

“It’s Dry January... But My Cup Runneth Over”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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My sermon is a little bit longer than normal. Forgive me, I am savoring the task of preaching with you. As exhausting as it is, I will miss those late Saturday nights staying up and conjuring up a sacred dance between God’s word, my lens, and your ears. If it’s too long, at least I will leave you with a readiness to move on from this long-winded preacher!

Weddings were a big deal in biblical times. We don’t hear many stories about actual weddings. But the prophet in Isaiah uses the imagery of marriage to describe God’s relationship with God’s people. Isaiah ‘shipped God with Israel, as my middle school daughter would say. “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 your God rejoice over you.” Now maybe you are one who loves weddings, maybe you don’t. But in biblical times, the experience of marriage was typically met with great joy, a time of celebration because- in a heterosexual context- a marriage often meant children, and children meant the strengthening of God’s people Israel.

I remember when Chris and I first got engaged, it was kind of a big deal in Montclair, NJ in 2007, that a queer local pastor was marrying another woman. Someone from the Montclair Times Newspaper came out to interview me. I don’t remember exactly what I said, but I know that her opening line to the article she wrote did *not* come from me: “Ever since she was a little girl, Leah Fowler had always fantasized about the perfect wedding dress.” I actually did not have that fantasy, and I certainly never spoke to the journalist about that!

But people get caught up in the joy of a wedding, and perhaps project their own hopes and dreams onto them too.

It was likely with that same joy that people arrived at the wedding in John’s gospel. And even though Jesus and his disciples had seemingly only met a few

days ago, they had all been invited to the wedding. However, the wine had run out. This was a problem.

Now I know some of you choose to be sober, or are trying to be. Perhaps you are trying a "dry January." More and more is coming out about the negative health impacts of alcohol on your health, and as I creep closer and closer to 50, I have found that my body is more sensitive to the negative impacts of alcohol. For the sake of my health, and my sleep, I drink less.

But in Jesus' time, wine was core to the culture. Mind you, they didn't have soda or Starbucks. At a pinnacle cultural event such as a wedding, to run out of wine wouldn't have just been inconvenient; it would have been a deep shame.

So, Mary chooses to be an instigator, to make things happen. "They have no wine," she says to her son, plainly.

"Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come." Now, reading this line 2,000 years later than it was said, we cannot be sure of the tone here. Is Jesus being sassy with his mom? Even disrespectful? We cannot tell. John's gospel, by the way, never mentions Jesus' mother, Mary, by name. But still, the woman has power, even if she is not named. With a confident authority, Mary tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Perhaps Jesus was waiting for just the right time for his coming out as the wise teacher, the miracle worker, the compassionate healer, the revolutionary. Maybe Jesus knew that once his role was clear to others, he could no longer just be the carpenter's son; his road to the cross would be paved before him. Maybe he had simply already had enough wine and was ready to settle down for the night.

Whatever his reasoning, it seems Mary had something else in mind, and she knew the kind of nudge Jesus needed to do what came next. From the jugs holding water for purification rituals, Jesus made the finest wine, and there began his public ministry.

Without Mary, the change that needed to happen to bring forth the life-changing, death-defying revolution in faith that only Jesus could bring may not have even

happened. First, Mary said yes to helping to bring God into the world in human flesh. But that could have just stayed a special little secret among the family lore, had not Mary tipped Jesus' hand by saying, "*They have run out of wine.*"

It reminds me of something I heard about what was perhaps Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most famous speech he gave at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. It was not originally titled "I Have a Dream." In fact, he had planned on giving a speech he had named "Normalcy, Never Again." But near the end of his speech, Mahalia Jackson, the famed singer known as the Queen of Gospel who had been sitting on the platform behind King, called out to him, "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin!" She had been performing alongside him on his tour of speeches, and had heard him speak about his dream in a previous speech months earlier in Detroit. At that point, King left his notes, and began preaching in the extemporaneous style of the Black church, and made this one of the most famous speeches in American history.

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

King’s speech, which Mahalia Jackson likely steered from her seat behind him, challenged Americans to have bigger, more daring dreams; dreams that are more faithful to God’s vision for our lives.

