*In the name of the Father and of the*+*Son and of the Holy Spirit.  Amen.*

I commented elsewhere last week that I was sorry not to have the opportunity to be preaching this text, during this retirement year because I like John 2.  It is a simple, powerfully, grand story, unique in Christ’s ministry.  And then, here it is.  In talking to our pastor on the phone, he mentioned that he was sad not to be able to preach on this text this year because it is also among his favorites.  It was my wedding Eucharist’s Gospel and I would guess it was probably his and his wife’s also and more than a few other clergy marriages.  However,I must add the following caveat.

Weddings—not preaching on John 2-- can at times terrify fully grown pastors and the loss of presiding at weddings can be one of the best blessings of retirement.  I have heard some clergy say that they like funerals better than weddings.  You could define a marriage ceremony as an event waiting for several things to go wrong.  Makes me ask an almost sinful question:  Why would our Lord want to go to a wedding when they are one of the often least perfect situations of sinful people?

Weird things happen at weddings and stranger than that—they are often planned to take place at weddings.  It used to be that someone secretly tied noisy cans and shoes to the couple’s car but today people openly do stuff that makes pastors’ collars twirl in circles.  Sadly, weddings are best appreciated today when they are least religious.  “Please, pastor, could you marry us underwater, off a beach with whale-shaped balloons?  Can we have our dog carry the rings and if not maybe can you consider my mother’s cat?  How about four of my cousin’s kids, her preschool nursery, can they be my maids of honor and walk down the aisle between gawking strangers and toss wrapped candy in the air?  Are we allowed beer in church as long as we hide it under the pews?”  A wedding is a confluence of flower, frosting and photography businesses who have no business with their hands in Mom and Dad’s wallet and purse taking what they want and more.

OK, so if I have you smiling and all your sermon-attention is turned away from our Lord and Savior and focused rather on fun wedding gaffs and crazy reception gifts… you are getting the point.  The photographer has not shown up, the flowers are the wrong color and wilted, the wedding cake has been bumped and dented, a candle has caught a bow and ribbon on fire and, by the way, the wine has run out, is the family cheap or did someone not order enough?

Maybe they should not marry… oops, here comes Mary and her son, what’s going on?

We recently finished hearing of guests, several Magi coming from afar with surprising gifts for a unknown, poor family’s child born in a stable.  In this marriage text are a couple of surprises that do not necessarily have to do with the wine which I am sure some of us have wondered how surprising good it must have tasted.

We want the Lord to bless the extraordinary, be it something frightening and linked close to loss of life or health or other sadness and fears but while he welcomes the invitation no matter when, even to joyful extraordinaries like a wedding, he there takes the ordinary and yet the most necessary of the ordinary-- washing water and blesses us with it, lifting the mundane into the surprising, unexpected and amazing, pointing to divine grace in a simple swallow, and we might add the partaking of broken also blessed bread because he becomes the meal itself.

St. John, the only one of the Evangelists to record this occasion does not tell us why Mary, Christ and his disciples were asked to join in these festivities.  We are told it was the third day, reminds us of another important third day, doesn’t it?  A day where wild things happen to the loss and emptiness of an earthen vessel, the grave, and death is changed into life.  Mary’s name is mentioned first, that she was there.  Was it due to a friend, neighbor, family member connection? I read that someone offered that she might have been doing some of the catering, as it were.  Seems remote to me.  But St. John, by sharing this story, is inviting us into the wedding.

