

“This is the Kingdom! We Won’t Run Out!”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, January 17, 2010.

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

If you’ve never been to a Chinese wedding banquet at a Chinatown restaurant, I would like to suggest that one day you disguise yourself as Uncle Hoy’s second cousin, and sneak in. Join one of the twenty, thirty, or forty round tables of partygoers. What you will get is an 8-10 course dinner beginning with bird’s nest soup or shark fin soup. These are served because they are symbols of longevity, or long life, so you begin your life together with the hope or promise of long life. Then you have courses like whole fish, mustard greens, abalone with black mushrooms—symbols of good fortune. All the foods are symbolic, it seems, of some promise or wish for the couple—long life, good fortune, prosperity, strength, happiness, and so forth. The last course is the famous Peking Duck. Oh, and one other thing was always served--beverages. On the lazy susan of every table was always a pot of tea, a bottle of Belfast Sparkling Cider, and a quart bottle of Seagram’s Seven.

I don’t know the symbolism of the Seagram’s Seven, but there was always an abundance of it. I had an Uncle—Uncle Hoy—who would go around the tables when dinner was over and gather up all the unfinished and unopened bottles and take them home—20 or 30 bottles of Seagram’s Seven, enough, I assume, to last him until the next banquet.

But the banquets were not about the food or about the Seagram’s. They were about community, sharing in the gift of abundance—heaps of food piled on the tables, course after course of chicken, and duck, and greens, and not a fortune cookie in sight. The banquets are a display of abundance, and at the same time a symbol of the hope for abundance, or trust in abundance.

Sometimes it’s hard to think in terms of abundance. We’re used to thinking “The wine has run out.” “We don’t have enough” money, or people, or time, or things, or help—the list goes on and on. There’s not enough. When I was in the hospital just after back surgery, the nurse came into my room to ask if I wanted a couple of pain pills. I said, “No, I want to wait until the pain gets worse. I’m afraid of running out and then there won’t be any more.” She laughed and said, “This is a hospital! We won’t run out!”

At Cana, it’s not about the wine running out, either. If it were about the wine, I would be worried about Jesus’ judgment, ordering up another 150 gallons of wine—600 bottles of Chateaufort-du-Pape after using up, what?—800, 900 bottles of Gallo Red? But it’s not about the wine being scarce. It’s about Jesus saying, “*This is the kingdom! We won’t run out!*” Jesus is always telling us, “This is the kingdom! There’s plenty!” In John’s Gospel, these acts of Jesus like the turning of water into wine are not called “miracles,” as in the other Gospels. Jesus turning water into wine, healing an official’s son, feeding 5,000 people from a few loaves of bread and two fish, all the way up to the

last sign—the raising of Lazarus from the dead—these acts, John doesn't call them "miracles, he calls them "signs." The signs of God's kingdom here on earth that Jesus brought are all signs of abundance—enough wine to keep the feast going, enough wellbeing to heal another person, enough food to feed a crowd, enough life to bring someone back to life.

One of my favorite books is called *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God*. The title is intriguing because we associate soup kitchens with scarcity. We have soup kitchens because people don't have enough to eat. The food has run out. But in the Kingdom of God, God's soup kitchen works all night long, and the food never runs out. But it's still a soup kitchen. It's just that God has transformed it into a banquet.

On the day that we commemorate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the church, the first reading is from Exodus, in which God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, saying, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." God promises to his people not just liberation from bondage, but also liberation from scarcity—abundance. They have lived in a land ruled by a fear of scarcity. As our Visiting Theologian Walter Brueggemann said last year, they were bound by Pharaoh's world of scarcity--remember what the Egyptians kept saying to the Israelites: "Make more bricks!" Part of Dr. King's prophetic ministry was recognizing that there was, not a scarcity of opportunity but an abundance, even for African Americans in America, even when it looked to many like there was only so much to go around—only so many jobs, or so much good education, or so many voting booths, or so much brotherhood or sisterhood. Dr. King believed in a God of abundance. He believed in that God who promised a land flowing with milk and honey, that promised an end to misery and the beginning of freedom, abundant life.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets like Amos and Isaiah foretold the coming of a messianic time when there would always be an abundance of wine B a divine gift which God would give as a sign of the new age. Now, in Jesus, what the prophets sing about in hope has come to pass.

Baptism is the celebration of that giving of new life, a new age, and abundant life (today, in one little boy named Hudson). We baptize with water, of course—this time the water will be fine. We don't want it to turn into wine. It's water that parted at the Red Sea to let the Israelites walk to freedom. It's water as Jesus does water—a gush of living water springing up to eternal life. It's water turned to wine—Jesus' sign of abundance.

But then you may say, "But what about Haiti? Where is the abundance there? Where is God?" There is no theology that serves to justify the destruction of Haiti's capital city, or that justifies the suffering and death of so many thousands of her inhabitants. There is no theology that says that this is God's will, or God's deliberate act. We live in a natural world, a world of air, and water, and land. The tides go in and out,

the storms come and go, the land moves back and forth—the earth is alive. We do not control the earth, we do not control earthquakes, and God doesn't send them. What we do control—and what God does send, and what we have in abundance—is hope, and compassion, and generosity. Is it not time now to give these gifts as they have been so generously and so abundantly given to us? There's an abundance—after all, this is the kingdom, the marriage feast of God with us. We won't run out!