

John 2: 1-11  
“**The time has come**”  
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The gospel of John gets right to business. There is no holy birth, no angel glow, no stars in the sky, no majesties bearing gifts, no pregnant Mary declaring the child’s purpose. The opening chapter of the gospel of John is more like a preamble in which John declares that Jesus is the light of God, and that he is more ancient than we can even imagine: *He was in the beginning with God . . .* And then Jesus walks up to John the Baptist and is baptized, without any voice from heaven calling him Beloved. It is John who names him, calling him *Lamb of God*.

Here is what gets me every time I read this story of our lectionary. The One we have been waiting for has finally arrived, the Prince who will bring peace and justice to the world, the Messiah who will save the world and us, the Teacher and Healer who will transform the lives of so many – God’s beloved has finally arrived and what is his first action: he turns water into wine at a wedding! Seems a bit anticlimactic, doesn’t it?

Of all the miracles that Jesus could have performed in establishing who he is, such as healing the blind or the lame, or even the raising someone from the dead, Jesus’ first miracle as he begins his public ministry is to turn water into an alcoholic beverage. Of all the possible stories of Jesus that our gospel writer could have picked, he highlights this one. Go figure!

We could spend plenty of time pondering his first miracle and what we believe about miracles and the people who stand behind them. Or we could ponder the customs in regards to weddings of ancient times, and what a disaster it would have been to run out of wine. Or we could ponder the theme of scarcity of our own making and the grace and abundance given to us by God that is clearly part of this passage. But we are not going to talk about any of that. Not this time. Maybe the next time the scripture comes around in our lectionary.

Today I want to focus on the exchange between Jesus and his mother. In the gospel of John, the mother of Jesus is never named, never called Mary. She is always denoted by her relationship to Jesus but never named. She is there from the very beginning to the bitter end. And it is upon her urging that initiates Jesus' action. It is her pushing him that he begins his ministry.

The exchange between Jesus and his mother at the wedding is really quite funny. Jesus, his mother, and the disciples are at this wedding which, by the way would have been a week-long affair. On the third day, she notes that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus' response is that of an annoyed, eye-rolling teenager. What do I care? They should have hired a better wedding planner. Mary, in her great wisdom, ignores Jesus' comment and tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says.

I have two images of the mother of Jesus in my head. That of a parent encouraging her child to get on the school bus for the first time saying, "Come on, you can do it! I know you can!" Or worse, the situation lends itself to imagining that Mary might be the stereotypical Jewish mother who wants to show off her precious son's great talents by embarrassing him into performing his first miracle.

But, I also wonder what she saw in that moment. What had Jesus revealed to her up to that point that would cause her to believe that such a miracle was possible from him? How did she know that this was the time for revelation, the event of Epiphany?

The mother of Jesus appears only twice in the Gospel of John, at the wedding at Cana and at the foot of the cross. It is more than poignant that she brackets his life, and is present throughout his earthly ministry. She is the nurturing force as he is beginning to realize that he is the Word of God made flesh. She is there at this pivotal moment to tell him that the time has come to act like it. She kind of "kicks" him out of the "nest."

I think that we can connect to this story on a deeply human level. Who are the people in your life, in my life, who had at one point or another the guts to tell us that it is time to claim our strength, or our smarts, or to get off our "tuckus'" and move, to stop hiding behind our own insecurities and doubts, and to take our own lives into our own hands?

Often it is our parents and caregivers who out of love will tell us that it is time to leave the nest and to stand on our own feet. I connect with this story so well because this is what kind of thing happened to me. My dear aunt managed to wrangle out a scholarship for me to attend Bangor Theological Seminary for a year. But with the Berlin Wall securely in place, that remained an impossible probability. And then it happened, the Wall came down, Aunt Ilse made that fateful phone call to the president of Bangor making sure that the deal still stood, and when the answer was yes, I got kicked out of the nest. And in all honesty, I was not prepared for this, starting with my knowledge of English that was inadequate for graduate level studies.

But in hindsight it was the best move, the best step I could have taken for myself, and maybe it was what God had in mind for me. So I thank God, and I thank all the people I met on my journey that it worked out the way it did.

We can apply this to all kinds of situations, be it here at church or in our personal lives. Every time we start something new, we wonder how that might turn out, and sometimes the encouraging voices get drowned out by the voices of doubt and fear.

Think about the times in your life you were pushed beyond what you thought you could do and how it turned out. My bet is that for the most part, things turned out well or, if nothing else, changed the status quo.

In my work on the sermon I came across an illustration (1) that also connects to the scripture reading. The interchange between Mary and Jesus resembles the interchange between Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. on an ordinary day in Montgomery, AL. By refusing to give up her seat on the bus, or give in to one more instance of the humiliation of her people, Parks provoked a moment in history, and she provoked King's entry into that moment in history that would change his life forever.

As much as we hail MLK, Jr. as the charismatic leader of the Civil Rights Movement, first he was a preacher and minister, committed to social and economic justice. It is often forgotten that he was reluctant to take up the mantle of leadership in the civil rights movement.

When the Montgomery Bus Boycott was first contemplated and local Black leaders were sought to spearhead the campaign to defy the Jim Crow laws of Alabama, King was far from an enthusiastic volunteer.

He was a young preacher who became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, at age 25, just one year before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on that bus. King had been married just two short years when the bus boycott began.

In the world of 1955, King was far from being a limelight-seeking activist.

Leading any kind of effective movement for African-American empowerment in the 1950s was a highly dangerous business. And, as a son of the South, he knew its dangers well and was not eager to embrace them.

The campaign King led in Montgomery was not simply to support the civil disobedience of one woman but he led a campaign to effectively shut down the city's major transportation business. It was, to say the least, a challenging, highly ambitious and terrifying undertaking. In December 1955, when the bus boycott first began, King was neither a Nobel Prize winner nor a world-renowned speaker who inspired millions at the Lincoln Memorial. He was a preacher, a husband, and the father of a newborn daughter.

But somehow, the hesitant pastor became a leader of a highly orchestrated disobedience campaign who despite the clear danger, was guided by a moral imperative, by conscience and by faith to step into uncertainty and threat.

It was Rosa Parks who helped open his ministry to the nation. By her action she declared that the time had come. Reluctantly, King's response became a first of many unforgettable signs, moments of memorable light in a ministry in which he lived as John's gospel says Jesus did, offering powerful signs in very ordinary human situations.

According to John's gospel, Jesus' signs will grow more stunning. And so will King's. For both men, the red thread connecting all their moments is compassionate justice, which reaches out to raise people from many kinds of death and shame.

While Martin Luther King, Jr did not change water into wine, he did change words into the new wine of commitment. He did gather thousands to hear him, and they were fed; he did raise those whose lives were decaying in death, the garbage collectors; he did proclaim to the educated in America that they needed to be born again in mind and spirit; he did raise up the dead daughters of Birmingham, speaking of them in an unforgettable letter to the white clergy from the tomb of his jail cell in that city; he did lift up to us a cup of everlasting life, and we drink from it still.

The work MLK, Jr. started, continues to this day. We still live in a nation that is deeply divided about race, still struggling to live out its eternal truth, that *all people are created equal*.

The message of Jesus (and subsequently that of MLK, Jr.) to us insists on living into and bringing about radical equality and justice, and that we all are called to embody the Word of God to the World, even as we wonder if I and even we together can make any difference at all. But if not us, who then will? Maybe it is time for us to declare that "the time has come."

Amen.

Sources:

"Cana - An Unexpected Time, Nancy Rockwell, from The Bite in the Apple, Jan. 13, 2013