

Good wine: Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

by [Debbie Blue](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

On the darkest day of the year, the Incas tried to tie the sun down. The Zunis kept their fire indoors and let the trash pile up in their dwellings; Zoroastrians stayed up all night and read poetry. Wild women tore the god Dionysus to pieces and ate him. There were winter solstice rituals that involved pig snouts, ghosts, the river Nile turning into wine.

The dark is hard to deal with. Our vitamin D is waning, our serotonin depleted: we need light, dancing, some really good stories or some really good wine. The church placed the feast of Epiphany on a date that coincided with the Isis festival. The Romans layered Christian feasts over traditional religious practices. We know the wise men didn't reach the baby Jesus' cradle on January 6. Instead of worrying about how the Christian meaning supplants all the lingering vestiges of indigenous meaning, it might be more in the spirit of the season of Epiphany to imagine how the grace of God encompasses all that is and was, all the thick, complex layers.

It would seem to be in the spirit of John. The Gospel doesn't give us a birth story; it gives us the One who always was and is—the One through whom all things were made (Incas, light, melatonin). The author of John makes enormous claims about Jesus in the first chapter and then, rather suddenly, Jesus is at a wedding.

The scriptures are full of wedding imagery. In Isaiah, the land is married to God, who delights in her like a young man who marries a virgin. It's a racy metaphor for the scripture writers to latch on to. Weddings may be decorous occasions on the surface, but there's a lot going on in the subtext—sex and passion and the possibility of impotence and disappointment. Two beings are committing their lives to something the exact nature of which is yet to be determined, till death do them part. Behind the day's celebration, there's death and failure and fear in the background.

Weddings can be tense. Somebody is almost always worried that the food is going to run out. The mother may think she's only nervous about the caterer, but maybe her fear symbolizes a greater anxiety. Is there going to be enough? Is there going to be enough love . . . for my children, for me, for starving babies and dying friends? Is the

thing with God and the land really going to work out? Will there be blissful union? We're three sentences into the story of the wedding at Cana when Jesus' mom says, "They have no wine." It's a pronouncement of doom.

This is the first glimpse we have of Jesus' mother in the Book of John. She isn't a naive young mother gazing adoringly into the eyes of her sweet infant. She's more like an irritable menopausal Jewish lady kvetching to her unmarried, unemployed son, "They have no wine."

Every commentary I've read insists that Jesus' reply to her is not impatient or disrespectful; apparently it was common to say to one's mother, "Woman, what have you to do with me?" Still, as a mother I want to wring his neck and retort with: "What have I to do with you? You're kidding me, right? Where shall I start? With the DNA? The milk from my breasts that kept you alive? The thousand diaper changes?

But Jesus' mother seems to disregard the dismissal—she isn't quite listening to his lack of respectfulness. Although he seems aloof and unresponsive, she trusts him to disrupt whatever needs disrupting. She trusts him to do something about this situation, this archetypal anxiety: there's not enough.

So Jesus tells the servants to fill the containers that hold the water used for purifying. It's an interesting choice. I mean, say you're at a big event and there are a lot of people and it's a time when everyone is sensitive to bacteria or H1N1 or there's a cholera outbreak—something that makes people want to be careful about washing their hands. Say you're part of a religious subculture where this is considered very important: washing hands is the polite thing. Jesus fills up the containers used for *purifying*, the equivalent of filling our pump bottles of hand sanitizer with wine. Good wine.

We have all sorts of rituals that are important to us, to our religious practice, or to how we think one should properly conduct oneself in the world: stop at stop signs, cough into your elbow, wash your hands. Jesus takes an important vehicle for the law and fills it with wine—gallons of it. People often say this story is not about Jesus offending anyone. It is about joy, generosity, abundance. Even so, maybe these things are occasionally offensive. Excess: excessive joy, excessive generosity, excessive abundance, excessive *anything* often offends. Something bursts out of the bounds of the expected—something delicious: excessive life and love. Good wine gushing out of the sink. But what if you just wanted to wash your hands?

The sheer excess of the life and the love of God can be a little traumatic for us. We don't always choose to drink too much of these things. Moderation is more polite; excess is an offense, garish, rococo. Jesus continues to come off in this wild way throughout John's Gospel. He will continue to be a little out there, a little too something—a little much for the dominant ideology to bear.

I hope God keeps filling our sanitizing containers with good wine.