We may wonder, without King still here to lead us, and especially at this point in America where our country is sharply divided, hatred is fermenting, and voices are being silenced: is it even safe to dream anymore?

Once Jesus had done the thing, and turned water into wine, the person in charge tasted the wine that had been made. “Surely there’s been a mistake; the custom is to serve the good wine first, and once people are too drunk to know the difference, then serve the lower quality wine.” The wine Jesus had made was much higher in quality than anything else that had been served at the party.

As the church faces a time of transition, to many it will feel like a dry and barren time, a wilderness time. Have faith in the possibility that with God’s help, the **best is yet to come**. But that will also depend on your partnering with the Spirit and with one another to make that happen. My friend and seminary classmate, Dr. Melva Sampson, teaches preaching at Wake Forest University. She is a black woman, and has been organizing with other black preachers to find a collective voice for what they will say today at church. I have been watching, through social media, this movement unfold, and I am moved at how these preachers are taking the mantle of the black church and claiming its role in the public sphere, and how they are sharing the hard work of pressing toward justice so that no one preacher has to bear it on their shoulders alone. Later on today, or maybe tomorrow instead of watching *another* event happening, I will listen to the sermon made by their collective words. I do know this: their sermon will be called “The Arc of Justice Won’t Bend Itself.”

One reason I suspect I have been halfway decent at my job is that I can accept the fact that I don’t know what I am doing half the time. I have accepted the possibility that I may fail. And I lean into that— giving myself the grace and

forgiveness that if I fail, it will be okay. And I look you in the eye and say, “We can do this!” but the truth is that there’s a part of me that doesn’t think we actually can pull it off— whether it’s signing up to make a meal for 200 people, or getting a group of people who feel somewhat awkward to get in front of the congregation and lead a sanctuary drama, or bringing an 85-year old on a mission trip to the Yakima Reservation in Washington State. Don’t get me wrong- there have been times when I genuinely suspected that something was not right for the church, and so I drew a boundary and said no, to people, to ideas. But some of my fondest memories in the church have been when we have done something that seemed possibly *impossible*, but because we each brought an ounce of faith to the effort, we pulled it off. And I can tell you the reason I ever tried to scheme with you dreams that may have been bigger than our britches is that I could see the glimmer of the holy in you, and that’s what gave me the faith to try.

I’ve been asked about the timing of my choice to take another ministry position. Couldn’t I have waited a few more years? Like Jesus, maybe you feel like the hour has not come yet for you and me to move on from each other. I don’t know if I have an answer to that question that will satisfy your grief, or mine. I think grief just isn’t something that can be avoided.

But, like Mary, I will nudge you to address the emptiness with bold confidence. There will be much that seems impossible in the next four years. In addition to at least several months without a pastor, the incoming administration will test your faithfulness to Jesus’ call. You might be asked to stand with the undocumented, and use the power of being a faith community, to protect your friends and neighbors from deportation. You may need to extend your care and protection for LGBTQ+ people beyond these safe walls, to tend to others whose rights and belonging are threatened. There will be much that seems impossible in the next four years.

But friends, be gracious with yourselves. In Jesus Christ lies the power to turn water into wine. Accept that you might fail, but **do not let the possibility of failure keep you from doing bold and courageous things.** Lean on one another— no one should have to shoulder the burdens alone. If the work feels too hard to do, see how your efforts can be stronger if you work together.

Looking ahead, the landscape seems dry. You will be without a pastor. You may not like the president. You'll wonder if you can actually do this. But take heart, and have faith. It is in the dry, wilderness times that God is the most active, and calls forth the best leadership, and even exposes within *you* gifts that can nourish God's people. Remember the promise from the prophet in Isaiah: "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."

I have no doubt that God delights in the Presbyterian Church in Leonia. Have the faith of Mary that your dry cup will be filled, indeed, it will run over, more than enough to share. Amen.

As a response to the sermon, I invite you to join in saying some of King's words, from a speech he gave in 1965. These words speak to the fact that a time such as this is *not* a normal time— but as Christians, we all must courageously lean into the moment, and bring the kind of faith that builds the transformation God calls forth. Let us say together: