

December 22, 2013  
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MESSAGE FROM THE LAMP  
JOHN 2:1-11

INTRODUCTION

I have a prediction about the upcoming year. I predict that in 2014 Laurie and I will not have a wedding in our family. Since we have two kids, one married in 2012 and the other in 2013, we are out of unmarried kids. I have mixed feelings about that. I'm mostly overjoyed, because both of our kids are married to great people and I won't have to pay for any more weddings. But I have to admit that the weddings last year and this year have been awfully joyful events.

Weddings are events full of symbolism. We all know the tradition that the groom is not supposed to see the bride before the wedding. Do you know where that came from? It dates to the time when marriages were arranged and a groom might not even know his bride. They didn't want him to see her before the wedding on the off chance that he might not like what he sees and bolt. On the other extreme in many cultures the groom stands to the right of his bride. The reason is to keep his right hand, his sword hand, free in case he needs to fight off any jealous rivals.

I've been thinking about weddings recently. Today I am going to talk about a wedding that took place 2000 years ago. This was a totally unique event I really would have liked to witness. I want to look at it because this event has an important role in the life of Jesus. This week we celebrate the birth of a baby a long time ago, but it is the life of Jesus that gives meaning to the birth. We understand the significance of the birth of the child only through the life of the man that child became. We're going to look this morning at the record of what happened at that amazing event found in John 2:1-11.

Thirty years before this wedding there was a momentous occurrence that we celebrate this week. A young Jewish woman gave birth to a baby boy in the city of Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem. The woman was not famous, powerful or rich. She and her husband were humble poor people the larger world knew absolutely nothing about. The birth of her child would typically have happened with no notice whatsoever. In fact, the mother ended up having to give birth to the child in a place where a family kept their animals because they couldn't find any other lodging. Though there seemed nothing special about that event it was, in fact, the most momentous birth in human history. Prior to the child's birth angels had appeared to both the mother and father. Foreign religious leaders, apparently drawn by some

unique astronomical events, came from far away to bring gifts to the child. Angels appeared to shepherds out in the fields and proclaimed that this child's arrival was news of great joy for the entire human race. The shepherds also went to the stable to see the baby and pay homage. All who witnessed the events, the parents, the shepherds, the foreign leaders, were amazed at all that had happened.

But then came...nothing. The shepherds went back to their sheep, the foreigners returned home and none of them ever heard anything more about that baby. The mother and father returned to their home eventually and raised their family in total anonymity. What seemed like a momentous event has long faded from memory. Thirty years later that baby boy, who has lived in utter obscurity to this point, is all grown up. He is, by all appearances, nothing remarkable. He was trained by his wood-worker step father to carry on the family business. He is a fine craftsman, but there is nothing about him that would elicit notice from the world. He has not gone to a university. He has not been trained by knowledgeable theologians. He is not a military or political leader. He has no contact with people of influence and power and he is not known outside his own small and poorly regarded home town. He is just another common person with no particular claim to uniqueness or expertise. Despite that seemingly unimpressive resume he begins traveling around the area preaching and people begin listening to him. He is a winsome, riveting, insightful speaker with a quick wit and an excellent sense of humor. People are drawn to him because he has rare understanding of God's truth and of people and he has a message that brings hope to even the most downtrodden and outcast. Already he has garnered for himself a handful of dedicated followers.

At this point he is not much more than a curiosity. While he is attracting some attention among the common people in the hinterlands outside the nation's capital, the intelligentsia take no note of him. To the few of them that are aware of him at all he is merely another unsophisticated, untrained religious wannabe like the many others who crop up from time to time among the rabble. At least that's how he appears until the incident we consider today. He goes to a typical social gathering, but it is at this party that something startling, something impossible happens. For the first time it appears that this man, the baby born 3 decades earlier in that stable in Bethlehem is the farthest thing from ordinary.

