

# Water, Wine

John 2. 1-11

Ordinary 2

January 17, 2010

First Presbyterian Church

Owensboro, Kentucky

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On September 11, 2001, the whole world, or so it seemed, huddled together like anxious relatives in the waiting room at the ER; we were glued to our TVs, intoxicated and sick with images and video of those two planes flying into those two buildings, bringing them - and the thousands of lives inside them - down to the ground in a pile of rubble; we gathered around radios and websites; we held prolonged conversations over the phone and on sidewalks; we went to our churches; we didn't want to be alone.

“What have you heard?”

“Any news?”

“How bad is it?”

Words like “search & rescue”, “debris pile”, and “death toll” became regular parts of our communal speech. And everything in our lives, at least for a time, stopped. Such sadness. Such destruction.

Three thousand people died that day.

Our response? International sadness, empathy, compassion, support, and...resolve. Sadness about the losses. Compassion turned recovery and rebuilding. Support to re-establish signs of American strength and stability. Resolve...to find out who did it, to retaliate, to bring justice to the wrongdoers.

While our churches were for a few weeks full of people and full of questions, questions like,

“Why did God allow this to happen?”

“Are we being punished?”

“Is God absent?”,

We at least knew early on that there was someone we could blame: Al Qaeda. Osama Bin Laden. And his 19 hijackers who commandeered four commercial airliners. We knew who was at fault. We knew whom to place the burden of guilt.

And here we are, just under 10 years later, having experienced other atrocities together like the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Indonesia, Hurricane Katrina in the

South, the earthquake in Kashmir, the cyclone in Myanmar, and the list goes on. In every event, thousands upon thousands of people are killed, millions are left to pick up, rebuild, and start again, the world helps as it can, and watches, and waits, and sometimes even forgets, and the questions begin to roll in like the tide.

“Where is God?”

“If God is all powerful, all loving, and all good, why doesn’t God stop it?”

And today, after nearly a week of hovering over TVs and computer screens once again, taking in images of destruction, collapse, and death in the streets, listening to first-hand, eye-witness testimony about the horror of it all, we find ourselves in a very familiar place: at church, pain-stricken, paralyzed by a sense of helplessness, questions galore, bibles and hymn-books in trembling hands, hearts broken.

I’m not sure how many Americans are feeling this way this morning, Haiti being so far removed from us, so different from our country, so racked with poverty and pain to begin with. And that grieves me. We are not that different, after all. They are human beings and so are we. Must we make other distinctions now?

The US State Department estimates along with Haitian authorities that the death toll will range between 30,000 and 200,000, with some sources citing 140,000 deaths already.<sup>1</sup> Can you believe it? As horrible as September 11th was - its hideous crimes made more so because they were caused by other human beings senselessly and in the name of religion - the horrors still to be uncovered in Haiti seem are beyond comprehension.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes these moments in our lives as “limit experiences” - experiences that push us beyond the limits of imaginable, normal life. Worse than we can imagine, we think that on the other side of that experience is only emptiness, nothingness, loss. But Ricoeur calls us to remember that such is not the case. Beyond the limit there is more; there is God, whose love knows no limit. Suffering, natural disaster, pain, loss, and death - they do not have the last word. Beyond the limit of this horror is the wondrous God’s incarnate, crucified, resurrected Word giving us life even amid the latest headlines and the final death toll. Life. Abundant.

The lectionary - that collection of biblical readings assigned to each Sunday - never fails to amaze me at its precise understanding of the world, or so it seems. For reasons not imagined before Tuesday’s violent and death-dealing earthquake, I was already preparing to preach John’s account of Jesus at the wedding at Cana. And for reasons still too lovely to comprehend, it seems as appropriate now as ever.

The text describes Jesus’ first miracle - though John doesn’t use that word here, this is a “sign”, something that Jesus *does* to illustrate who he is in God! - and his first public action. Some have thought initially that John’s inclusion of this story as the first in Jesus’

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<sup>1</sup> [Merinews Report](#) on Sunday, January 17, 2010

public ministry seems frivolous - after all, wedding receptions and the drinking of wine seem like leisure activities, especially given the often painful realities in the world. At stake in the story is so much more than a wedding host saving face. And we should not be surprised that this One whom we call Lord should transform water into wine. What *does* surprise us, I think, is the shadowy statement Jesus offers around this story: My time has not yet come.

Jesus was referring, of course, to another horrendous and catastrophic event - the state-sponsored execution that would cost him his life and would give us ours - Good Friday whose sun set twice only to rise on Good Sunday. Jesus was referring, of course, to this font, in which grace pours out, onto, over, into, and through us for the sake of the world. Jesus was referring to the table around which we celebrate today. This wine is also the wine of a wedding - water that takes on potency, color, fragrance, and flavor - the foretaste of our marriage as the bride of Christ. The cross, which that Cana event foreshadowed, was the ultimate push of the brokenness of the world beyond the limit; but God pushed beyond that, weaving that sadness and suffering into God's redemptive purposes, transforming Christ's death into resurrection.

In the weeks following September 11, we had a decision to make: what kind of nation will we be? What kind of world are we making? In the wake of the quake that has shaken Haiti to near complete collapse, the people of God have a similar decision facing them: what kind of church will we be? Jesus went to that wedding to demonstrate that God was alive in him, that there was enough grace-poured-out for everyone, that even the most mundane and ordinary things in life were imbued with the presence of God, that water becomes wine, that grief becomes gratitude, that despair becomes hope, that the tearing down becomes a building up, that indifference becomes love, and, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., the old world becomes new!

Our hands seem tied on this side of the recovery in Haiti. But they are not. Presbyterians around the country are mobilizing and traveling to Haiti, and will remain there for years after this day. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, or PDA, is still in New Orleans all these years after Katrina. PDA is among the first in and is always the last out...by design, by decision, by devotion...no one gets forgotten. PDA is on the move now in Haiti and needs support. Maybe one day we will travel together to Haiti to help. We are already collecting funds to support the rescue, recovery, and rebuilding. And we always have that radically transformative gift to give to the world, prayer. And we do it all in the name of the One who came to comfort us in our affliction and to walk with us beyond the limits to death...to new life.

May the Spirit of God continue to whisper - no! shout! - to the churches the same words spoken by Mary, whose first impulse when confronted by need amid crisis was complete and utter trust: "Listen to my son. Do whatever he tells you." Our hearts are broken along with their bodies, their hope. "Listen to him," she says. And listening becomes a life lived in service to all those who sift and sort and long to be knitted together again. Amen.

