

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**January 17, 2010**  
**“Back Room Justice”**  
**John 2:1-11**

Imagine visiting an art museum and walking into a gallery whose walls contained oil paintings all illustrating this passage from John 2 – different artists, different styles, all capturing various aspects of this story. And a group of Presbyterian docents are there ready to give mini-sermons about each particular painting. There's one painting of the Cana wedding celebration. You can see the servants moving back and forth, the tables full of guests with a shy bride and groom over in the corner. Up front the artist has captured the moment of surprise when the steward sips from a ladle and discovers that the best wine has been saved until the end. The docent for this painting is a jolly chap, who begins by nudging you and remarking how something always seems to go wrong at weddings. No matter how much you try to organize things, some detail is overlooked – a cufflink or boutonniere is misplaced, Grandma gets seated in the wrong pew, or you run out of red wine at the reception. Yet our God is one who joins us in the midst of our imperfect lives, and is especially present in our times of celebration and fellowship. We are to see in Jesus' rescuing of the wedding festivities a reminder that God's grace provides what we lack and always does so in joyful abundance.

Next to that is a more abstract painting, in which there appears to be a mountain range with a red stream coming down from it that joins up with a similar stream flowing from a cluster of brown jars. This painting's Presbyterian docent is a bit more studious. She begins by pointing out that the miracles of Jesus were performed to help people understand that he is the Messiah as predicted in Old Testament prophecies. The Messiah was the one who would inaugurate a new age, a future time of security and prosperity, when the children of Abraham could grow their crops and raise their families in perfect peace. The docent then quoted from the Messianic prophecies of Joel and Amos where it says, “In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine”.<sup>1</sup> Then she shows how in the painting, the mountains' sweet wine merges with the wine flowing from the stone jars that Jesus provided on that wedding day in Cana. This first sign of Jesus was done to reveal how the long-awaited Messiah had come at last.

On the opposite side of the room, there's an intricate oil painting that captures the moment when Mary, the mother of Jesus, is saying to the household servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” At her feet are the six stone jars and off to the side stands Jesus in a pose of quiet anticipation, waiting for the servants to come to him, showing their willingness to act on his word. That painting's docent suggests that it is a sermon captured in a single image, reminding us that in all situations, especially in times of need, we are to go to Jesus. When we're not sure what to do, the advice of Jesus' mother still applies today. “Do whatever he tells you”; believe and trust in Jesus. For, to paraphrase the old hymn, his grace has brought you safe thus far and his grace will lead you home.

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<sup>1</sup> Joel 3:18, Amos 9:13

So you stand in the center of the gallery and allow the richness of this story from John's gospel to nourish your soul through works of art. The wedding celebration in which Christ is a guest; the hopes of all people coming to fulfillment in the Messiah Jesus; the picture of Christ as the One beside us in times of need, whom we are called to simply "do whatever he tells us." It is a wonderful, peaceful moment.

Then suddenly, something else happens. The museum begins to shake. The lights flicker and then go off, with the one, lone window in the back of the gallery showing a horizon that is tipping and swaying as you feel the shock waves of an earthquake pound away beneath you. You seek shelter under a long table with others, as the plaster cracks and you hear the paintings fall with loud thuds. An interior wall collapses; there is noise and dust and no time to do anything except react instinctively. Chaos rules; followed by silence, total silence.

The recent earthquake that hit Haiti puts us in a comparable position to what I've just described. We've imagined pictures of Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine, even as our neighbors to the south have endured a devastating earthquake. Earthquakes do more than just shake our buildings; they also shake our faith. Back in 1755, a major earthquake hit Lisbon, Portugal, striking on All Saint's Day even as hundreds of people were in church saying mass. Over 15,000 were killed with thousands more injured. People wondered where God was when such a tragedy strikes innocent people. People still ask the same question in light of the recent tragedy in Haiti.

Some announce that earthquakes are part of God's judgment upon a sinful earth. You'll notice, though, that the pious fools who promote such views are invariably not affected by the tragedy themselves; they're not the ones who lost their homes or lost their children when the earthquake hit. The truth is, God is in the ruins, beside the heartbroken and mourning, in the makeshift morgues and amidst the rubble, far more than God is in pulpits and religious TV studios wherever it is claimed earthquakes are God's judgment on others.

Others try to remove God from these natural disasters altogether. They talk about plate tectonics and how we live on a planet whose climate is subject to violent outbursts. That may be comforting from a scientific perspective, but it suggests that God is always somewhere else, up in the clouds, when disaster strikes here on earth. It makes no sense to worship God as Creator if God has nothing to do with the rough and tragic realities inherent in creation itself.

