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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/17/2010, The Second Sunday at Epiphany  
Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11  
Abundant Life

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is on my heart to speak of Haiti. You know of the horrors there this past week. I want to encourage us in our good deeds and prayers on behalf of the poor and suffering, to say that our best efforts are right and godly and heading in the right path, the direction of reality.

So, my sermon is meant to set the stage for that discussion. My text is from the last verse of this morning's Gospel Lesson:

This, the *first* of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:11, RSV)

This morning's Gospel story ends with mention of a numerical order. What I want to do in this sermon is to persuade you that this *first* miracle of our Lord is first not only in number, but also in fundamental meaning. It's a story that intends for us to be happy about Jesus and about him being in charge of this world.

Here at Immanuel Lutheran Church, our beautiful wooden altarpiece gives us special reason for affection for St. John the Evangelist, for there he is, on the right, with his quill pen in his hand and his high-flying symbol at his feet: the eagle. In my notes in our worship folder, I mention that Moses represents the holy Law of God, and St. John the holy Gospel, with Jesus in the center, the perfect meaning of both Law and Gospel.

The word "Gospel" means "a happy rumor" or "good news." It is as if the early Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, contemplated the story of Jesus from beginning to end, especially pondering the Easter triumph of Jesus over death, added it all up and exclaimed, Gospel! This is no frivolous summary. There are frightening parts to the story of Jesus, and in many ways, Jesus is a stern preacher of piety. Still, adding it all up, the Church expresses its fundamental conviction that the resurrection of Jesus is good news for this old world of ours.

In this morning's Gospel story, St. John well deserves the title "Evangelist." He is a preacher of Gospel, of good news. His fundamental slant on things is that the life of Jesus means happy news for our world. And so it is that St. John almost immediately turns to the story of the wedding in Cana to begin his story of Jesus.

It is a story about a wedding and therefore about a fun time -- a time like we had yesterday evening at the wedding of our member Will Dunn and his beloved Rebecca. Commentators note that St. John tells far few miracle stories that the first three evangelists, Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke. St. John only tells seven such stories, and he begins with this one. It is a story that has no parallel in the other

Gospels, not only in subject matter, but also in tone. The story of the wedding in Cana is not told in the other books, nor do they tell of any miracle with such an air of joy, excess, and excellence about it. I mean this: most miracle stories are stories of rescue and restoration. The first miracle we read of in St. Mark, for example, is the healing of the demonic in the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:23-28), followed immediately by the healing of Peter's mother-in-law who lay sick with a fever. The miracles include the healing of the leper, the blind, the paralytic, the one with the withered hand, the one with the tied tongue, the lunatic boy at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, the stilling of the storm on the sea, the raising the widow's son, and so on. Surely we can thank God for such stories, for they hold promise of the healing of our sorrows, aches, and pains. They promise peace and calm and health.

But this story is of a different character. It is not a story of restoration, but of luxury and excess. Jesus comes to a scene that is already happy, and makes it happier still. He comes to a wedding, where the host has already served wine, and our Lord increases the supply of that wine by a large measure, aye, and makes it the best wine of all.

Those stone vessels were large, each holding twenty-to-thirty gallons. Adding them up, that means a hundred-and-twenty to a hundred-and-eighty gallons of wine. We have a good supply of communion wine there in the sacristy, each jar containing one gallon. We have room for maybe two cases at a time, which means twenty-four gallons. That amounts lasts our church a good long time. But this was much more wine than that, and it was being added to a party in which people had already consumed the initial supply. Furthermore, this new wine was extraordinary wine. It was the best wine. In this story, the first of his miracles, Jesus provided both an excess and an excellence of wine, to make folks even happier.

It is, as it were, that St. John surveyed all the great promises of the Old Testament, some of which are promises of healing and restoration, and some of which are promises of joy, and chose to begin his story of Jesus with the promises of joy. He could have had in mind the lovely promise from this morning's First Lesson:

<sup>3</sup>You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. <sup>4</sup>You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. <sup>5</sup>For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:3-5, RSV)

Or, here is another of these promises of joy from Isaiah, this time from Chapter Sixty-One. The Church reads this passage and can scarcely stop herself from

thinking of Jesus. *He* is the one who both restores the broken and changes their sorrow into joy. Notice the shift in this passage from restoration to joy:

<sup>1</sup>The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup>to grant to those who mourn in Zion -- to give them *a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.* (Isaiah 61:1-3, RSV)

By placing the miracle at the wedding at Cana first in his account of the miracles of Jesus, John give us an immediate picture of one of his great themes about Jesus, which is that, if will let him, Jesus will give us abundant life. I suppose the servants at the wedding could have disobeyed the advice of Mary the Mother of Lord, with her blessed saying, "Whatsoever he saith unto you to do, do *it.*" But if they had disobeyed, life would have been the poorer for them.

