

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
19 January 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Second Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Signs in this Time”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*

Touchstone words in Epiphany: *HOLD FAST and REORIENT*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

John 2:1-11

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

In general, signs are helpful. They tell us something we need to know. Yet even the most basic signs require some interpretation on our part.

For example, speed limit signs tell you how fast or slow you should drive in a given area based on flow of traffic and number of exits (highway driving) or if there might be kids around (school zone). But, you might choose to ignore a speed limit sign’s recommendation if someone in your car is having a medical emergency and you are trying to get to a hospital, or when you’re driving in a polar vortex and the roads are packed with snow and patches of black ice and you don’t want to skid out of control. In these cases, you see what the sign is saying, but you choose to speed up or slow down based on other circumstances that the sign itself is not aware of.

Then there are the less straightforward types of signs. The ones we learn how to interpret gradually as we gain more life experience. Think of a green bud breaking through the snow—a sign that spring is coming. Or, a raised eyebrow on someone’s face—a sign that they are skeptical of what you’re saying. Or, a distinct odor wafting up from your child—a sign their diaper needs to be changed.

Most importantly, *these signs* point to something beyond themselves, which is the meaning of the word “sign” in Greek *semeion*. The fourth gospel writer, John, is unique among the others (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), in that John describes the miracles of Jesus as “signs/*semeions*”—something that points beyond itself.

The Wedding at Cana is a significant story. It is the first event we see Jesus at after calling his disciples in John's Gospel. Jesus' mom is there, which is the first time she appears in John's Gospel (remember there is no traditional birth narrative in John's Gospel). And it's kind of bizarre encounter between mother and son, at least to our modern ears. We could talk about that or the religious significance around these six stone water jars for Jewish purification that hold 20-30 gallons a piece, or the significance of the place of Cana—but I'll save those for another sermon because today I want to focus on what John is calling Jesus' "signs." And the first of these signs is turning the water in these jars into wine so that the celebration could continue.

Hospitality is big in Jesus' culture, as it is in ours, so running out of wine at a wedding isn't a good look for the hosting family. But Jesus didn't just ensure they didn't run out of wine; he created an abundance of really fine wine, the best wine, more than could

possibly be drunk by the wedding guests. Scholars differ on their "ancient stone jar to modern wine bottle conversion metrics," but some say it would be around 120-180 gallons, which is 600-900 bottles of wine.¹ And remember, this is after all the other wine was out! People had already enjoyed quite a bit. So why does Jesus make so much wine? What is this a "sign" of? And why is it a sign instead of a miracle?

By contrast, the first miracles in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels involve casting out demons and healing people (Matt. 4:23-25; Mark 1:21-34; Luke 4:31-40)—which establishes Jesus' own power to do amazing things.

Yet in John's gospel, the first miracle is not called a miracle (so it's not about Jesus' own power), but rather is called a sign. And it's not something as life-changing as expelling demons or healing diseases. It's turning water into wine for the sake of celebration and hospitality and joy. It's not about what Jesus himself can do, but rather what God is revealing through him.

¹ Conversion information sourced from different places. Example: <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/7368>

0/at-the-wedding-of-cana-how-large-of-a-gathering-was-likely-taking-place.

John writes: “*Jesus did this, the first of his **signs**, in Cana of Galilee and [it] revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him,*” (2:11).

And there it is. This is a “sign” because it points to something beyond Jesus himself. It reveals God’s glory or the nature of God, the divine. You could say that Jesus’ whole life is a “sign” to us of what God is like and THAT is John’s point. When we see what matters to Jesus and what Jesus does, we see what matters to God and what God wants *us* to do.

These signs show us something about God’s nature, but also they inspire belief, which is to say, they inspire growth in the Jesus movement. As scholar Emerson Powery points out, “Signs...are accounts that lead to an attraction and growth in the Jesus movement...within the other gospels, the descriptions of Jesus’ miracles are also about his identity...but they do not usually lead crowds to believe in Jesus or acknowledge his identity as God’s Son.”² But John’s “signs” do.

² Emerson B. Powery, “Focus On: Signs (2:11),” eds. Emerson B. Powery, Stacy Davis, Mary F. Foskett, Brent A. Strawn, *The Westminster Study Bible: New*

Powery is inviting us, I think, to ask *Why?* What is it about Jesus’ signs in John’s gospel that inspire people to follow him and grow a movement that they become a part of? (Rather than just admiring this guy as someone who can do great things.)

