

**Sermon**     January 19, 2025

*A Messy Business*

[Isaiah 62:1-5 • 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 • John 2:1-11]

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Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that light and life in the world. Amen.

Right now. Today: 470 days of genocide in Palestine. Right now. Today: Wildfires rage across Southern California. And right now, today, for those who fear Trump's presidency: The last weekend of democracy in America.

How do people cope? How do people endure? Where do they, where do we, find hope?

Where do we find hope? That's the question the Israelites are asking in our First Reading. According to scholarship, Isaiah 56-66, or "third Isaiah," was written shortly after the Exile. Now the Exile, you may recall, occurs between 586 and 536 BCE. It was a 50-year period in which the Jews were taken into captivity by the Babylonians, who destroyed their city and brought their temple to ruins. This text, accordingly, speaks a word of hope to people who have returned to their homeland, only to find their temple and their city destroyed.

Verses 4-5 clearly express this hope, that in spite of this reality, God is with the Jewish people. The Prophet says, "You shall no more be termed forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed desolate, but you shall be called, "My delight is in her," and your land "married," for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you. And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall God rejoice over you."

This talk of bride and bridegroom, of course, is not unknown in the Hebrew Bible. In the Song of Songs, one of my favorite biblical texts, we hear a reference to a bridegroom and her bride, which Jews historically have understood to be an allegory, or a story with two levels of meaning, concerning God and God's relationship to Israel.

Of course, this word of hope that we find in the Hebrew Bible is not only in Isaiah. We find it as well in Psalm 130:4-7, which contains a passage, a word of hope, that Martin Luther would call the Gospel, listen closely: "<sup>1</sup>Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my petitions. If you, oh Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?" then verse 4: "But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord, there is mercy. With the Lord, there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem." (That is to say, set free from slavery.)

The Gospel, in this text, in my judgment, is clearly in verses 4 and 7, which preach about forgiveness from God, and also God's enduring steadfast love. "Let Israel hope in the Lord, for with the Lord, there is mercy."

Now hope and perseverance have been a candle that flickers, but refuses to go out; one that has enabled the Jews to endure hardship, calamity, fires, and floods. My friend Beatrice Lawrence, who is of the Jewish faith, explains it this way. She says, "I don't know if there will be people around in 500 years, but if there are, there will be Jews among them." That is hope, that is endurance, that is the Gospel.

But what about us, as followers of Jesus Christ? Where do we find hope? How, beyond the passages I've cited in the Hebrew Bible, is hope manifest for us?

Well, at first glance, the Gospel, or word of hope, I can tell you, doesn't seem to appear in our Gospel Reading for today. There, of course, we hear the story of how Jesus turns water into wine, which raises an important theological question: So what?

So what? How can this diminutive, otherwise pathetic miracle serve as the basis and ground of our hope as Christians?

A couple things. Number one, John doesn't use the word "miracle" for the occurrence of turning water into wine in Galilee at Cana. Instead, John uses the word "sign." Now, in Greek, there is a major difference between "miracles" – the Greek word is *dynameis*, which is where we get the English word dynamite – or deeds of power, and "signs," or *semeion* in Greek. Matthew, Mark and Luke use the word for miracles, or deeds of power, which are manifestations of God's emerging Kingdom. In John, however, the focus switches from the Kingdom to Jesus himself, such that the signs teach us something about who he is.

Second, each sign has a symbolic meaning. In other words, John is clearly up to something. Let's see what it is. Question: How many signs are there in John's Gospel?

Seven. There are seven signs. Now, seven is a really important number. In fact, John 1-12 is called "the Book of Signs." Seven is an important number, symbolically speaking, because it represents *completion*, as evident in the conclusion of the Creation narrative in Genesis 1. So seven, they say, is "God's number." And so this author is clearly up to something by focusing on Jesus performing seven signs.

Now, next question: Can you help me name them? (discussion with the congregation)

... There's a blind man. That is one of the signs. So that is the sixth sign: Jesus heals a man born blind, according to John 9.

... raising of Lazarus

So we have now named two of the seven signs. They are:

Water turning into wine, Chapter Two;

Jesus healing the son of a nobleman, a royal official, Chapter Four;

Jesus healing a man who cannot walk, Chapter Five;

Jesus feeding the 5000, Chapter Six;

Jesus walking on water, Chapter Six;

Jesus healing a man born blind, Chapter Nine; and then, (thanks to Eric's knowledge), Jesus raising Lazarus, according to Chapter 11.

Now, do you notice anything about a pattern or a progression in these seven signs? We start with turning water into wine, something seemingly small, but we end with something really big, the resurrection of Lazarus. This shows that these signs in the Gospel of John have a cumulative effect. They get bigger and bigger and bigger.

Now when it comes to the sign of turning water into wine, I say “seemingly small” for a reason. Signs, you recall, have a symbolic meaning. They represent something else. By turning water into wine, John is referring to Holy Communion and how Jesus’ blood washes away our sins. That’s a big deal, and a small sign.

And by the way, Jesus washing away our sins with his blood, that’s an ancient Hebraic way of thinking. Blood was the cleansing agent in rituals of the ancient Jews. And so that language, that analogy, that metaphor, is applied here to Jesus. His blood washes away our sins. He cleanses us from our imperfections.

And by raising Lazarus from the dead, John shows how Jesus Himself is the resurrection and the life. He not only conquers sin, he also conquers death. In Christ, in short, God overcomes sin and death. Can I get an Amen to that?

Now, we take this message for granted sometimes, at least I do, and so I want you to listen to these words of Martin Luther. He writes, “A poor man dead in sin and consigned to hell, can hear nothing more comforting, nothing more reassuring, than his precious and tender message about Christ. From the bottom of his heart, he must laugh and be glad over it if he believes it true.”

Now there are some expressions of Christianity that are stern and rigid, but at the core of Lutheran Christianity, which granted, has its own faults, there is a message of gladness, a message of joy, the kind that “compels,” as Luther says, “a man, to laugh and be glad over it.” (If I could go back to the 16th century and I had a choice of living in Martin Luther’s Wittenberg or John Calvin’s Geneva, I would choose Wittenberg every single time! Katie, it turns out, was the brewmaster of Wittenberg, good choice, in my opinion.)

Right now, none of us today, certainly by ourselves, can stop the genocide in Palestine, or the unprecedented weather activity caused by global warming in Los Angeles. Nor can we bring back the ones we love, as Jesus did of Lazarus. But this is my message for today: we do have reason to hope. Christ, who meets us in the food of forgiveness at the altar, has overcome sin, which is to say, our separation from God, and death. Death is not the final term of our being. Death has been destroyed. Because of that we should “sing and be glad,” as Luther says.

Knowing therefore that we have reason to hope in Jesus Christ, let us be beacons of hope in a hopeless world by helping others, by giving to aid to relief programs like Lutheran Disaster Response, and by treating one another generously and with kindness, as children of God. In Jesus’ person and work, God was up to something big, something significant, and that dear friends, should give us hope.

Amen.