

“God in the Kitchen”
January 15, 2023

John 2:1-11

The Gospel of John assesses the situation with stark honesty: “The wine gave out.”

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?

The Gospel of John tells us that early in his ministry, Jesus shows up at a wedding in Cana. From water comes wine—and *good wine* at that! John says this happens “on the third day,” and any time we hear that phrase in the Gospel stories, our minds quickly—and rightly—turn to thoughts of resurrection, of new beginnings.

This story, of course, presents us with multiple problems as we puzzle over just what happened.

From the start, people have tried to find another explanation.

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

But Jesus is pointing us toward something much greater here.

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.

The novelist Reynolds Price says: “It seems unlikely that John would describe such a homely kitchen-wonder unless he had been present and convinced of its actual and inexplicable occurrence.”

“A homely kitchen-wonder.” I’ve also puzzled over that description since I first read it years ago. What is God up to in the kitchen?

I was finally helped in my thinking a few months ago, when I came across the story of what happened to Martin Luther King, Jr., early in his ministry:

In 1954, when he started his first pastorate at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, King was off to a good start in his professional life. He was on track to receive his Ph.D. in Theology from Boston University the following year. His academic focus was on the God, who acted in history and spoke to people in prayer. The late African American ethicist, Rufus Burrow, Jr., tells us: “From the time he was a boy, King believed God was personal, although as an adult...he did not know from a personal...standpoint what this really meant. He knew as well as anybody what it meant intellectually or academically.”¹

Then, in 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began.² King was at its center as the conflict and tension increased. The threats started coming and King was not sure that he could continue.

It was then that a ringing phone woke King in the middle of the night. The caller on the other end of the line threatened to kill King and blow up his house.

One does not go back to sleep after that.

Sitting with a cup of coffee at his kitchen table, King wondered how he could possibly go on and where he might find strength.

King tells the story of that night in the kitchen in his book *Stride toward Freedom*:

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

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"At that moment," King says, "I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

This homely-kitchen wonder, as Reynolds Price might say, was as much an "actual and inexplicable occurrence" as empty jars becoming filled with new wine.

"The kitchen experience," as King called it, became, as one person says, "the most important night of his life, the one he would always think back to in future years when the pressure again seemed to be too great."³

God arrives—or as we affirm at Christmas, *God is with us*—in the worst of circumstances. This is the God who, as King would later say, is able to make a way out of no way, the God who sets Israel free from bondage in Egypt, who sets Jesus free from the bondage of the tomb, who can still set us free from all that holds us captive and powerless.

As it happened, King would soon face a great challenge. On the third day after King experienced this quiet kitchen reassurance, he left his home for an evening meeting at his church. While he was there, a bomb exploded on the front porch of his home.

Although he didn't know if his wife and baby daughter were safe, King recalls:

Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it. After telling [the people at the church] why I had to leave, I urged each person to go straight home after the meeting and adhere strictly to our philosophy of nonviolence. I admonished them not to become panicky and lose their heads. "Let us keep moving," I urged them, "with the faith that

what we are doing is right, and worth the even greater faith that God is with us in the struggle.”

His family was unharmed. But, having heard the explosion, hundreds had already gathered at King’s house. One Black man was saying to a policeman, who was attempting to push him aside: “I ain’t gonna move nowhere. That’s the trouble now; you white folks is always pushin’ us around. Now you got your .38 and I got mine; so let’s battle it out.”

King wrote: “As I walked toward the front porch, I realized that many people were armed. Nonviolent resistance was on the verge of being transformed into violence.”

And yet, because God was present, even when terror threatened, King was able to defuse the anger of the crowd. He stood before the angry crowd with strength and courage, and by God’s grace and God’s strength, neither King nor they faltered.

The God who comes to us arrives in the most unexpected places, in the most unexpected ways, at the most unexpected times—even at a kitchen table in the middle of the night.

God comes to us, as King would say in his final sermon, in the water of baptism so that we able to face the water of the fire hoses—of all that would turn us back and take our eyes off of the prize of the equality that we seek as we work toward the time when justice will roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Remember this in the days ahead and let it guide your 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.

Jesus assesses the situation and looks for God’s abundant presence—which isn’t always obvious to most of us in our emptiness and exhaustion. There are six empty jars. There is water. And that will be enough.

That will be more than enough.

And even now—from water, wine.

¹ Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, pg. 105. Quoted in Root, pg. 92.

² See the discussion of this in Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, pg. 191 ff.

³ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, quoted in Burrow, op cit. pg. 108, quoted in Root, op cit. pg. 193.