Well, I think it has a lot to do with what these “signs” reveal about the nature of God. If you learn something about God that is inspiring and good...wouldn’t you want to find out more and/or join a movement that was multiplying that good in the world?

Depending on who you ask, there are 6-8 “signs”³ in the first twelve chapters of John’s gospel. I’m going to list them and offer one potential meaning we can glean about God’s nature through these actions or “signs” of Jesus. In other words, instead of thinking about what these signs prove that Jesus can do...what do these signs tell us about who God is, what God values and desires for us and the world?

1) **Jesus changes water to wine to keep a party going**

Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2024, pg 1853.

³ The * signs in the list are the ones not agreed upon by all.

(2:1-11) = *God's nature is one of abundance and joy—overflowing and over-the-top hospitality and welcome... God pours into our lives “the good stuff”.* God wants us to live with joy, to prioritize hospitality, to celebrate. The entirety of John's gospel is full of really hard stuff. But the first “sign” is one of joy, abundance, life, fun, celebration. Almost as if God is saying: Joy first. Celebration first. You're gonna need it...

- 2) **Jesus drives the moneychangers out of the Temple to expel corruption and greed from the Lord's house** (John 2:12-17)* = *God's nature is generous to all, opposed to corruption, greed, and anything that supports power structures that harm or exploit the poor, marginalized, oppressed. Where there is exploitation, there must be action to eradicate it.*

I'm going to do the next two “signs” together...

- 3) **Jesus, while in Cana, heals a royal official's son in Capernaum because the official knew who Jesus**

was and sought him out to ask for the healing (4:46-54)

and

- 4) **Jesus, on the sabbath, a day one is not supposed to “work,” heals a paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda, unsolicited, meaning the man does not ask for healing nor does he know who Jesus is** (5:1-9)

=

- 3) *God's grace and presence has no bounds...is not confined to one place (Jesus can be in Cana and heal someone in Capernaum); God is all places with all people. And God's grace and presence is for those who recognize it and seek it out, who come to God on their own initiative.*
...AND...
- 4) *God's grace and presence is ALSO for those who do not recognize it or seek it out or do not come to God on their own initiative; God sees us all.*

*And bonus revelation on this one: focusing on the marginalized or vulnerable always trumps any kind of law like ‘no work on the sabbath’; moral law is above religious law or judicial law. Shout out to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. here

and his courageous civil disobedience; he was often arrested and imprisoned for taking a moral stand for humanity even if meant breaking the law that was in place to support white supremacy.

5) Jesus multiplies five loaves and two fishes into enough food to feed 5,000+ people until they are satisfied, and there are extras left over!

(6:1-14) = *God provides. More than enough. Humans look at resources and see scarcity, while God looks at the same and sees possibility, abundance.* A little boy's lunch feeds 5,000. He doesn't hold on to what he has for fear he won't get to eat or he won't have enough. This is the essence of stewardship; the opposite of capitalism. When we realize that stuff isn't ours to own, but rather God's to share—there's enough for all.

6) Jesus walks out on water during a storm, unsolicited, to calm the disciples saying “do not be afraid” (6:16-24)* = God's nature is to come to us when we are afraid, in the midst of the storms of life. God's presence walks to us calmly

on the roaring waters of chaos and says, “do not be afraid..I am here...”

7) Jesus heals a man born blind because his disciples ask if it's the man's fault or his parent's fault that he is blind; Jesus says neither and says he's the ‘light of the world’ and further reveals the spiritual blindness of the disciples and Pharisees (9:1-41) =

God's nature is to bring out the insight, wisdom, spiritual light which is within us all. This spiritual illumination is not about pointing out sin and blame of an individual or family. In focusing on sin and shame, we dim our own lights, yet God calls us into healing places and practices so that our inner light and wisdom shines more brightly.

8) Jesus raises Lazarus, who had been dead four days, back to life (11:1-44; 12:17-18) = God's nature is Life.

Life over all. Life over death. God calls us to Rise. Always. Even when we feel defeated, God says, Rise. Jesus said to Lazarus: “Unbind him, let him go!” God's desire is for us to unbind all that is tying us to death, imprisonment,

oppression, and decay. God calls us to Rise Up and to Rise Others Up.

