

“The Inaugural Event”  
January 12, 2025

Amos 9:11-14  
John 2:1-11

Donald Trump will soon be inaugurated as President of the United States.

And no, this sermon is not a repeat from eight years ago.

*Inaugurate.* The word comes to us from Latin and has its origins in the practice of augury: divination from omens—reading of the signs. A lot of augury still surrounds our inaugurations. Every four years our prophets and pundits—and preachers—seek to tell us what will come of the next presidency—never an easy task. And that task is not made any easier even though many are left with a sense of “here we go again” as Inauguration Day approaches.

Who knows what the future holds? Some are apprehensive. Some are excited. Our nation, we’re told, is pretty much split down the middle.

This past week was filled with the bombast that we’ve come to expect: talk of the new “Gulf of America;” the ongoing suggestions to buy or invade Greenland; to annex Canada. And the week ended with sentencing in a New York courthouse, ensuring that we would, for the first time, inaugurate a convicted felon as President.

On first hearing, it might seem strange, then, that I chose to read that story from the Gospel of John about Jesus turning water into wine, which seems far removed from our concerns in these days of transition.

But the biblical scholar, Gail O’Day, discussing of the wedding at Cana wrote: “The miracle at Cana is the *inaugural* event of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus,” she says, “*inaugurates* his ministry with a vivid enactment of the gift he has to offer.”

This morning we heard a story of beginnings.

We heard a story that points to something new—not just “Here we go again.”

What’s going on? What is being foretold? What might we augur for our own time from this story?

A wedding is as good a place as any for us to begin thinking about the future. It is an occasion of hope and unknowing. A wedding brings with it the hope for the best that life might bring. At the same time, the unknown challenges and the unknown responses that a couple will have in their life together hover in the background.

We get some idea of what this story is all about with the opening words: “On the third day . . .” Those words hint that we might know the end of this story even at its beginning. Hope and unknowing mingle together to move us toward new life, toward resurrection.

Listen, then, to that curious confrontation between Mary and Jesus.

In the midst of the wedding festivities, the wine runs out. Poor planning, excessively thirsty guests—we don't know. The mother of Jesus sees the problem and finds him. He's just a guest here, mind you. So, too, his mother, who tells him: "They have no wine."

The wine gave out.

We know what that's like. And we wonder:

Where is God when the challenges are great and the resources seem scarce?

Where is God when the burdens we carry are overwhelming and our strength is depleted?

Where is God when we struggle and seem to be losing?

Where is God?

Mary is impatient. She wants something done.

Mary would have been a good Congregationalist. She's like us.

We are restless people.

We don't settle for easy answers.

We don't settle for the way things are.

We don't settle for the way *we* are.

Because of our faith, we do not put up with things. If there is no food, we go out and buy some and take it to the Crisis Center. If there is no place to go on a cold night, we work to expand Shelter House. If there is no love for some, we make it clear that as a congregation we welcome all people. When resources seem scarce, we're usually pretty sure that more food, more funds, more love, more acceptance will be found somewhere among us.

We listen and discover that the mother of Jesus is like us. She wants something done.

Jesus replies that this is really none of her business. And no, that doesn't sound like any way to talk to your mother. Jesus doesn't always sound the way we think Jesus should sound, does he?

Meditating on Jesus' response, in *The Brothers Karamozov*, Dostoyevsky wonders: "Was it to increase the wine at poor weddings that he came down to earth?" His conclusion? "Yet Jesus went and did what she asked. . ."

In the face of Jesus' reticence, Mary says to the servants: "Do whatever Jesus tells you."

I think I know what she had in mind at the time, but I hear Jesus telling us again: "Love one another."

I hear Jesus telling his followers: “You can show kindness to the poor whenever you want.”

I hear Jesus telling us: “Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you.”

It would take a miracle, I sometimes think, for people to start living like that, for people to do whatever Jesus tells us. It would take a miracle, I sometimes think, for *me* to start living that way.

A miracle, of course is not *natural*. It goes against the way things are.

We are, I think, called to be “people of miracles”—to do those things that go against the death and destruction that is often seen as “the way things are.”

