

Sermon for the Second Sunday after The Epiphany
RCL Lectionary, Year C
[Isaiah 62:1-5](#) / [Psalm 36:5-10](#) / [1 Corinthians 12:1-11](#) / [John 2:1-11](#)

January 17th, 2010
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

First Miracles
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

There is so much material to work with in today's readings, it's hard to know where to begin. We first might be tempted to talk about marriage – the theme of our Hebrew Scriptures lesson and the setting for Jesus' first miracle. We might wonder if there is anything here to inform what is unfolding these days on the other side of the Golden Gate, as one of the most important religious, civil rights, and institutional debates of our time begins in federal court. Our tradition holds up the wedding in Cana in our marriage liturgy as a rare example of Jesus' blessing on matrimony. But it is odd that we hold it up in this way. The story doesn't have Jesus active at all in the marriage proper, and instead he is much more concerned about the party afterwards. Rather than counseling the bride and groom, he seems much more preoccupied with jars for water standing empty. Perhaps our seeming preoccupation with marriage and gender are not so much Christ's concerns as our own.

No, there is something much deeper going on in today's readings than an argument about marriage, who gets to wed, and who doesn't. And that deeper something speaks to us more when we consider the shadow over us all this week. . . as horrific images and cries come from our sisters and brothers in Haiti following one of the worst natural disasters in recent years. The water of today's gospel is much less about a wedding and much more about the thirst of those who have had no water for days; for the hunger for comfort in lives that are broken and lost; for the desperate men, women, and children seeking loved ones amongst the rubble of their homes.

At the heart of the devastation in Haiti is the age-old question of theodicy. . . the broad question of why God apparently allows, or even as some people sometimes claim, causes bad things to happen – even horrific things. It was a question that Isaiah is in the middle of addressing in today's prophetic words composed for a people in exile – a people. . . God's people even. . . who seem to have lost everything that made them God's people: their homeland, their roots, their temple, the very heart of their heritage. It is also a question John's early Christian community wrestled with as they were turned out of the synagogues and their roots and heritage in Judaism were profoundly questioned. It is a question these days on the streets of Port-au-Prince amidst incalculable and unspeakable thirst, hunger, and pain. What is left, and where is God? It is the first question of faith, a question we all hold as we gather together in God's name; a hard question that must be lived most of all by those of us who claim a loving and gracious God.

We could resort to the widely declaimed Pat Robertson solution this week, which is to simply blame the people of Haiti for bringing God's wrath on themselves for pagan ways past and present. It's an argument beyond the odious, and – for my money – I frankly have far less use for a wrathful God than a negligent one. But there are subtle ways we still take up Robertson's apparent theme, like the much more secular articles I read yesterday pointing to the shoddy construction and widespread corruption in Port-au-Prince as root causes for the disaster. These were cited as reasons that an earthquake roughly equivalent in power to the Loma Prieta quake can take tens of thousands of lives in Haiti rather than a few dozen as it did over twenty years ago in the Bay Area. Then there is the natural tendency to blame as I heard two people doing as they discussed the situation in Mill Valley's downtown yesterday. . . to blame simply out of our frustration that decades of international aid and political support have not born the fruit we expect. But then, blame -- however justified -- is a favorite American pastime these days, and it does nothing to relieve the suffering, restore the lives, or salve the broken hearts of our sisters and brothers who face a nightmare at which most of us can only recoil. Blame is, quite frankly, an easy way out in the face of questions of theodicy, for it can let us off the hook for our shared responsibility, and it quickly forgets that our lives are profoundly interconnected. Blame is a manifestation of judgment. And as Jesus reminds us elsewhere in the Gospel, when we judge, we only judge ourselves. And Jesus has one command for us when it comes to that kind of judgment, whether we are widely known televangelists or lesser-known priests and parishioners at Church of Our Saviour: Don't indulge in it.

