

*100 Days in John*  
***Water to Wine***  
*John 2: 1-11*

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

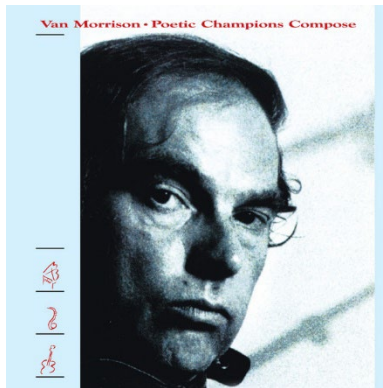
**January 8, AD 2023**  
**Gerrit Scott Dawson**

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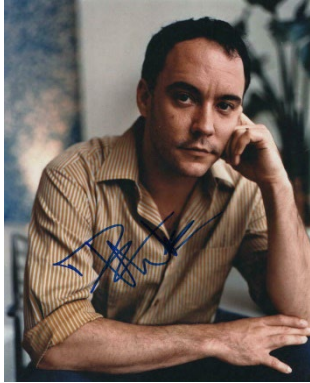
We're beginning *100 Days in John*. Over the next three months we'll be working our way through this beautiful gospel. Our focus will be on the conversations Jesus had with people. We'll notice how his encounters reveal more and more of who he is. The beauty of his person as the Son of God who became man will shine before us. We'll be approaching John's gospel through the weekly messages, but also in different ways. Our book for Lent will take us into 40 questions we asked Jesus and what we learn from his replies. And, in just 26 days we'll be doing a mini-retreat here at church. It's called *5 Mysteries of John*. So we'll be excavating five treasures of the person of Christ uniquely revealed in John's gospel. If you're not on another Bible reading plan, I encourage you to be reading John prayerfully with us over the next 100 days. Together, we can meet Christ in a deeper, richer way.

Today, we'll look at the first miraculous sign Jesus performed that reveals the meaning of who he is and why he came. The event takes places at a wedding celebration in the town of Cana in the region of Galilee where Jesus was raised.  
*Read John 2: 1-11*

One way to speak the meaning of this story is to say, "The best is yet to come." Jesus made wine out of water. He didn't make cheap wine, but brought out the best after the wedding guests had already drained the first supply. He saved the best for last. So can we also expect that the best is yet to come?



Now I've had to deal this week with a conflict between two of my musical heroes. In his song, "Someone Like You," Van Morrison sings about meeting at last someone who makes his whole life worthwhile. He sings how he has travelled all around the world singing and searching for love. But "lately I have realized that the best is yet to come" because he met "someone like you." It's a great love song.<sup>1</sup>



But Dave Matthews disagrees. One of my favorite songs is his poorly titled tune called “Pig.” Its theme is that life is very short, so “don’t burn the day away.” Don’t miss giving and receiving love in this present moment. Don’t think your life is coming to you in the future. Your life is now. He sings,

Oh, come sister, my brother,  
Shake up your bones, shake up your feet.  
I'm saying open up and let the rain come pouring in

Wash out this tired notion/ Oh, that the best is yet to come.

There's bad times but that's OK. Just look for love in it

And don't burn the day away.<sup>2</sup>

For Dave, what’s coming next is just the end of life. The best is now if you let love into all you say and do. So, which is it? Is “the best is yet to come” a washed out idealism? Does it fail to recognize that all we have are these moments now? Or is there more to come? A *more* that can come from the future and fill up our present with hope? The answer, of course, is *Yes!* I can keep both songs on my play list.

Wedding feasts in those days could last up to a week. They were a time of great celebration. The people took a long time to rejoice and also to be sure the couple knew that all their lives were threaded into one another. We’re all in this with you, and you’re in this for us as much as yourselves. But as the party went on, the unthinkable happened. The wine ran out.

Has that ever happened to you? You miscalculated your party, and ended up without enough food or drink for your guests. Depending on the importance of the occasion, it can range from mildly embarrassing to a downright disgrace.

We don’t know the exact relationship between Mary and the bride’s family. But it was close enough that she took responsibility to avert this social disaster. So Mary approached her son. Jesus did not make a direct request. She simply stated the fact, “They have no wine.”

We will see throughout the coming weeks that the words in John’s Gospel function on multiple levels. John records history. These things literally happened. But what the events the Spirit inspired John to record also had deeper levels of meaning. “They have no wine” is a true, immediate problem. But of course it means more.

Scripture associates wine appropriately enjoyed with the celebration of God's blessings. In God's grace, the union of a man and woman brings forth the fruit of the womb. By his providence, the land yields a bountiful harvest of grapes from which wine is made. The people bless the LORD of marriage, children and harvest as they raise their glasses.

But in Jesus' day, the Romans occupied Israel. The people languished under exorbitant taxes. Their harvests were not their own. Political freedom vanished under the Emperor's sword. The pagans Romans ridiculed their faith in the LORD. Mary's statement summed up current conditions. *They have no wine.*

A deeper look reveals this is the human condition worldwide following the fall. We toil in sweat, thorn and frustration to make a living. Discord breaks families. Scoffers steal joy. Rulers squeeze. Thieves deceive and plunder. Illness debilitates. Death steals every life. *They have no wine.* Bad bosses, difficult spouses, troubled children, evaporating money can all make us lament that the joy has left our lives. We have no wine. Yet God's people then and now raised this lament to him. "Father, the wine has failed!" And then we cling to the hope that the best is yet to come. God will fill our emptiness. He will restore us.