If all that happened at Christmas time was a child who would eventually become a wise man, a great leader with unique thoughts was born, there is no way we would have the kind of celebration in honor of his birth that we do now. There have been many great men in history, and for a few we have holidays. But look at what goes on this season of the year. People decorate their houses elaborately, the music we

listen to changes, we put trees in our houses and lights everywhere, people give presents to one another and our entire society comes to a halt. It is by far the largest celebration of any kind in our year. Why? The incident we are going to consider today from John 2:1-11 gives us our first hint of who this person really is and it tells us what kind of impact he can have even on our lives today.

## **THERE WAS A CRISIS AT THE WEDDING**

The child who is now a man is, of course, Jesus of Nazareth. He attends a wedding in Cana, a town not far from Nazareth, along with his family and his 5 or 6 new disciples. It is entirely possible that this wedding involved a member of his extended family, perhaps a cousin. But a problem occurs there. They ran out of wine. Some people have suggested that the crisis occurs because Jesus and his disciples showed up when they weren't expected. However, verse 2 says "**Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.**"

In that culture running out of wine at the wedding was a major social gaffe. Weddings were huge in that society. Their entertainment options were quite limited. No television, no movies, no concerts, no sporting events to attend. Life was generally hard. You can imagine how boring the dull routine got for those people. Work all day long, go to bed, wake up and do it all over again, day after day. A wedding was a party that broke up the harshness and monotony of life. It was an event that was enjoyed by the entire community.

The ancient Hebrews looked forward to a day when their Messiah would come and set up an ideal kingdom of peace, prosperity and power for Israel. They pictured the initiation of that idyllic time as a wedding feast. A wedding party was the best thing they could imagine. It was the most fun they ever had. So wedding parties were a huge deal. Bigger even than they are today in our society where the average wedding costs \$28,000. In some places it's more. In pricey Santa Barbara the average is \$42,000 and in Manhattan the average tab is a stratospheric \$77,000. Even today they are a big deal, lasting many hours in some cases. But back in ancient Israel they lasted for days!

Wine played a crucial role. Not because the wedding was an opportunity for everyone to get plastered. In fact, the wine they drank had about a third the alcohol content of today's typical wines. The kind of wine that is common today was considered strong drink and was frowned upon. So this wasn't about boozing it up and getting wasted. Think about what their options were for liquid refreshment. No Pepsi, Coke, Dr. Pepper, no coffee, no orange juice. No Starbucks, no vanilla mocha latte whatever, no Gatorade. Even water itself was

less than wonderful. Since they had no refrigeration and no ice at best it would be lukewarm. They had no water purification systems, so in many instances the water might be less than healthy. Wine was all they had to drink.

No wine and the party was going to be a royal bust. In fact, there are records of a family being sued because the wedding party didn't fulfill expectations. Run out of wine and there's a good chance the new in-laws would sue you. Talk about a rough start to a marriage, nothing like having the in-laws suing each other because the wedding reception didn't live up to expectations.

When the wine ran out Mary seemed to feel some responsibility to do something about it. She may even have been responsible for the catering, so she asked Jesus to deal with the problem. It is likely that Joseph, her husband, had died years earlier and is no longer on the scene. Since Jesus was her eldest son she looked to him to be the man of the house. So when there was a problem she went to Jesus.

### **JESUS SOLVED THE PROBLEM IN SPECTACULAR FASHION**

Jesus' response to his mother is a bit confusing. It seems abrupt, and it sounds like he's refusing to help. The Greek used here literally was "what to me and to you?" That's not very clear. The reason is that this was an idiom, a colloquial saying whose meaning is not clear to someone not a part of the culture. We also have to remember that this is actually a translation. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, so we're reading an English translation of a Greek translation of an Aramaic idiomatic saying whose meaning was opaque to us.

To me the English translation sounds for all the world like Jesus said, "How is that my problem? What do you expect me to do about it?" However, observe that Mary immediately turns to the servants and says, "**Do whatever he tells you**" as though Jesus had agreed to help. That leaves only two possibilities. Either Mary was a good Jewish mother who was telling her 30 year old bachelor son what to do and ignored him when he refused, or she understood his response to be an assent. I believe that whatever that idiom meant, it was intended to communicate to her that he was willing to help. There is a similar expression in a Syrian dialect of the time that basically meant "I understand this with you," or in our vernacular, "I hear you." My guess is that's what this expression meant.