Jesus speaks of a way that is different than the way our emotions might tell us to go.

He speaks of a way that is different than the way our thinking might tell us to go.

He speaks of a way that is different than the way politicians and pundits and policy analysts and even preachers might tell us to go.

Jesus speaks of a way of love, a way of peace, a way of abundance. And as G. K. Chesterton famously said: “The way of Jesus has not been tried and found wanting. It is still found wanting to be tried.” We are troubled by the foolish way that Jesus tells us to follow and we are reluctant to be fools for Christ.

Out of that reluctance, however, keep watching.

Jesus assesses the situation and looks for God’s abundance—something most of us don’t always see. There are six empty jars. There is water. And that will be enough.

That will be more than enough.

Each of six stone jars is filled with twenty or thirty gallons of water—filled almost to overflowing, to the brim.

Out of those jars comes wine. Do the math—that’s a lot of wine. And not just wine, but good wine—no, *the best wine*.

We can imagine the commotion and the confusion that results.

The steward at the wedding is confused. He has no idea where the servants got this, the best wine. There must be rational explanation. The steward calls for the bridegroom and praises him for his exceptional hospitality. That must be the reason.

The groom doesn’t really try to set the record straight, does he?

The wine steward and the servants and the bridegroom—and even we, ourselves—are standing around wondering.

From the start, people have tried to find an explanation because, well, because everyone knows that water does not turn into wine. We know that now and they knew that then. The scientifically minded might discredit the whole thing. The pious might give it more credit than is due.

What do we do with a miracle?

What's going on?

We get a hint from the prophet Amos in his attempt to describe the coming of the realm of God. "The mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine."

This is what God desires for us and all people: Abundance. Restoration.

This is what God seeks to bring about through us: Abundance. Restoration.

Let's let that sink into our weary, January souls for just a minute.

Imagine your life restored.

Imagine the cities rebuilt after the human disasters and the natural disasters that have come upon them.

Imagine the hills and mountains flowing with all good things.

Imagine this nation living out its promise.

And remember—what happened at this wedding is more than a miracle. It is a sign. Jesus points us toward something much greater a few more glasses of wine.

When Jesus shows up at the wedding in Cana, when water turns to wine, it is a sign that the sun is beginning to shine upon bleak and desolate valleys. The sunrise is slow, but it is certain.

When Jesus shows up at the wedding in Cana, when water turns to wine, it is a sign that God's work of abundance and restoration has started—that the *inauguration* has occurred.

Our conventional assumptions about what is possible, about where God is found, and about how God is known are shattered. This is an act of abundance and new possibilities.

What is of real importance here is not the event but the reality to which the event points.

Do not look at the miracle—for those who look at miracles will always need *one more miracle* to be certain. Look instead toward what is beyond this miracle—toward what the *sign* points to: the abundance of God in a world of need.

Let this sign guide our thoughts and actions:

God shows up when the challenges are great and the resources seem scarce.

God shows up when the burdens we carry are overwhelming and our strength is depleted.

God shows up when we struggle and seem to be losing.

God shows up to minister to us.

At Cana, Jesus shows God's abundant presence—which isn't always obvious to most of us in our emptiness and exhaustion.

Six empty jars and water will be enough.

In these days, we are invited to open ourselves to the abundance we often overlook or seek to deny. Out of such openness, we might realize that while we can't do everything, we can do something. This congregation has received an abundance of resources: skills, talent, energy, and, let's be honest, wealth. What might we do individually and as a congregation with all that we have and all that we are to bring the healing and restoration that God desires?

A wedding is an occasion of hope and unknowing.

So, too, are these days—and, really, each day of our lives. In the morning, we know neither the challenges nor the opportunities that will come to us in the hours ahead. Even in the uncertainty of these times we can live our days in hope—in the hope that by God's grace, we will be up to the challenges; that out of God's abundance, we will make good use of the opportunities we receive.

In that hope, we can be signs of God's love in the world.

Regardless of your political affiliation, the good news this morning is about the inauguration—the inauguration of God's restoration of all creation in Jesus Christ.