

The Second Sunday after Epiphany • January 17, 2010

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 2:1-11

"Unexpected"

We did not expect it; we did not see it coming. Few did. But then it comes, unexpected, fundamentally changing the lives of those it touched. We saw that in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. We saw it when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. And this week, we see it again in Haiti, as the most densely populated area of the poorest nation in the western hemisphere has been left reeling in the wake of the largest earthquake to hit their country in two hundred years. Even before this week's quake, the Haitian people were in great need of food, employment, and infrastructure, as our servant team from St. John's witnessed last year during our visit to the Lazarus Project. But now, even the meager expectations that the people there might have had have now been shaken to the ground. There are those who are wondering why such a thing might have happened: haven't the people of Haiti known enough hardship and despair without *this* disaster coming along? And what does this catastrophe, having the impact of ten – or even thirty – Hurricane Katrinas, have to say about our expectations of the God whose love we Christians are celebrating in this Epiphany season, in which we remember how He revealed Himself to the world?

In the New Testament era, a wedding feast was a pretty big deal. An event like the one that we hear about in our Gospel reading today would typically run for seven days: an entire week of celebration with family and friends. People would come together and enjoy food and drink as they reveled with the new bride and groom. Throughout the scriptures, wine (but not drunkenness) serves as a symbol of blessing, abundance, and joy. Accordingly, the host of a wedding feast would be expected to provide for his guests, making sure that they would have enough to eat and drink as the feast continued on. Sensibly, such hosts would put out the fine wine first and then serve the cheap stuff later on, when the guests were less likely to notice – or care. That way, you'd be sure to have enough to go around for the duration. It would be a huge blunder, a social disaster, to run out of wine. But that's exactly what happens at this wedding in Cana of Galilee. We don't know why or how Mary might have learned about this – maybe she was a close friend or relative of the host family – but she expects that her son can do something about it.

When it comes to Jesus, God's Messiah, people have a lot of expectations. Mary certainly does when she comes to Jesus with the news that the host has run out of wine for the banquet. Again, we don't know exactly why Mary believes that Jesus can do something about this issue, one that could cause huge embarrassment in what should be a time of celebration, but here she is, instructing the servants at the feast to do whatever her son tells them to do.

The people of Jesus' day had some pretty strong expectations about the Christ. Many thought that the Messiah, God's anointed one, would be someone who would free them from foreign rulers like the Romans. He would make things right for Israel, so that they would no longer know need or suffering; instead, they would be blessed by God to become a prosperous people, highly regarded by the rest of the world.

We, too, might have a lot of expectations about Jesus, even if we might not often reflect on them. We might think that, because we believe in him as God's Son, we don't need to make changes in how we live our lives – that we can keep on doing things that we know are wrong, but still expect to be forgiven. We might think that he'll bless us because we are his people, setting us free from want or suffering in this life, so that disasters cannot touch us. Because we know that Jesus lived, died, and rose again for the salvation of all people, we might think that we do not need to be concerned for the people around us who do not share the Christian faith, hoping that God will do something to

let them know Jesus, without our involvement. People expect a lot of different things from Jesus. As God the Son, though, Jesus brings the *unexpected*.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus heard his friends' need and did something about it. As we heard in the reading, he instructed the servants at the feast to fill six large, stone, ceremonial jars full with water. They did. He then told them to draw a bit out from those jars and to take that to the steward of the feast. The servants did this, too, though it may have seemed kind of an odd thing to ask of them. Imagine their surprise in hearing the steward's exclamation. Not only had the water been turned to wine, it was *fine* wine – a completely unexpected result!

Jesus didn't come to be the Christ that many had expected, either. He didn't fit the model of a mighty messiah that would be a political deliverer. Though his birth had been prophesied for hundreds, even thousands of years, few watched for his arrival. The wise men that came from the East expected to find a child in a royal palace in the capital city, not in an ordinary home some little town. John the Baptist, who saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove at his baptism, didn't fit the image of a king's herald, announcing his arrival to the high and mighty. And now, at a wedding feast, **God makes Himself known through an unexpected sign, to an unexpected audience.** That's one of the most remarkable things that happen in this account. To whom does Jesus reveal himself as the Messiah? To the guests of honor, the bride and groom? To the steward of the feast? No – it's the servants who are the witnesses to what Jesus has just done, people who were likely so lowly regarded that they were not invited to the wedding feast. Though this is only the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus already shows that he has come for the lowly and the outcast. **It is through these servants, not wealthy or well-regarded people, that God brings His unexpected grace to bear.**

Jesus reveals God's love in unexpected grace at the wedding feast in Cana. Even though it was not yet his time, he demonstrated that he was willing to meet the need that was brought to him in faith. And we can see God's grace in the unexpected abundance that Jesus provided: not only did he spare that family from the shame of want, not only did he provide wine to meet the need, he provided fine wine – between 120 and 180 gallons of fine wine! (No offense to those who enjoy it, but this blows any quantity of wine-in-a-box away!)

Jesus reveals God's love in unexpected grace on the cross, some three years after this wedding feast. Because of our selfish, greedy, and unworthy thoughts, words, and deeds, you and I shouldn't expect *any* mercy from God, only just judgment. But instead, God comes down to us to take our place. He takes the lowly place of the condemned prisoner on the cross and sets us free to live as God's adopted children. And God will make you and me His honored guests at the wedding feast of Christ and the Church that we hear described in Isaiah 62, where God will rejoice over you.

Even in the wake of the devastation in Haiti, **God continues to reveal His love in unexpected grace.** Against all expectations, from what we have heard from our contact at the Lazarus Project's Hope House, all of the staff at Hope House, Grace School and Orphanage for Girls, the orphanage for disabled children at Little Children of Jesus, and the Village of Hope are all OK (including Jorel Carte, who visited St. John's and other area congregations to share the gift of music on the accordion). The people of Haiti are in great need, but God has not forgotten them. He reveals His love through His people, those who are at work even now in Haiti to help rescue, rebuild, and restore; and those of us here who can continue to pray for the people of Haiti and to give from our riches.

They did not expect him; they did not see him coming. Few did. But then he comes, unexpected, fundamentally changing the lives of those he touched. God is love, and that love comes to us through His Son Jesus, the Christ. In this season of Epiphany, in all that we say and do, let us go out and share God's revealed love in that same Jesus, our Messiah. Let him be our sole hope, our sole expectation, in this world and the next.

Amen.