The invitation is a surprise compared to most of the other events that are recorded as things that Jesus does during his ministry.  I know we do it in this place.  While we are invited to come and worship, come and worship Christ the Lord and King, we also invite the King to “Come, Lord Jesus.”  At weddings many still send out engraved invitations with ritual statements like,

*So-and-so, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Full Name and
Son-and-so, son of Mr. and Mrs. Another Full Name request the honor of your presence
at their wedding
on the numbered day of a certain month,*

*two thousand twenty-two
at Some o'clock in the afternoon
Christ’s Evangelical Lutheran Church*

*Stanley, NC*

*Dinner & dancing to follow
Black tie required*

When I was beginning my vicarage or internship year in New Jersey, my bishop’s wife had the duty to take me aside and instruct me in how to properly respond to a formal wedding invite because it was a very large parish and I would be getting a number of such invitations, some even from very socially conscious folks.  Although when I, recently looked up such classical texts, to say nothing of cutesy, artsy and strange modern adaptations, there are a whole bunch of variations due to divorces, previous marriages, name changes, children, deaths, family divisions and squabbles, I am sure.  Our relationships can be complicated by sin. But God has clarity, hold the wine up to the light and see there is no contamination.

Interesting thoughts:  How does God invite us?  “Follow me.  Come and see.  Behold the Lamb of God.  *Ecce homo*, behold the man.”  Not much formality or stuffy politeness, more like grab the fire alarm, grasp the life preserver, call (not 911) but The Three in One.

How ought we respond?  “Listen. Follow. Eat and drink.  Do what he tells you.”

No black tie is required.  The Lord will be the blest “tie that binds” you to himself.

The invitation is as broad as can be, addressed not to only family, a few friends, some Lutherans of the NALC-type but kindly leave your kids at home, but as broad as all people, even the as-yet-unborn, to the greatest of all weddings—The Alleluia Feast of Victory of our God where all mercy and peace is beyond abundance.  We there, like the jars at the door in Cana are in Christ completely filled with grace upon grace.

I am not sure it is properly called a throw-away line.  In fact, I looked up what that term means.  It said it was an in-joke or build up statement that seems like not much but really forms a foundation to the point, something like that.  The blessed mother of our Lord, Mary,  tells the wedding reception staff or servants: “Do whatever he tells you.”  We are on the way to the water becoming somehow by the word of God’s Son, the most excellent of wine and that tastes like it is going to be the big deal and so this line about obeying Christ sounds like instructions on how to open the cases or pop the corks or over which arm to drape the towel while serving.  But it may well reflect more for her and I think for the Gospel writer and certainly can to us as another surprising gift of the Gospel.

Sometimes Christians are inclined to think less of St. Mary than we ought, making her a mere vessel that when emptied of the Bethlehem task, could really be shelved and somewhat forgotten.  The disciples are not looked at that way in their faithful moments nor in their fearful times and their obvious mistakes.  Mary takes charge and turns it over to her son to take charge.

And that because God is in charge.  At a wedding rehearsal and even the day itself, look out sometimes for the mother of the bride, often the dangers of a pacing maid or matron of honor, or a best man with a worried look and the wedding planner at full pay.  But God is in charge then and during the marriage and family and neighborhood, country and world, the entire universe of all that is.  New surprise, you thought you invited him and his mom but you are there and this is happening all because he has created and called you forth into life and life with him.

One of our NALC profs and a recognized poet and song writer of lyrics, Gracia Grindal has recently published a volume of 366 Sonnets tracing Christ’s life in this particular verse format.  They are well done in their clarity and ease of reading, often with a small surprise or turn of thought or theology within.  In her lines devoted to the Wedding of Cana she sees the gift enlarge, the ferment of Christ’s faithfulness blesses beyond the moment, even of the miracle into a greater miracle.

Let me read you the second half of the sonnet, after Jesus has taken charge of the liquid elements of the reception.

*The steward marveled, the vintage aged and fine*

*As the party rocking and reeling in the room*

*Imbibed a joy they’d never drunk before,*

*The house spinning around the bride and groom.*

*This is the rite of Eden, the temple door,*

*When God engages with us, husbands and wives,*

*So two together engender another one.*

*He blesses them, their bodies, as they rise,*

*Dancing within their flesh: daughters and sons.*

*A miracle of joy that Jesus brings*

*To be our bridegroom, flagons of light to drink.*

And the guests may have even piously thought they were drinking one of God’s gifts-- fine, refined fruit of the vine but really were drinking, “flagons of light”.  …A poetic way of saying they were in the presence of the one who said of himself, “I am the light of the world,” the light no emptiness can drain or un-fill.