Notice his comment about his hour not yet coming. I believe that Jesus and his mother had discussed who he was and what he was about to do with his life. She had some idea of what he was referring to when he spoke of his hour coming. The ancient Jews looked forward to a huge banquet, portrayed as a wedding feast, when

Messiah came and established his kingdom on earth. Later in Matthew 22 Jesus would portray the kingdom of heaven as a wedding feast. I believe that Mary thought the wedding was the time for Jesus to inaugurate his kingdom and Jesus understood that. I think he agrees to help her and in so doing reveal his identity, but he cautions that this is not the wedding feast of Messiah in the sense she was thinking of it – the hour when Jesus would begin his rule as the King of Kings.

So Jesus proceeded to deal with the problem. Verse 6 tells us he pointed out 6 stone water jars. These jars were used John says, “for ceremonial washing.” It was part of the law of Moses that they had to wash to be considered religiously clean. Rabbinic law of the day said that they could not use clay jars for their ritual purification because the clay could become contaminated, whereas the stone could not. Note that John specifically identifies these jars as ones used for ceremonial washing. John also notes that these jars could hold from 20 to 30 gallons of water. Jesus instructed the servants to go fill up all 6 jars with water from a well.

What went into those jars was just plain old H<sub>2</sub>O. But it was not what came out of the jars, and that’s where the story really gets interesting. In verse 8 Jesus instructs them to draw some of the water out and take it to the host of the banquet. When he tasted the water it wasn’t water any more. It was wine. Not only was it wine, but it was better wine than the bridegroom had provided his guests.

One “scholar” said that what Jesus did here was to tell the servants to dilute the little remaining wine with water. However, remember the problem occurred because the hosts had run out of wine. There wasn’t any left. You can’t add water to dilute the wine if you’ve run out of wine. Second, and more important John clearly indicates that Jesus did something miraculous here.

There were 6 jars, and each of them held 20 to 30 gallons. That means in one fell swoop Jesus produced a minimum of 120 gallons of wine. Quite a way to announce his identity. It probably made for a bang up of a party. Some people say this is a legend, that it didn’t happen. But John was there. He saw it happen. But this is impossible! If you start with the premise that the supernatural is not allowed, then that’s true. There is no possible, natural way for water to morph into wine. But if you start with the premise that God created everything that exists, for him to alter the molecular structure of some liquid would not be a big deal.

Imagine you go to the gym and you see a large man bench press 400 pounds. Would you think it reasonable to then say to him, “Yeah, but I bet you can’t pick up that 5 pound dumbbell.” If the guy can bench press 400 pounds, picking up 5

pounds is not a problem. If you can create a universe out of nothing, you certainly can change the molecular structure of a substance.

### IMPLICATIONS

That's a nice story, but what possible significance could it have for us? John tells us this miracle was a sign. What do you know about signs? They tell you something. What does this sign tell us?

### **JESUS IS THE POWERFUL LORD OF ALL**

Up to this point while Jesus was an excellent wood worker, he had been an unusually good child growing up and now was a terrific human being, there was nothing uniquely remarkable about him. He appeared for all the world to be a normal human. He was likely regarded by all who know him to be in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile when it came to character. He was likely good at everything he tried and he was exceptionally loving to other people. But everyone would have regarded him as the best humans have to offer. There are many today who insist that's exactly what he was. He was a terrific human being, but nothing more than that. Perhaps he was wise and good and courageous to a degree never matched by any other human, but he was a human they say, nothing more.

This incident is shocking. Who can somehow alter the molecular structure of water and turn it into something entirely different? In verse 11 John said of Jesus' action in this story, "He thus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him." I wish I could have been there to see their reaction to this event. They put their faith in him, but it was not a complete faith nor a permanent one. They were much like us, for that moment they believed he was something special, though not quite sure what. And later in later stressful situations their faith would prove inadequate.

Yet Jesus revealed his glory here for the very first time. His glory is that which makes him unique and worthy of praise. It is obvious that in this case it was power over nature itself that awed them. If a person has power over the very structure of the material of nature, what will that mean? It means that he has the power to accomplish anything in any situation.

Jesus would later demonstrate his power of nature by healing diseases, making the blind see, miraculously multiplying food, controlling weather systems with a word and finally defeating death. But this was the first glimpse of his power of nature. Humans can do a lot of amazing things. We create machines that can defy gravity and fly. John DeGrassie just returned from India, and he flew on a plane that held 800 people! It's amazing such things can get off the ground. We have created

machines that somehow reproduce music and pictures and transmit through the air, even in hand held units like cell phones. But we don't control nature's very structure. Jesus has that power.

A funny thing happened to me on my way to this sermon. I was working at my desk at home on this section about the power of Jesus. It was late in the day and getting dark. I have a desk lamp on my desk that was on. Laurie was downstairs teaching a piano lesson. All of a sudden the lamp on my desk blinked off, then came back on. At first I thought we'd had a brief power outage. But then I realized other electrical items were working fine. Then it happened again. It kept happening. It was really weird how it kept going off and on. I thought maybe the bulb was loose, but that wasn't it. I've never had any problems with this lamp so it seemed curious. Suddenly I thought, "Hey, is there a pattern to this?" It seemed like it was winking in a curious way. I wondered if it could possibly be Morse code. I began paying attention and writing down what it would say if it was Morse. To my shock as I wrote down the letters words began to show up. It said, "Tell them about the lamp." Can you believe that?

You can't? That's good because it didn't happen. In fact, the only Morse code I know is SOS. If I could have written down a message from Morse code that would have been a miracle because I don't know it. But that blinking lamp caused me to wonder, "Could God have used that blinking lamp to send me a message if he wanted to?" If Jesus had power over nature that would be no problem at all. God could even make me miraculously able to translate Morse code. He could do anything because he has the power to manipulate nature in any way he desires if he so chooses.

Ephesians 3:20 says God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." Think about that. He is able to do more than we can even imagine. Not just more, but immeasurably more. In other words, there is no limit to his power. This has a message we need to not just hear but believe. I was talking to Laurie recently about a particular situation and I said, "That's just hopeless." Hopeless? In the situation I am referring to if it is up to human actions alone that I believe was a totally accurate statement. But I had to correct myself. There is hope because God has power over nature. God can change things. That's what this story tells us.

There was no hope that humans could overcome the problem of their guilt before God. But Jesus announced with this story that God, with all his power had arrived to accomplish that which is impossible. John made a big point about the stone jars used for ritual cleansing. They represented the way one becomes clean and

acceptable before God. By filling them and changing the water into wine Jesus was saying that he was coming to bring a whole new way to be clean and acceptable to God. Humans were never able to perfectly clean themselves, to keep all the rules necessary to be accepted by God. It was simply impossible. But now Jesus was providing what was necessary to gain that acceptance. He has the power to provide what we need not only for that but for everything we deal with. Whatever situation you may face that you think is hopeless, remember that God can do anything.

Jesus showed here that we can never limit what God is able to do. In my own life there have been a number of hopeless situations that God showed up and changed. So the first lesson for is in this story is to see the glory of Jesus and to believe that God has the power to work, even in situations that seem hopeless to us humans.

### **JESUS CARES ABOUT THE DETAILS OF YOUR LIFE**

This was the first miracle Jesus did. And all it accomplished was to save some people he apparently cared about from being embarrassed because of a social faux pas. Why this? He's going to begin announcing that he's the Messiah, the Savior of the human race, the Lord of all, and he starts by making sure everyone can have a good party and a young newly married couple won't be embarrassed?