Perhaps that is eight mini-sermons in one, but do you see how these signs reveal something about God's nature and how Jesus—through these actions—comes to help us know more about what God desires *for* our lives and *from* our faith?

It's no wonder that these "signs" lead people to belief. Wouldn't you want to believe in anything that was about joy and abundance over scarcity? Honesty over lies? Clear conscious over corruption? Grace for all over grace for some? Just treatment of all over laws that privilege some? Provision over poverty? Sharing over greed? Peace over fear? Insight and wisdom over dullness and delusion? Life over death? Unbinding and liberation over tying down and oppressing?

These are the "signs" that Jesus gives us in John's gospel. They are Truth with a capital "T." And indeed, they not only point us to who God is and what God wants for *us*, they inspire us to mobilize and believe and share this truth with the world. These "signs" inspired a movement

back in John's day, and they can in our day too. And remember, they received these "signs" in hard times. His community was oppressed, marginalized and were suffering for their beliefs against a big empire. And *those* times are not different from *these* times, are they? We need signs to help us embody the beloved kin-dom—so that our very lives become "signs" for the world.

Going back to street signs again for a bit: Did you know that, worldwide, more than 1,000 streets carry the name of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on a sign? Including MLK Blvd. here in Denver!

Memphis-based Journalist and *MLK 50: Justice through Journalism* editor and publisher, Wendi Thomas, gave a thought provoking speech about these street signs on March 26, 2018 at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. She called on us to see beyond their directional purposes and rather interpret them as impacting the circumstances of our lives...the real stuff happening on the streets underneath which the signs sit.

She said, *“Each MLK street sign testifies to our reverence for the Baptist preacher who told us that love can drive out hate and showed us that the power of nonviolent resistance can topple segregation. For this, King deserves our admiration. But I wonder if there’s not another way to show him respect—by seeing MLK street signs differently? What if we didn’t see these signs as an honor to him, but as a reminder to us? A reminder to finish the work [he started]?”*⁴

She quoted a professor of hers who said, *“Once you name a street after someone like King, you better be certain that you maintain the street as a monument to him, so that if he were to come back and visit the street, he would [see the beloved community all around its corners].”*

So how do you build a street [a community] worthy of King’s name? A sign that symbolizes a ‘new way’? Well, the instructions are in his words.⁵

In 1963 from his jail cell in Birmingham, King wrote: *“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”*⁶

You build a community worthy of a street with King’s name on it by welcoming in mass, not deporting in mass.

In 1966, King said: *“A living wage should be the right of all working Americans.”* In 1967 he said: *“The problems of racial injustice and economic injustice cannot be solved without a radical redistribution of political and economic power.”*⁷

You build a community worthy of a street with King’s name on it by making policies that benefit and prioritize the poor, not the rich.

The reality of our day is that “Together, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk & Mark Zuckerberg own more wealth than the bottom

⁴ Wendi C. Thomas, “Signs to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Put MLK’s name on street signs—and put his anti-poverty pan in action,” *Medium.com* (29 Mar. 2018), accessed on Jan. 19, 2025 at <https://medium.com/mlk50-justice-through-journalism/signs-to-honor-dr-martin-luther-king-jr-d674972afcdc>.

⁵ Thomas, *ibid.*

⁶ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” (16 April 1963), https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

⁷ Thomas, *ibid.*

half of America.”⁸ “The top 1% of Americans, roughly 3 million people, own 35% of the wealth and capital in our country. The bottom 50% of Americans, which is about 150 million people, own about 1.5% of wealth.”⁹

Mass income and wealth inequality is a HUGE deal. You know the pictures we’ve been seeing of wildfires ravaging through California destroying homes? It’s devastating; it compels us to act. Well, we do not get to see inside poor homes or poverty stricken streets on our news very often, but mass income inequality is ravaging through neighborhoods across every city in our country and its devastating families every day.