Likewise, later in St. John's Gospel, Jesus spells out that he comes to offer abundant life to the world -- not just meager, passable life, but abundant life. His promise of abundant life is to be found in Chapter Ten, in what is called the Good Shepherd Discourse. Jesus says this:

<sup>10</sup>The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more *abundantly.* (John 10:10, KJV)

The extraordinary wine in today's story is an image for this abundant life.

So, we have these two kinds of promises in the Bible: promises of restoration and promises of abundance. On this particular Sunday, after this week of horrors and heartbreak in Haiti, it seems to me that we should cherish both kinds of promises and join our Maker in fulfilling them as soon as possible.

There is a verse in the Psalms that speaks of the need for immediate relief. The Psalmist says that he would have despaired if he did not believe that he would live to see the Lord's help. He says that he would have fainted:

I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. (Psalm 27:13, KJV)

King David is right: the land of the living is important. And therefore our land and this whole world are under divine orders to help Haiti. We know, we feel it in our hearts, because our Maker has placed within our hearts fellow feeling and

sympathy and the desire to help those who suffer. God bless all the relief efforts directed toward that poor land and God bless each of you as you support those efforts.

The whole life of Jesus constitutes promises of both restoration and abundance. The intention of Jesus that this world should have abundant life means that he is with the relief workers in the mud and chaos of Haiti. He is bending his back to the digging and the distribution of food and water. He is working till he is worn out at the end of the day and he can hardly sleep for worry about those who need rescue. He has told us in plain words that to the degree we neglect the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, and the lonely we neglect *him*, and *he* sure does not mean to neglect the suffering people of Haiti.

But there are needs in Haiti that go beyond food and water and shelter. These are needs that go in the direction of “abundant life,” and for those needs, we are going to have to rely on Jesus to go beyond what we can do. For the grieving people of Haiti or anywhere in this world, there can be no true relief and no real peace in the soul until death is defeated and the loved ones are back in our arms. There can be no abundant life for Haiti or anywhere until poverty-stricken, calamity-cursed lands are rebuilt with streets of gold and gates of pearl. That is, there can be no abundant life on earth until the promises the Lord has made to Israel become a blessing for all of humanity, so that Isaiah 25 expands to include Haiti and Afghanistan and all lands:

<sup>6</sup>On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. <sup>7</sup>And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. <sup>8</sup>He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup>It will be said on that day, “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25:6-9, RSV)

Again, the Psalmist writes:

<sup>6</sup>There are many who say, “O that we might see some good! Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O LORD!” <sup>7</sup>Thou hast put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. <sup>8</sup>In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for thou alone, O LORD, makest me dwell in safety. (Psalm 4:6-8, RSV)

These verses come from the Psalm that is traditionally used at bedtime. To sleep peacefully in the Lord, both every night and at the time of death – what a blessing!

Wine is associated with gladness, along with grain and oil – bread and wine makes the heart glad.

Many are saying, “O that we might see better times!” Even before the earthquake hit Haiti, many were saying this. Yes, we wish for better times. And that is exactly what John is telling us about Jesus in his miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. By changing ordinary water into extraordinary wine, Jesus gave us a sign that says, “Better times are ahead!” For in this miracle, that Divine feast that God promised us way back in Isaiah’s time has actually come down to us. Heaven has come down to earth; heaven has invaded earth. In the beginning of the Gospel John puts it this way: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory...”

Do not faint, nor grow weary in well-doing. Instead contribute from the supply of strength and resources God has entrusted to you. Contribute them to relief efforts and other good causes, knowing that Jesus works at your side, that you are working in the right direction, and that Jesus will carry forward your efforts all the way into a world where there is no more sighing or sorrow, but peace, joy, extraordinary wine, and abundant life, through his grace and merits, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.