Why not something more important like curing cancer or miraculously feeding all the starving people in the world? Was this a sort of offhand miracle, or maybe just a warm up, kind of making sure the old divine powers were working? Or was this intentional? John says it was a sign. One of the things it tells us is theological. He used the ceremonial jars for a reason. The old Jewish way of trying to make oneself clean before God was being replaced by something new, something better. It was by his kindness, his grace. You'll be made clean as a gift you receive by faith in Jesus. Purely because God is kind. He filled those stone pots to the brim, way more than the family would need for the wedding, as a way of saying that what he would provide will be more than sufficient for us. His new way of being clean before God would be all we will ever need.

But it's also important to note that Jesus did this amazing thing simply because he cared about a young couple in a difficult spot. Saving them embarrassment was not world changing. It wasn't life or death, or even life altering. ***But he cared.*** He cared about the detail of their lives!

Do you think of Jesus that way? Do you think that he actually cares about the little insignificant events of your life? This incident says he cares deeply about us and is interested in the small events of our lives. 1 Peter 5:7 says “**cast all your anxiety on**



him (God) because he cares for you.” Jesus demonstrated his kindness and his care for people by even caring how the wedding party went. They were nobody. We don’t even know who the bride and groom were. You can bet they weren’t significant in the eyes of the world. Yet what was happening in their little lives mattered enough for Jesus to show his kindness.

But how far does this go? Peter said, “Cast your anxiety about the really big, important things in life on God.” Oh, wait, that’s not right. Cast all your anxiety on him. *All* your anxiety. Are you worried about it? He cares about it. Yeah, but it’s so small. Smaller than wine at a wedding? He cared about that. Enough to do a miracle to fix it.

We might object that it seems absurd that the Creator of all that exists, the Almighty God, could possibly care about the minutiae of our lives. I have recently noticed how my brother Jerry and his wife Annie along with my mother are full of reports about the adventures of their granddaughter, Addison. Are you waiting with baited breath to hear about her fascination with Karen, the little girl on the *Frosty The Snowman* television show, or her focus on Thomas the Tank Engine? Of course not, but they are absorbed by it all because they care about her so even her little, insignificant interests matter to them.

This reminded me of something that happened a long time ago. One day when our daughter, Carissa, was about 2 I was working at home. Carissa wanted to sit on daddy’s lap. So she sat there while I tried to accomplish some task on the desk. She opened the desk drawer, took out a pen, set it on the desk and closed the drawer. Then she drew my attention to what she had done. I said, “Yes, that’s very clever, Carissa.” Then she opened the drawer and put the pen back and closed the drawer. Then she took the pen out and put it on the desk again. Once again it was clear she expected a comment. She proceeded to do this over and over. It didn’t take long to figure out I needed to try to get her interested in something else or I was going to spend the rest of the day participating in this momentous task she was involved in.

I reflected on how a little child gets so focused on something so totally unimportant and meaningless. Then it was like God slapped me on the head and said, “How is what you do any different?” Out of billions of people on the planet, how is anything in my life a big deal? What happens in my life that will be remembered by anyone 100 years from now? Now measure what I do against eternity. What part of my life is really significant? None of it. What makes it significant is simply that God cares about it. Nothing I do is big to God. So that leaves us with two possibilities. Either my life is so microscopically small as to be

of no notice to God whatsoever and I'm completely on my own here, or God is big enough and powerful enough to be aware of and care about all of it. Even small events that might seem insignificant.

The action of Jesus here tells me that the second option is true of our amazing God. He cares, even about the details of our lives. There is nothing too small to talk to him about. There is nothing he is not interested in and nothing he cannot act to bring to a joyous outcome should that be for our best.

Jesus confirmed that this is true in Matthew 10:29. He said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father." Doesn't this tell you about the magnificence of God? Laurie really likes birds. She has a bird feeder in our back yard. I get to spend money buying these big bags of bird seed so she can feed the birds. So we have doves, finches, sparrows, wrens, crows, robins, orioles, even hawks occasionally visiting our yard. I can tell one kind from another, but I can't tell the individual birds apart. And I have no idea what happens in their lives. I can't tell you if the ones who visit today are the same ones who were there a week ago. I don't know if any of them have become victims of predators. But Jesus said God can and does. If he knows the details of the life of a sparrow do you suppose he can't keep track of your life?