The recent earthquake defies easy answers and tidy explanations. But return back to our museum gallery dedicated to John 2. After the quaking stopped, you emerge from under the table, shaking off the dust and picking up the scattered pictures. You brush off one small canvas that is a close-up of Jesus and Mary. They are shown in the back room of that wedding banquet, away from the action back in the storage area near the six stone jars. Mary first names the problem, saying "They have no wine." If the setting were different, she might have said, "They have no food." Or "they have no clothing, no shelter, no education, no safety, no peace." But for now, she says, "They have no wine."

Jesus replies, “What concern is that to you and to me?” It is not said angrily or with indignation. It is an honest question. He asks, “Do you see a link between us and the wedding guests in the next room, between us and Haiti, between earth and heaven itself? Do you truly feel that and see that?” In response, Mary acts with faith and says to the servants, Do whatever he tells you.

Something happened in that back room. Mary’s question prompted the miracle. A human initiative led to a divine outcome. A prayer request was answered. I’m not sure what to call it, but there is a real connection between God’s care and our care, between God’s providence and grace and our ability to ask and hope and acknowledge the fact that we are our brothers’ keepers. This is difficult theology for me, as a Presbyterian pastor, to articulate, for our tradition strongly emphasizes how God goes before us and precedes our every thought and action. But in that back room we glimpse a shared responsibility for the world, a coming together of earth and heaven over something as mundane as wine at a wedding feast. And yes, God responds then with overwhelming generosity – gallons and gallons of fine wine. But the wine only comes when Mary names the problem and speaks her request and acknowledges there is a connection that concerns her between “them” of the world and “us” of the world.

Earthquakes focus our attention and prompt us to say, “They have no water, no food, no safe place now to live.” But we could have truthfully said those exact same words a week prior to the earthquake. And if not about Haiti, then about a hundred other countries in the world, a hundred other cities in America or neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. Earthquakes make visible what we’ve too easily let become invisible, or at least unnoticed. That is why justice and real faith often emerge in the back rooms of our busy world, when people stop long enough to name what is wrong and ask what can be done, and then seek an answer that is grounded in faith in Christ Jesus. “Do whatever he tells you.” Usually this type of back room soul-searching only happens after the earthquake tremors cease and the dust settles. Sometimes it happens before the quake hits – and we call those people “prophets.”

I’ll close with an anecdote from the life of Martin Luther King, as is appropriate for this Sunday. In 1963, the Civil Rights movement was in trouble. Money was drying up to bail protesters out of jail. Court orders were making it difficult for people to gather and march for justice. One day, King was sequestered in a motel suite in Birmingham with his closest advisors trying to decide whether to defy the law and lead a march on Good Friday, knowing it would lead to his thirteenth arrest and incarceration. His friends warned him not to do it this time. Here is King’s description of what happened next.

“I sat in the midst of the deepest quiet I have ever felt, with two dozen others in the room. There comes a time in the atmosphere of leadership when a man surrounded by loyal friends and allies realizes he has come face to face with himself. I was alone in that crowded room. I walked to another room in the back of the suite and stood in the center of the floor. I think I was standing also at the center of all that my life had brought me to be. I thought of the twenty-four people waiting in the next room. I thought of the three hundred, waiting in prison. I thought of the Birmingham Negro community, waiting.

Then my mind leaped beyond the Gaston motel, past the city jail, and I thought of twenty million black people who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt. I pulled off my shirt and pants, got into work clothes and went back to the other room to tell them I had decided to go to jail. 'I don't know what will happen. I don't know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act.'"<sup>2</sup>

King did march that Good Friday and was arrested. Out of that experience came his own prison letter, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Out of that choice came the nasty encounters with Bull Connor and the world witnessing fire hoses turned on black school children marching for freedom. And out of that back room choice emerged a fresh commitment to justice, to God's vision of a peaceable kingdom that still stirs within our hearts today, impatient for its fulfillment.

In our pulpits and pews, in our homes and government buildings, in days prior to and days after disasters and earthquakes, God's call goes forth. Invariably the strongest answers to that call happen in those places of deep quiet, in the back rooms of each of our lives, when Christ invites us directly to name the connection of earth and heaven that runs right through us. May we ever respond by faith to that call. And may God's grace lead us safely home.

AMEN

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 72-73.