

Sermon: Year C, II Epiphany

Texts: Isaiah 62:1-5

I Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Late in life, the renowned artist Wassily Kandinsky wrote a series of reflective essays, which were collected into a slim book on modern art. He began by telling a story from his youth. One day when he was in elementary school his class was assigned the project of painting a horse, and each student made quick work of the task. After all, how much can one do with basic school paints and how much can be expected of eight year olds. Kandinsky, however, took his time and carefully tried to capture not only the form of a horse but a vibrant sense of its physique as well. He had nearly finished when his teacher, who was impatient to get on to the next subject, approached. Looking down at Kandinsky's work, the teacher exclaimed that all that was needed were some hooves, and with an awful suddenness, he took a brush and abruptly punched out four solid black blotches at the ends of the horse's legs. With this done, he then announced that the painting was complete.

Kandinsky's only thought was that the painting was ruined. All the finesse of his own work had suddenly been obliterated by these horrible, glaring hooves. From close up, from far away, from every perspective, all anyone could notice now were these four miserable spots on the paper, so brazen, so carelessly applied. The horse was lost to sight. Its natural grace had been grossly overwhelmed. His every effort at subtlety, at rendering something enthralling, displaying the nuanced beauty of creation, had been destroyed by the slapdash addition of these terrible and thoughtless brushstrokes. More than six decades later, the offense of this event was still fresh in his mind, for of all the things that could be told, this story was his first word as he considered his life as an artist.

More than twenty years after reading his essay, I remember this story still, and I remember it often. Kandinsky's horse has served me as an excellent parable, reminding me of how easy it is to see but not see well, reminding me also that in our own impatience to finish tasks and move on we can all too blithely ruin beauty by trying to finish it, sloppily.

I am especially reminded of Kandinsky's horse, however, whenever I read miracle stories in the Bible – because somehow, in the course of the last two centuries, we have learned to finish nearly every account of a miracle with just one highly skeptical question. We wonder whether, in fact, such a thing could have happened. Feeding five thousand from five loaves of bread and two fish; telling a paralytic to stand up and walk; restoring the sight of a blind man by covering his eyes with mud; healing ten lepers by a simple command; turning water into wine; each story seems to be read through a single, demanding lens. We question whether miracles are believable any more in an age of science, and this question, like garish black hooves, obliterates every other consideration of interpretation. All we see, as if inescapably, are bald, supernatural claims that leap off the page and seem either dubious or impossible. And what is lost, then, is the more subtle and far more substantial meaning of any given story. For in the Bible, miracles are never the point of the story. To make them so is to effectively misread and destroy whatever was actually intended. The real beauty lies behind the apparent magic. And much of our task now is the work of looking past the obstacle of knee-jerk objections in order to recognize the grace and truth that is far more central to the story.

The Gospel reading we have heard this morning provides us the perfect example. Turning water into wine; it seems appropriate for a first try at the miraculous – a simple trick, a good way to warm up in preparation of harder feats, an easy illusion with which to begin. In comparison with other miracle stories, it's a bit underwhelming and pedestrian – as a miracle. But the magic is not the point. The beauty of the story can be seen only by looking

at connections that lie much deeper, connections that answer a very different question. For the issue of the story isn't whether the miracle is believable; it's whether Jesus is, in fact, the fulfillment of the promise given to Israel, whether he is truly the Messiah, and, if so, what salvation in his name means. And in order to discern these things, John's text must be read in light of the whole narration of the Israel's history.

In the Old Testament, the defining story of the God's covenant with Israel is their release from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Freed from Pharaoh's oppression, the people of Israel set out to claim the promised land, which, as the whole canon of Scripture attests, turned out to be a deeply troubled possession, plagued by conflict and constant battle. The expectation of the Messiah was Israel's faith that a leader would arise who would deliver the final judgment of God in favor of his chosen people, by which Israel would gain its unquestioned inheritance and all the people would then be able to live in enduring peace.

This great process began with a first miracle too. Moses' turned the Nile River from water into blood. It, too, was a suitable first trick, designed to convince Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go. Impressive in the moment, it had, however, no lasting effect, and this first plague then led to nine more, each more severe, each more devastating, until, finally, the angel of death passed over all of Egypt, and the first-born of every household and of all animals of the land was killed. In this last dreadful and violent judgment, the promise to Israel was kept. They were set free. God's word to them, on their behalf, proved to be reliable. And leaving Egypt with the devastation of this promise behind them, the people of Israel moved forward toward their new future, confident that the same divine power would insure their continued well-being and the deliverance of the land into their hands. By force, they contended, God's judgment would destroy all their enemies. His Messiah would initiate this kingdom.

When John tells us that Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine, this story can't be adequately read or understood without reference to the account of Israel's exodus from Egypt. As Moses began the fulfillment of God's promise by the transformation of water, so Jesus, by replicating this first sign, announced that in him the expectations of the Messiah were about to be realized. In him, the judgment of God was being delivered. In him, all the benefits of Israel's election would be secured. This is the central point of the story.

The fascinating twist, however, is that in the Gospel the water is not changed into blood; it is turned into wine. This difference is notable. The occasion is not the initiation of God's anger in the form of plagues; it is the opening of God's grace in the form of a celebration, which does not fall short, but continues with such richness that all are astonished by the lavishness of its generosity.

Israel's promise is not gained at the expense of others, a freedom purchased by means of escape and vengeance. It is rather fulfilled in the act of marriage, in a binding together that has no qualifications.

Freedom is obtained not by independence but through the bonds of communion.

The cries that arise from the descent of the judgment of God are not the anguished wails of people in grief, finding death at every turn, the affliction of the first, the strongest, and the best. What accompanies the judgment of God are shouts of joy, of feast, not famine.

What was expected to be least – poor wine served at the very end of the party – is discovered to be the finest.

And as Jesus himself would live out, the only first-born to die would be he. The only violence in his judgment of us would be ours against him. For abiding peace comes not by forceful suppression of others, but by such unrestricted grace in hospitality that violence loses its place and fear withers before the sturdy, quiet invitation of love.

All of this is indicated in this one story – if you can see the beauty of the horse behind the glare of the ugly hooves we tend to thrust upon it. Which is important because it is so clearly evident in our own world that religion can be the catalyst for terrible offense and even more dreadful violence, especially when we read the Bible like Kandinsky's teacher painted – as if God is so plainly and easily representable, a few quick strokes and the picture's complete.

God, however, is not an object or an idea, a thought or a fantasy. Like a person, God comes to light slowly, in great complexity, in the loveliness of mystery, in the beauty of a relationship that unfolds, surprises, and continually, in the gift of time, deepens – as in the vibrant physique, we might say, of the horse that Kandinsky perceived behind the offense of ugly hooves.

Representing that astonishing glory, knowing it and giving witness to it, is our joy and our responsibility – which our world, at this time, when there are so many prominent bad painters, desperately needs.

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