

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Good News Surprises Us

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During a Bible study about concepts of light and dark, an eye surgeon reminded us that our eyes can only see because of contrast. We rely upon the brightness and shadow, and all the subtle tones in between to make sense of the world around us.

John's gospel describes Jesus as "the light shining in the dark," the light that disrupts the shadows and draws our attention toward God.

And just as light and dark help us see, the contrast between good and bad helps us discern what nurtures life and what diminishes it.

We crave good news, especially when bad news dominates the headlines. Compounding our anxiety is the realization one person's definition of good news may horrify another person. At some point, it becomes necessary to say, "this is not good, not healthy, not life sustaining."

The very word *gospel* means "good news." The four gospel writers begin Jesus' story by revealing him against whatever forces keep human lives from flourishing.

In Mark, Jesus casts out a demon.

In Matthew, he blesses the poor and challenges cycles of vengeance.

In Luke, he proclaims release to captives.

John differs. Jesus starts before time itself – "In the beginning" – within a song about divine light and life coming from God.

After appearing at the Jordan for baptism, Jesus calls disciples... but for what?

Today's story reveals the beginning of his good news.

Dear God, we become so accustomed to news that masquerades as good and giving in to people who try to deceive us into thinking too little of ourselves and one another. So, as we turn to this holy text, surprise us, speak to us of good news so we trust and believe. Amen.

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.

⁸ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet." So they took it. ⁹ When the person in charge tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), that person called the

bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, ***and his disciples believed in him.***

Possibly you’ve danced the first dance, helped choreograph the bridal party’s entrance, curated a playlist, or kicked off your shoes to celebrate at a wedding.

Whether it’s a Ceili, a Scottish barn dance, the Texas two-step, an electric slide, or the hustle, these shared dances gather the whole reception—young and old, single and married, family and new friends—into one body.

We sway to the music, sing more loudly than we ever do in church, float across the floor, and wave our arms to fully embody the joy of a new beginning.

Perhaps Jesus raised his voice and the groom’s chair in the Hora, a dance still done at Jewish and secular weddings alike, not only because it’s fun, it is tradition to show support for a couple.

That night in Cana, Jesus’ mom interrupts his fun.

Imagine the music so loud it drowns out her voice, so she taps him on the shoulder to shout, “They have no wine.”

Implicit in this statement is her belief that he can do something about it.

He calls her not “mom” or even “mother” but “woman.” Our English translation loses some of the sharpness of his reply. “Get off my back” or “this is none of my business.”

Even though he tries to argue it is not “my hour,” his mom wins and he steps up. He steps up to take a common element and turns it into an abundant, extravagantly delicious wine.

Why?

When John wrote this gospel, it was widely known Cana resided in territory invaded by a tyrant who sought any way to strangle the life out of a community.

Maybe three days into the celebration, the wine had run out because Herod’s henchmen squeezed the supply lines, diverted the shipment, or doubled the taxes.

Jesus’ first sign in the Gospel of John points to God’s life-giving goodness even (and perhaps, especially) in daily places of human lives when threatened by fear and even death.

John's gospel calls the miraculous works of Jesus "signs" because they always come from and point to God. The signs draw us...

- to believe Jesus is from God
- to believe God so loves this world God will turn our misery into an abundant life
- to believe through Jesus, God makes our earthly home a place to thrive and an eternal home for all to reside.

A couple of things, among many, to note about the good news this story tells. John's story launches Jesus' ministry from an entirely human posture.

Even Jesus, God's son, needs to be prodded. He's not sure his time has come. "Ah Ma, can't I just keep singing and dancing with my friends?" Jesus averts his eyes, maybe looks at his feet, tries to step back from the problem, wishing someone else will fix it.

"No." She tells him, "this is your time, your hour."

His mom knows those buddies he brought to the party will become more than new friends. From this first sign, they believe in the glory of God within him.

This first sign surprises us by God using something we consider ordinary for something good.

