

It may seem counter-intuitive to us, since in our culture, even folks who aren't very religious still make a pretty big deal out of Christmas, but the ancient church didn't start celebrating Christmas as its own holiday until long after it had been celebrating Epiphany—the revelation of Jesus as God's incarnate Son. So if we think of even Jesus' birth stories as part of that revelation, then we can see a number of things that the gospel writers wanted us to know about Jesus: Luke reveals Jesus' birth to the shepherds, showing us God's solidarity with the poor and powerless. Matthew reveals Jesus' birth to the magi, showing us God's love for all people, not just followers of one religion or citizens of one nation. Mark, Matthew, and Luke reveal Jesus' divinity through the story of his baptism, where the voice from heaven names him *Beloved Son*. And then there's John. John's gospel lacks a birth narrative or description of Jesus' baptism. Instead, John includes seven signs by which Jesus reveals the glory of God, and the first of those signs is saving...a wedding reception by turning water into roughly 150 gallons of really good wine.

John doesn't tell us who is getting married, but Jesus, his disciples, and his mother are all in attendance. Commentaries always point out how serious a problem it would have been for the wine to run out at a wedding: it would reflect poorly on the bride and groom's families; the steward could have gotten in trouble for poor planning; sometimes wine was given as a wedding gift, so it would be embarrassing if the couple didn't receive much. In a society that was very status-conscious, nobody wanted their wedding to be remembered as the one where the wine ran out. However, John describes the shortage less like an unexpected catastrophe and more like a matter of fact: *when the wine gave out*...which would have to happen eventually and sort of makes it sound like a natural end to the festivities, which, in that culture, often lasted for a whole week. It's hard to say whether Jesus' mother wants him to solve a crisis or whether she just doesn't want the party to end.

In any event, she says to Jesus, *They have no wine*...and although she doesn't specifically say so, Jesus seems to interpret her words as nudging him to act. There really is no tone in which we could read Jesus response to make it nicer: *Woman, what concern is that to me and you?* probably sounded as borderline disrespectful to her as it sounds to us. But while Jesus *says* that his hour has not yet come, what he *does* is follow her lead.

Here's your trivia for the day: in his whole gospel, John never calls Jesus' mother by name. That's probably not an important detail. What is important is that she knows who Jesus is and what he is capable of doing; in spite of him speaking dismissively to her, she instructs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. Now, like many children who obey reluctantly when their parents asked them to do something, Jesus gives in and tells the servants to fill up six jars with water and then draw some out for the steward. When the steward tastes the wine, we learn that it is not just the amount that is impressive—though the quantity is, definitely, stunning—it's also the quality of the wine that Jesus provides. When they would have expected to settle for what was left at the bottom of the barrel, it seems the best has been saved for last. The crisis is averted, the guests presumably party on, and the disciples decide that Jesus is a pretty good guy to have around.

John never describes any of the miraculous things Jesus does as *miracles*; John always refers to them as *signs*, because although they reveal Jesus' power and glory, their main function is to act as signposts that point to God. Jesus doesn't do the water and wine magic, or any of his other healing or feeding walking on water miracles, so that people are impressed with *him*; his actions reveal something about the nature and character of God. So what does Jesus producing a shocking amount of really good wine for a small town wedding reveal to us about God?

Our God is a god of abundance. Jesus transformed enough wine to keep that party going for days; it was a ridiculous amount of wine. And if there was any special relationship between the bridal couple and Jesus or anything noteworthy that they had done to inspire his generosity, John doesn't think it's worth mentioning. And so far as we know, they never find out where all that really good wine came from; Jesus' gift came with no strings attached—and without receipts. God's love is like that: filled right up to the top, more than we know what to do with, given as a true gift—not something we've earned, given to us through circumstances we may never understand, from people we may never meet or expect. And it's not just more than we can imagine, but *better* than we can imagine. Our world trains us for scarcity—for competing, for accumulating, for excluding...but our God loves us with abundance—unearned, unending, and unlimited by our experience, expectations, or wildest imagination. If, in response to God's love, we're going to share God's Word and serve all people, and our mission statement says that's what we're going to do, let's make sure that response is reflective of the God who loves us so very much and so very well.