I may have heard or read it before but it evidently had not made that much of an impression on me until I read her line “This is the rite of Eden, the temple door….”

Genesis begins things after creation is called forth by the Lord’s word of goodness and at the apex of creation there is Adam and Eve.

Stars hang above us, for us; Saturn wears a belt, for us; parrots swing through the trees, for us; cows deliver milk, for us; precious metals are formed into cars and computers, for us, Lenten roses bloom even in the winter, for us… it is all there for Eve and Adam and for us.

The Gospel of John who has in his first chapter all the lofty, poetic vision of God before all things, making all things, the beginnings before Bethlehem and then in chapter one verse fourteen, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us… gives us a moment of restoration reminding us of the joy of Eden and our first parents and the angels hovering over the ark of the covenant guarding now beyond Eden-- the Temple’s holiest place of worship, God’s earthly throne until the animal feed-box.

Genesis 2 tells of the planting of the perfect Eden and first wedding, attended also and only by God, of male and female and here in John 2, at Cana, comes God in flesh walking seen by his and our Father, not hiding but naked in his holiness, beginning again the goodness in another marriage for Mr. and Mrs. Cana.

I usually do not even reread and certainly almost never re-preach old sermons.  But I did this past month read a couple because I wasn’t sure I would have the time I needed for writing, but thankfully I did.  One of my last sermons on this text shared some internet research on Jewish Weddings customs and Orthodox Christian weddings.  Many of the present-day practices have their roots in what weddings must have looked like centuries ago in our Lord’s Day.  And the Orthodox Church customs come closer to these kinds of roots than do many in our Western portion of Christendom.  Both have a lot of dancing and meals as you would expect, like we do, but both also use crowns in their ritual.  We have rings, some call them jeweled, finger crowns but the Jewish custom references crowns and the Orthodox actually use them.

At Jewish weddings the bride and groom have their ceremony under a special canopy, a *Huppah*, signifying God’s presence, protection and shelter. They dance the *Hora* holding ends of a handkerchief while being lifted by the crowd on chairs and being celebrated as “king and queen of the night.”  And parents are crowned after their last children are married.

Among the Orthodox churches the climax of the marriage service is The Service of Crowning.  The couple are given diadems symbolizing they are queen and king of their own little regnum, the home, the domestic church.  The Triune Name is invoked as their coronets are placed atop their heads.  I read also-- get this—the royal headpieces are used additionally to, “refer to the crowns of martyrdom since every true marriage involves immeasurable self-sacrifice on both sides.”  Their crowns are called *stefana*, does that not sound similar to Stephen the first of our Christian martyrs?  And then the Gospel of John 2 is read.  There is a lot more in the Orthodox rite that makes our marriage liturgy a bit light on weighty matters.

I don’t recall a specific biblical passage that uses the terms prince and princess of the children of God but others have used royal appellations for human beings.  C.S. Lewis is most notable to me in that he even uses the more elevated King and Queen titles in his Narnia novels.

But we are the children of the King of the Universe, aren’t we?  No wonder the crowns.  And in order for that to become true again after we attempted to overthrow the royal kingdom beginning in the Garden of God’s Goodness, the true and only beloved Son of God had to wear the crown of human hair, a Jewish beard, our blood and skin and ultimately an additional crown of puncturing thorns, mock-adoring spittle, and the nails which created jewels of his scars at his wrists.  Finally, add a spear for a scepter driven into his heart.  Thus talk about a relationship where love overflows!

Sip on these overflowing verses:

“You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God,” Isaiah writes. (62)

One of the Old Testament’s closing verses has Zechariah, like a wedding soloist sing, “On that day the LORD their God will save them for they are the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land.”  (9.16)

Finally, hear both Timothy and again St. John in his final revelation that goes beyond any “until death do us part” qualifying phrase.

“From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”  (2 Timothy 4.8)

“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”  (Revelation 2. 10b)

*In the name of the Father and of the*+*Son and of the Holy Spirit.  Amen.*