We remember Dr. King’s life and his birthday this week. But it’s hard to do that without thinking of his death. He was killed in Memphis, a city he had come to support black sanitation workers—men who worked full-time but earned so little that they qualified for welfare. They were disrespected, overworked and underpaid—out of their

frustration came the slogan: *I am a man.*¹⁰

The night before he died, King spoke to a church full of sanitation workers and their supporters. He called for a “dangerous unselfishness,” a solidarity with the working poor that would demand sacrifice. Sanitation worker Cleo Smith was in the audience that night. He was a striker in 1968, and today, he still works for the city of Memphis as a sanitation worker...After more than 50 years on the job, he makes just \$16 an hour.¹¹

So journalist Wendi Thomas says, “*we still haven’t done right by King’s sacrifice...so the next time you see an MLK street sign, let it prick your conscience. Remember workers like Cleo Smith. Remember the words of King, who said: “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.*”¹²

⁸ Jasmine Laws, “America’s 12 Richest Men Now Worth a Combined \$2 Trillion,” *Newsweek* Dec. 5, 2024), accessed on Jan. 19, 2025 at <https://www.newsweek.com/americas-12-richest-men-worth-combined-2-trillion-1995950>.

⁹ Ivan Pereira, “Oligarchy 2.0: Experts weigh in on whether Biden’s warning about wealthy justified,”

ABCNEWS (18 Jan. 2025), accessed on Jan. 19, 2025 at <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/oligarchy-20-experts-weigh-bidens-warning-wealthy-justified/story?id=117790741>.

¹⁰ Thomas, *ibid.*

¹¹ Thomas, *ibid.*

¹² Thomas, *ibid.*

“I would like to think that we are those individuals,” she said.

So would John, the Gospel writer.

Because John concludes his gospel by writing, *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name,”* (John 20:30-31).

And if we believe and have life in his name—and live as if that is true—do we not then become “signs” ourselves? “Signs” that point to the nature of God’s providence, peace, abundance, grace, wisdom, equity, justice, and joy?

Friends, we are on the eve of a presidential inauguration. A new era. If you are wondering how you can be “sign” of justice and love in *these times*, then I invite you to consider the same questions that King asked the country to consider in his speech at the *National Conference on New Politics* in 1967, where he named *The Three Evils of Society* as racism,

materialism (economic exploitation), and militarism.

He concludes his speech with this vision:

“So we are here because we believe, we hope, we pray that something new might emerge in the political life of this nation which will produce a new man, new structures and institutions and a new life...[but] I am convinced that this new life will not emerge until our nation undergoes a radical revolution of values. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people the giant triplets of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy...”

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies...

Cowardice asks the questions, is it safe;

Expediency asks the question, is it politic;

Vanity asks the question, is it popular,

but Conscious asks the question, is it right.

And on some positions, it is necessary for the moral individual to take a stand that is neither safe, nor politic nor popular; but he must do it because it is right.

And so we say to our nation tonight, we say to our Government...we will not be harassed, we will not make a butchery of our conscience, we will not be intimidated and we will be heard."¹³

Go and let yourself be heard. Be a "sign" in these times of God's justice and joy. They go hand in hand.

The first of Jesus' signs tells us so much about who God wants us to be...a people of joy and abundance.

Author and theologian of *Black Liturgies*, Cole Arthur Riley says, "*It can feel foolish to pause to marvel at the stars when the world is burning. Or to find the world beautiful when*

you've known it to betray you. But wonder is a liberation practice. A reminder that we contain more than tragedy. Beauty is our origin and our anchor."¹⁴

And, I would add...Joy is the prelude and postlude to justice. Joy is the first and last "sign" that you believe all are worthy of rights, dignity, love. And joy is the "sign" that no administration can steal or stamp out your divine image and imprint or anyone else's.

Inauguration Day does not just have to be a "sign" of the beginning of what President Trump or Project 2025 represents. It can be a sign of our new beginning too. Let's make Inauguration Day a "sign" of our new beginning too...of not being silent...of letting our lives be heard...

Let us inaugurate "these times" by becoming "signs" of God's justice and joy.

Amen.

¹³ The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Three Evils of Society," Address Delivered at the *National Conference on New Politics* (August 31, 1967), accessed on Jan. 19, 2025 at <https://www.nwesd.org/the->

[current/equity/the-three-evils-of-society-address-martin-luther-king-jr/](https://www.nwesd.org/the-current/equity/the-three-evils-of-society-address-martin-luther-king-jr/).

¹⁴ Black Liturgies, Instagram, Cole Arthur Riley.