *Theological Lexicon* notes, personal signs and “marks” are not always physical, as they can also signal distinctive character traits or something that authenticates someone. So ancient texts often treated “sign” as the equivalent of “proof.” Thus a *semeion* is the sign whereby the recipient may recognize the identity of the sender. This is what we see here in the Gospel of John. If it is a guarantee of the authenticity of the Jesus – the Sent One - and of the truth of his teaching.

³ Low & NIDA Greek Dictionary³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 2nd Edition*; Accordance Bible Software 13.3.2., Oaktree Software, October 2023 update.

⁴ Ceslas Spicq. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*. Accordance Bible Software 13.3.5, Oaktree Software, October 2023 update.

⁵ Sex Dimorphism in the One Hump-Camel (*Camelus dromedarius*) from Selected Populations in Nigeria. *Journal of Applied Life Sciences International*. 15:3 (2017) p1-10; <https://journaljalsi.com/index.php/JALSII/article/view/80>

Our scripture text ends with these words: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” This miraculous act of changing the water into wine authenticated Jesus as the Messiah announced by the prophets. These signs are manifestations of his power as the one the divine Father has sent – one who has revealed glory – the revelation that Jesus comes from God.

So who is Jesus? He is one who “revealed his glory.” Glory is a term we heard in our Old Testament passage that Angie read this morning from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah reminds God what God has promised to do to restore Jerusalem and her people: “The nations shall see your vindication and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.”

Jesus revealed his glory – he is God made manifest, as we sang in our first hymn.⁶

*Sing of God made manifest... signs mysterious and profound:
myrrh and frankincense and gold
grave and God and king foretold.*

*Sing of God made manifest...then from heaven a double sign—
dove-like Spirit, voice divine—
hailed the true Anointed One:*

*Sing of God made manifest...when Christ came as wedding guest
and at Cana gave a sign,
turning water into wine;
further still was love revealed
as he taught, forgave, and healed,
bringing light and life to all
who would listen to God's call.*

Who is Jesus? One who performs signs of love revealed, who performs signs of light and life. The sign that Jesus chose for his first was a sign of abundance and joy; it was a sign of the importance of community. It was a sign that foretold the value Jesus placed in sharing meals together and of laughter and welcome and love. It was a sign that kept the party going. It was a sign that those who were thirsting would receive the living water; that those seeking forgiveness would no longer need the stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification. For now the wine – the blood of Christ – would cover our sins once and for all. These signs transcended their materiality. They pointed to what is being revealed through them.

For the disciples it was the beginning of a journey with Jesus. Our scripture tells us that after learning of this sign, Jesus' disciples believed in him. They didn't understand the mechanism

⁶ Carl P. Daw Jr., *Sing of God Made Manifest. Glory to God. The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #156. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

by which Jesus created the wine, yet they followed Jesus on roads near and far, teaching, healing and forgiving. They witnessed the other signs Jesus performed. Yes – they believed in him and his powers, but the mystery of faith is that they didn't yet see the whole picture until after his death and resurrection – really until Jesus came to them after his resurrection and gave them instructions to be his body on earth – to feed his sheep and tend his lambs.

And so it is with us. When we encounter signs that point us to God, how do we understand them? What kind of meaning making happens for us? New York Times columnist David Brooks has been writing about his development of a deeper life of faith. He recently shared that when he was an agnostic, he thought faith was concrete. He says, “Being religious was about having a settled conviction that God existed and knowing that the stories in the Bible were true. I looked for books and arguments that would convince me that God was either real or not real. ... When faith finally tiptoed into my life it didn't come through information or persuasion but, at least at first, through numinous experiences. These are the scattered moments of awe and wonder that wash over most of us unexpectedly from time to time.”⁷

This is what the disciples and Jesus' mother Mary experienced at that wedding feast in Cana. Jesus did not begin his ministry with his disciples arguing the logic of his genesis; there were no recitations of facts of his heritage; no arguments about his credentials. Instead he performed a sign that pointed to the glory of God. He knew that this sign and the other signs would reveal his identity in ways no words could. In the David Brooks article I cited a moment ago, he quotes from Christian Wiman's book *My Bright Abyss. Meditation of a Modern Believer*. I read that book a number of years ago and had forgotten the beauty of Wiman's writing. The quote I shared in the words of preparation is how I imagine the disciples felt on that night so long ago - overwhelmed and in some way inadequate to an experience in their life; something in them staking a claim beyond themselves, some wordless mystery straining through word to reach them. Wiman contends that “Religion is not made of these moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can't even acknowledge their existence afterward.”⁸ This is who Jesus is ... the one whose intrusions into our lives require us to acknowledge that there is more to this world than what our senses and neural processing can comprehend. May we open to experience the wonder of the signs that reveal to us a God of abundant love and grace. I invite you to stand and join me as we share in our affirmation of the wonder of our faith using the Nicene Creed.

⁷ David Brooks. The Shock of Faith: It's Nothing Like I Thought It Would Be. New York Times. December 19, 2024. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/19/opinion/faith-god-christianity.html>

⁸ Christian Wiman. *My Bright Abyss. Meditation of a Modern Believer*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014, p70.