He cared enough to give far more than was needed for that party. And he gave the highest quality. That tells us what he wants to do in our lives. He wants to provide way more rejoicing and life than we even conceive of, and he wants to give the best quality. I'm not talking about circumstances. I don't mean money, fun, power, pleasure. I mean life, hope, peace, joy, courage and strength inside. This is about what he wants to make happen in our souls.

### **JESUS CAN MAKE THE ORDINARY SPECIAL**

What did Jesus have put into those stone jars? It was some very ordinary water. Several years ago one day Laurie was very tired, hassled, and distracted by a lot of demands she had to meet. She was preparing a meal. Toby was living at home at the time and was sitting down for the meal. He asked, "Mom, could I have some water?" Obviously distracted, she answered, "What kind?" This stumped Toby for a moment, but finally he responded, "Uh, the kind with two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom." That's what Jesus had put into those jars, the normal H<sub>2</sub>O. Yet what came out was something awesome.

I suspect at the time the witnesses to the event were so blown away by the impossibility that they didn't get much beyond that part of it. But symbolically

something happened here that had some significant implications for their lives and for ours. This story is preceded in John's account by the story of Jesus asking a handful of guys to come along with him and learn from him. But who were these guys? The core of the group were fishermen from the northern area of Palestine. What made them outstanding? Nothing! They were just...guys. Do you think there was anything special about those fishermen? They were as ordinary as a plain white t-shirt.

Imagine that you were going to start a movement. You want to begin something that will become a new religion that will change people's lives, become the focal point of their lives, a movement for which people will be willing to die. It will grow and spread all over the world. It will actually be able to withstand the might of the only superpower in the world during its initial stages, the Roman Empire. It will outlast that and all other empires and will change lives. What kind of people would you pick to be the foundation of that movement?

I'd look for some people with money, influence. I'd look for charismatic leaders, brilliant strategists and organizers. Jesus picked common fishermen who seemed at times dense and pre-occupied with themselves. At critical junctures they were as staunch as wet bread. They were so inept at organization when the movement started and some people gave money to help the poor among them these guys botched the distribution of it. And yet here we are today, because of the efforts of those guys. Actually not because of their efforts, but because of what God was able to do through them. He took the most ordinary things in the world and changed history itself with them. He changed the world with those humble guys. Ordinary people, turned special. In Acts 4 as they were being tried by the elite of their society Peter and John showed that Jesus had made something special out of ordinary guys. In verse 13 Luke wrote, "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

When you talk about God taking the ordinary and making it special, extraordinary, oddly most of us tend to envision something dramatic, so spectacular as to be famous. When I talk about God making something special of us, I don't mean powerful or famous. I mean extraordinary. God wants to turn you into something extraordinary.

Imagine a person so secure in who he or she is that it is nearly impossible to offend him or her. Imagine a person so full of love for God, so focused on his will and his glory that this person doesn't care about his or her comfort, about being noticed,

about whether people reach out to him or her. Imagine a person so full of God's grace and forgiveness that he or she floods other people with it, no matter what they do to him or her. Imagine a person so full of hope that on the darkest of days in the hardest of times, this person is not defeated or discouraged. This individual would not exude bitterness or complaint, but would be a constant source of hope and encouragement for others. This person wouldn't deny pain and disappointment, but in the middle of it would still have joy and would still be strong. This person would see people with all their faults, and believe in them anyway.

I submit to you that this person would be extraordinary. This person would impact people. This person would make a difference in this world because everyone is so desperate to have hope, to be given grace, to be encouraged. This is the kind of extraordinary people he wants to make us. Yes, we are pretty plain, ordinary people, but with Jesus at work there's no limit to how extraordinary he can make us. Trust that Jesus cares about what is happening in your life, and is pouring his kindness into you. Know that Jesus wants to make you, an ordinary person, into something extraordinary. So how do we do that? Listen to the words of Mary. **"Do whatever he tells you."**