Perhaps a better answer to this question of theodicy is tucked away in today's gospel, and whispered in Isaiah and held close to Paul's heart in his Letter to the Corinthians: and that answer is that we have a God who lives not on high, but right in the middle of our humanity. We don't get a God who, like Superman, shields the faithful from our vulnerability or swoops in to fly us out of harm's way. Nor do we get a God who deliberately shakes the earth and wields indiscriminate death like the angry spirits of old. Instead, we get our God in Christ, who embraces our suffering, who brings water to the thirsty and food to the hungry and calls us to do likewise; who blazes trails through our devastations to bring us the balm of compassion, who weeps with us on the streets of death and shows up even at our feasts when the wine has run out. A God far less interested in severing us from our heritage than rebuilding it. A God who weds us in baptism. A God who defangs death by rising again after accompanying us through the darkest valleys. A God who raises us up when we have fallen beneath the rubble of this life. A God who draws hope out of suffering and joy out of sorrow. A God who confronts every evil from without and within and transforms its consequences into grace.

When Jesus shows up at the wedding in Cana in Galilee, and performs his first miracle in the Gospel of John, he is not merely proving himself to his new disciples or saving the party. . .or conserving the institution of marriage for that matter, whether of the first century kind or the twenty-first century kind. Jesus, the living Word of God, instead is speaking through action to the very heart of who we are as a Christian community and as a human family. He is redefining not only marriage, but every other human relationship and institution, from our most intimate to those that are economic, political, national, and global.

The water, poured into the jars of purification, are for John's gospel community and for us the water of baptism, which Jesus transforms into wine, the great Eucharistic symbol of his blood – and not just his blood, but our new blood, the blood of the new family of God, a blood that makes us one with one another and with our sisters and brothers suffering this day in Haiti and around the world. The new wine that is saved for last, the blood that ushers in new life in the face of all our suffering and death. The blood that binds us to one another in grace, and casts aside the divisions of judgment and blame and replaces them with the bonds of a shared heritage of justice, hope, and love.

Today, as we baptize Liberty Carter, we welcome her into this new family, this new family where Jesus, in our shared story this day, demonstrates to us that water indeed runs thicker than blood; that baptism resides at the very center of who he is and who we are now, and who we are in the process of becoming. Liberty is not guaranteed any more than the rest of us a life without challenge or suffering, but she will be endowed with the spiritual gifts that will see her through the hardest days: gifts of the baptismal life like those Paul discusses with the Corinthians today. . . uttered wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, healing, fidelity, discernment, and tongues that will permit Liberty to articulate the deep language of her heart and interpret the heart speech of others. The gifts of the Spirit that will fill her soul when the vulnerabilities of this life threaten to empty it, that will remind her of the abiding presence of Christ when all else fails. The gifts of the Spirit that give her a claim on us, her new family, every bit as much as we have a claim on her in God's name. The gifts of the Spirit that will call her to compassion – to be Christ's eyes and hands in the face of suffering. The gifts of the Spirit that will lead her to carry her cross and follow after the Holy One. The gifts of the Spirit that will allow her the freedom to look at death without succumbing to fear, and rise again with God in Christ.

This is the promise of our baptism, the promise of the water made into wine, the new blood of God's new family, the first miracle of our journey with God in Christ Jesus, reflected in that first miracle at the wedding in Cana. And it's first miracles like this one that we trust are happening now amidst the devastation of Haiti, as boots hit the ground and the aid arrives, as compassion unleashes not distant condemnation, but present, struggling generosity; as the Haitian people themselves usher in first miracles in which the thirsty taste the water of new life and begin to rise from the rubble to reclaim and rebuild their God-given heritage. For we know this story as the story of the Gospel, and we live it in Christ's love no matter where we are. It is the story of our own transformation in the Word of the Living God, and it begins with that first miracle of baptism, and stretches all the way to the final miracle – the miracle of resurrection for the new family of God.