

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 17, 2016
Megan Shin
Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11
“Water into Wine”

Bible Passage into a Message

About a year ago, my friends from Knox College and I were talking about ministry in general. And we got to talk about preaching and what it is like to prepare a sermon and to preach. There was one person who did not find preaching difficult at all but others found either the preparation or the preaching itself difficult. When they asked me what I find to be difficult, my answer that it is hard to reach the aha moment.

When I'm preparing for a sermon, the first thing I do is to look up what the lectionary texts are for the week. Usually, there is one reading from the Old Testament, one from Psalms, and two from the New Testament. So I read those passages over and over again until I can decide which text I want to focus on. I eliminate one New Testament text so that I end up with one reading from the Old and the New Testament and a responsive Psalm.

I read the scripture and write down any words that catch my attention and any questions I have. Then I go to the commentaries. I try to find any answers to my questions, and I try to read everything about my passage – from historical commentary to one that offers a pastoral angle. I read commentaries packed with information and interpretations, and also read the ones that offer the commentator's own reflections and meditations. After I read every good commentary I know, I feel drowned in the ocean of information and many themes I can draw from the passage.

And this is where I usually get stuck. At this point, I feel that I did all the work I can do up to that stage in order to find some kind of a them. But until the aha moment occurs, I feel stuck. Sometimes it takes days, sometimes it takes more than a week. So I would read some notes over and over again, hoping that something in my notes will inspire me.

All of my aha moments have occurred in conversation with someone, whether through a book or in person. Dialogue allows me to think outside my box, reorient or refocus my thoughts. For this sermon, the aha moment occurred during a dialogue with Rev. Reid. I had been working on this passage for a few weeks, but I couldn't decide on a specific point that I wanted to get across. So on our weekly supervision time, I told Rev. Andrew that this passage does not feel very personal to me. It was a simple question he asked me that led to an aha moment. He asked “Can you think of any transformations you have personally experienced?”

That led me to think about transformation; Transformation from water into wine; Transformation that cannot happen with human effort, wisdom or ability.

I told him that this process of preparing a sermon, this process of turning a bible passage into a “message” is a transformation I get to experience every time. A Bible passage is a word of God in itself, but it is really through the work of the Holy Spirit that it gets transformed into a message

that I can deliver to the congregation. And it is the Holy Spirit who speaks to everyone's heart so that this message I deliver becomes a personal message.

This transformation does not just happen on its own miraculously, but it requires that I do my own work of reading, contemplating and doing research and studies on this passage. And it involves many people who have studied and thought about this passage. Sometimes it involves things that are very ordinary that brings about inspiration – like people I talk to, a TV show or a favorite book. For this transformation to happen, many things come into play. Above all, God is the one who provides the moment of enlightenment and illumines his word.

Water into Wine

Today's passage from the Gospel of John is so rich and beautiful because it did not only take one person – Jesus – for this miracle to happen. Gospel of John records that this was the first of his signs. It does not say that it was the first miracle but a first *sign*, in order to indicate that this points beyond the sign itself. It points to what kind of a person Jesus is and takes part in revealing his identity. And this sign that reveals something special about Jesus for the first time involves many people in the process.

It all starts when there is no more wine at this wedding at Cana. In those days, a marriage was celebrated by a seven-day wedding feast at the groom's home. It is a long celebration, and the most basic elements of celebration and hospitality would be good food and good wine. Running out of wine would be a social disaster for the family. It's not just inconvenient, but it would be disgraceful and shameful.

It was Mary who brought this issue forward to Jesus. She noticed that there is a problem and told Jesus. And although Jesus did not tell Mary that he will take care of this, she tells the servants to do whatever he tells them. Flip through the gospels and look at healing passages, and we will soon notice that there is always someone who brings Jesus' attention to a certain need. "Jesus! Here! We need your help here!" In this story, it's Mary. She brings God's intent for new life to birth.

After that, Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars for the Jewish rites of purification with water. The servants probably did not know that Jesus will turn water into wine. They probably had no idea why Jesus was telling them to do this, but they did it anyway. Then Jesus told them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward! Yet they simply obeyed. And by doing so, they were brought into the miracle, and they got to witness water turning into wine.

Then there are Jesus' disciples, who got to watch all that has happened. They just started to follow Jesus, and through this, they saw God's glory and realized that their teacher is not an ordinary teacher.

It seems that one of the reasons why Jesus turned water into wine was so that his disciples would believe in him, so that they would start to know who he truly is. By putting water into jars for the Jewish rites of purification and turning it into wine, Jesus was showing that he was providing something more than what tradition and rituals can offer. In fact, Jesus himself was the Word, the incarnate Son of God. He also turned all six jars of water into wine. Each jar contained about 20 to 30 gallons, meaning he turned 120 to 180 gallons of water into wine. He transformed

something that had run dry to new wine with rich and abundant blessing to signify the new wine that never runs dry. Perhaps Jesus meant to say that this new wine is Jesus himself.

The chief steward and many guests who got to enjoy this finest wine did not know where it came from. They did not see the miracle nor did they know that there was a miracle. But they all drank from the wine; they were all blessed by Jesus' work.

Transformation around us

God's miracle of transformation and renewal is always around us. God gives new names, a new identity in God. God bestows a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair (Isaiah 61:3). God's transformative work is all around us.

At times, our role may be that of Mary – noticing a need, pleading God for help, telling others that we need to do something about this, taking action and waiting for God to work. At times, we are like the servants. We may not even know that we are doing God's work and that we are being brought into God's miraculous work. But we realize later that God used us for his kingdom and get to witness God's goodness. At times, we are like the disciples. We do not do anything, but we see and hear of great things, and we praise and glorify God.

And at times, we are like the guests – blessed by God's abundant grace without even knowing that it happened behind the scenes! But we drink, enjoy and experience the richness and abundance of God's blessings.

Whatever our role may be, let us be faithful to the place that we are called to be in. Let us enjoy and be thankful for all of God's work of transformation, and let us believe, praise and give glory to God, as people did at the wedding in Cana when Jesus turned water into wine. Amen.