

“Waiting with the Water”

Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – January 16, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might know you are here with us, even in the midst of confusion and uncertainty. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

This scripture is supposed to be an occasion for a sermon about a joyous party. It’s a wedding reception, the wine is flowing, and Jesus comes and makes it that much more fabulous. It’s the beginning of the story, but for those who know how the end goes, there’s a hint right there in the first few words: “On the third day…” John began. This story is about the glory of the resurrection! Joy and celebration! Jubilant revelry! Wine in abundance, and quality wine at that!

But it’s the 16th of January in the year 2022, and I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one who’s noticed this point in history doesn’t feel much like a party. The pandemic is grinding on and on, far longer than we dared imagine. Our prayer list for covid patients is growing. Already today, before Omicron has even peaked yet, the newspaper is reminding us that another variant is sure to arrive soon, and no one can predict whether it will be more or less severe, let alone more or less contagious.

We’re beginning to realize that we may have to go ahead and find new ways to do all those things we’d put on hold till the pandemic was over, because we can’t afford to wait any longer. We’re tired of it all, even as we barely remember what “normal” felt like. And of course, the pandemic isn’t the only burden we’re carrying.

There are so many other things weighing our hearts down: a constant, underlying sense of dread about climate change, even as we respond to increasingly frequent disasters like the volcano in Tonga; report after report showing us how badly our policing systems are distorted by racism; anti-Semitic violence like the hostage situation that erupted in Texas yesterday; the slow-grinding wheels of justice leveling charges of sedition that may not even stick. And that's just this week.

If we were going to party, it seems it might require an unholy and unhealthy amount of wine for us to forget all our troubles. But what if there's another way to find ourselves in this story? As I was reading the scripture this week, it occurred to me that sometimes our circumstances are such that the most important moment of a story for us isn't the climax of the action. I would argue that on January 16, 2022, we need to read this story and hit pause right in the middle. Let's hear those verses again: "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim."

That's the moment. That's where we are. There are six stone jars that hold 20-30 gallons of water. Pause there for a moment. Can you imagine how heavy a stone jar that holds 20-30 gallons of water might be? I don't know that I have any idea how big that is, to be honest. But I can picture a five-gallon bucket. So if the stone jar is 4-6 times bigger than the 5-gallon bucket... that's pretty big. And it's made of stone, not plastic. Okay, now the size and the weight of this thing is making me think maybe

they bring the water to the jar, rather than the other way around. Surely they're going to a well or a spring with smaller buckets or jugs and filling them up and then dumping them into the storage jars, right? So maybe 10-15 trips per jar? And there's six jars. This is going to take a while. It's not clear how many servants were attending to this task, but it couldn't have been more than a few. This is a lot of work for a miracle to save a party you weren't really even invited to. It's a lot of work that's summed up in that one, short sentence: "And they filled them up to the brim."

Of course the point of this story is what happened after that, when Jesus turns all that water into wine, and it turns out to be better wine than the party started with. But today, maybe that isn't the most useful point. Just for today, just for January maybe, let's just stay right here, with these huge, heavy stone jars we're trying to fill to the brim. Maybe, somehow, we've lost all our buckets and jugs. It certainly feels like that, doesn't it? We've lost all our tools for carrying water between the well and the jars, so we're trying to lug them all the way over to the well themselves. Maybe we can roll them? Maybe if two of us work together, we could scoot it over there? But what if there's only two of us to fill up these six jars? What if the other servants are off trying to keep the overly drunken guests (who already finished all the wine we thought we needed after all) out of the private areas of the house? Would it be faster to work together on one jar at a time, or for each of us to try to scoot three on our own? Obviously, once those jars are full and we have to worry about spilling, it's just going to get harder.

It's hard. It's heavy. And it's taking forever. This is the moment in this miracle story that feels the most familiar in January 2022. And as I was noticing this, something else occurred to me. Jesus was about to produce wine. But you know what else? That water? It's also from God. That water that those servants are working so hard to fill up those jars with – it is also a miracle. For a variety of reasons, the water isn't considered fancy enough to save the party on its own. But the water itself is also a gift of God.

We've been working really hard to get those jars where they need to be so they can be filled. Sometimes it feels like everyone else around us is too drunk to help. This moment is lasting way longer than that one, short sentence implies it should be. We were ready for the "third day" to arrive 92 weeks ago. But what if, for a moment, we stopped focusing on the wine that isn't here yet, and noticed the water? There is so much that hasn't been taken from us, so many blessings from God that we still share. They may not be the kind of blessings that lead to festivating and frivolity. But they might be the kind that keep us alive. They might be the kind that help us hold on. Psalm 36 speaks of feasting on the abundance of God's house, and that seems far out of reach at the moment. But it also promises that "all people may take refuge in the shadow of God's wings," and that feels like exactly what I'd like to do right now.

I wonder what the stone jars are that you're trying to move right now? Whether it's trying to keep your kids safe, or police reform, or convincing a family member to get vaccinated, or voting rights, or trying to find a job, or living with

chronic pain, or something else, we're all working to help open our lives and our world to the transformative power of God's love. Those jars are heavy. We need to help each other. But let's not discount the water. The water is also a gift of God. The miracles may come, or they may tarry. But right now, God is giving us water, life-giving water. The water, too, is a sign. Let us watch for these more subtle signs of Christ's presence in our world. Once our eyes are opened to see them, we will realize they are as common as the water we drink. Have we overlooked them because they're not fancy enough, not what we asked for, not what we thought we needed? Let us pause, in our search for miracles, and look around to see the blessings that already surround us. We are waiting. But let us give thanks that we are waiting with the water, waiting for transformation, equipped by the power of God with all that we need to be ready. Hallelujah and Amen.