- God cares for the welfare of our community.
- God calls us, whether we are ready or not.

- God shows us how to use what we might find common is truly a force for the good.

Time and again, God moves through us. Enslaved Blacks galvanized their community by using their voices to turn the air they breathed into the path for liberation.

Their songs taught people how to endure, how to communicate under threat, and to remember their dignity when systems tried to erase them.

The music of the enslaved Americans remains part of a long history of marching for justice and equality.

In 1900, a choir of 500 schoolchildren celebrated President Abraham Lincoln's birthday by singing in public for the first time "Lift Every Voice and Sing" at a segregated school.

This song's lyrics united peoples' voices as their prayer of thanksgiving and faithfulness throughout the civil rights movement. You may have heard it sung at the Super Bowl just weeks ago.

Singing as resistance is remembered and learned from similar movements and moments in our shared history. It is carried in bodies that have learned, across generations, how to stay present with one another when fear is loud and the future uncertain.

Queer and gender expansive musicians sang in marches, jail cells, sanctuaries, and organizing spaces. They knew the

script: they united their breathing with human voice to turn common air into a movement to protect others.

Earlier this month, people started using their voices in a similar manner. Only, this time it is plain White people in Minneapolis.

Minnesota humorist Garrison Keillor once bragged, Lutherans are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony. From the earliest age, sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass, a child leans against that person's rib cage to hear and feel the harmonic intervals.

The origin of Lutheran faith began 500 years ago

*And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.*

What was once a bar song became a hymn enshrined in our faith we know as “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

The religious leaders in Minnesota — especially mainline and progressive Christians— Lutherans and Presbyterians and UMC — along with Black churches have given us the template of non-violent, determined, compassionate resistance to the ICE agents who are wreaking havoc in their neighborhoods.

In early February, 500 people gathered to learn new and old songs,
to unite and resist their fear.

Within weeks, the numbers swelled. Over 2,000 gathered at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis to sing before braving the bitter cold.

The night after Alex Prettti was killed by border patrol agents, 1,400 people gathered at Hennepin Ave UMC. While holding a candleflame they learned to sing “I am not afraid...I will live for liberation for I know why I am made” in both the English and Spanish.

Society does not lose its humanity all at once. It loses it by small permissions like the joke left unchallenged, the insult waved away as politics, the suffering explained as policy.

When dehumanization becomes familiar, it becomes acceptable and soon after, invisible. Silence in moments like this is not neutrality. Silence bends toward power. When we refuse to speak, we consent to a moral downgrade of our public life.

I don't know about you, but I've lost lots of sleep over these many months ruminating about the bad news that feels like a tormenting game of whack-a-mole. I need some good news. I need the portrait of Jesus that John paints.

Unlike the other gospels, Jesus' very next and not last act takes him to Jerusalem where he flips the tables of the corrupt system of money changing in the temple. This is good news. Jesus – implying God – will not tolerate the behavior of authorities who profit off the poor and monetize common elements intended for worship.

Later in this gospel, Jesus stands up for a woman publicly accused by powerful men for sexual improprieties. As if she acted alone? Or, was their way to deflect any blame? Regardless, it is good news to know that Jesus stands with her.

When his friend Lazarus dies, Jesus weeps. Everything about his ministry tells us that our relationships matter, that our grief matters, that this life—all of it—is sacred.

And maybe that is the real surprise of the gospel because God is still doing that.

Still taking what looks common or insufficient and making it overflow.

Still nudging us to take the air in our lungs and turn it into courage, solidarity, resistance, and hope.

Still shining light into the parts of the world—and the parts of our hearts—where shadows have lingered far too long.

Because good news often arrives the way it did in Cana: unexpectedly, not when we think we are ready, and through something familiar.

Maybe the invitation today is simply this: to keep looking—really looking—until the light breaks through, to trust that even in dark times, God is already at work, and to believe that good news is still possible ...

good news that surprises us,
good news that sustains us,
good news that helps us see and believe.

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