Hosea prophesied a wedding, "And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD" (Hos. 2: 19-20). A day was coming when the LORD would reclaim and restore his people. The God who seemed to have cast them off would marry them again and make their lives flourish as intended. And the wine of celebration would break out as all things were set right.

These ancient longings and hope underlie Mary's identifying of the critical need, *Jesus, they have no wine.* It's as if she said, "Isn't this the time to begin regathering your people with the glad wine of God's tender mercy? With the news that the Creator has betrothed his people?"

At first glance, Jesus' answer seems rude a way to answer his mother! "Woman, what does this have to do with me?" But scholars assure us that word "woman" was akin to saying "Ma'am." And the idiom he used was more like saying, "I'm not sure I can do anything about this now." He knew that Mary asked him to begin the public portion of his redeeming ministry. He had to consider the timing and the method.

Mary, with wonderful wisdom, just let the need sit with Jesus awhile. She told him the situation and left him with it. She trusted that the Father would reveal to his Son that this was indeed the time to give a sign that showed who he was. With faithful confidence she deftly responded by saying in his hearing to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Jesus did not disappoint. Six huge stone jars in the house could each hold 20 to 30 gallons of water used for ritual washing required for holiness before the LORD. Jesus ordered them to filled to the brim. The water became wine and the party went on. Of course, there was no more water for ritual purification. That old system had been replaced. The true bridegroom of his people had arrived. He had begun the washing of his bride that would ultimately be done by his cleansing blood. The best was yet to come, but also the best had *already* begun.

And that’s still how it is for us. Alice had lived a rich life. She had a keen intellect and a sophisticated sensibility. She worked for Stanford University organizing trips around the world for wealthy alumni. Alice had been to the finest museums, dickering with professors over the latest interpretations of DaVinci or Picasso. In the evenings she knew her way around a menu in any country. Alice also knew her way around a conversation about politics and economics or music and drama, always in a way that made her crowd feel smart, a cut above the masses. She was not raised in church, and generally considered church people to be ignorant of the real world, mired in superstitions and bigotry.

Then one day, the wine failed. Colon cancer. Radical surgery. Chemotherapy to which she had a violent reaction. She called an old friend from her twenties, from halcyon days in San Francisco in the seventies. She called Patty Williamson. Patty is married to a pastor named Parker Williamson, a guy who grew up here at First Pres in Baton Rouge. Parker was the pastor before me in Lenoir, NC. Patty and Parker invited Alice to come and stay with them while recuperating.

She came with her dismissive questions, the ones that usually silenced religious types. But Alice found people who weren’t put off by her questions but had actually asked the same ones and found an adequate response in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. She came convinced of the selfishness of Christians. She found instead a community of believers giving their lives for others. Alice went with Patty and another elder as they cared for their Hospice patient, a woman dying, of all things, of colon cancer. She saw the faith they shared. She heard the prayers. She felt the love.

Alice came to church from time to time and listened to the gospel. She realized that the Word is as intellectually stimulating as any system of thought in the world. She asked her questions and received replies laced with love. I remember how, when her sophisticated front had left with her health, Alice was stunned to think that the eternal God would find her significant. She felt that in all her upscale living she had never done anything that mattered. How could it be that she actually mattered to God? But as she was taken into the home and life of this extraordinary couple, she began to believe. She heard their prayers together in the morning; she saw the uncommon love that bound them; she felt them open that faith and love to her.

There was no miracle finish to this story. The best in this life was not going to come. Alice went back home to California. The cancer returned. The wine of this life continued to fail. But quietly, very quietly, Alice had begun to drink of the wine of the Kingdom of Heaven. She began going to church. She wrote to me of her trust that God loved her and that she knew this through Jesus. Alice died. But for her everything had been transformed. All the old ways of rightness—the art, the dining, the travel, the money—had been shown to be just old stale water in stone jars that never really did anything to make any one all right. But she was being made right by the new wine of Jesus Christ. Life was not lost. The best really was yet to come.

Jesus still comes and transforms life. He comes to all the ways people have tried and failed to be fulfilled, to be right in themselves and before God, and exceeds our wildest hopes by making everything new. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5: 17). Under his influence, stale forms of our life get replaced with fresh one. Spending habits change. Time use habits change. The way we look at others changes. We go from being consumers of people to lovers of people. We become givers instead of takers.

When the wine failed, Jesus turned the old water into exquisite new wine. The party was saved. But of course much more was going. Jesus came into the world changing *everything* around him. With the wedding at Cana, Jesus launched the great days of his ministry, cleansing sin and overcoming disease. But those days were just the beginning. For our bridegroom, our host, the Lord Jesus himself, has more still to give us. He has indeed saved the best for last. Christ will return for his bride, the church. And ignorance will be no more. Estrangement will be no more. Death will be no more. Tears will be wiped away. Rejoicing will resound through the universe.

At the beginning of the New Year, we still believe the best is yet to come. 2023 may bring suffering or triumph, prosperity or struggle in our daily lives. But we know that Jesus will return to set all things right. We know that as we partake of him in faith, he makes us part of his mission to the world. Our little lives get taken up into the significance of his mighty work on behalf of all people. We become part of Christ's massive blessing project on this earth. Whatever we do, we now do for his sake, in his name and for his glory. It changes everything. For the wine of Jesus, his blood shed for us, his Spirit poured into our hearts, never runs out.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Morrison, "Someone Like You," *Poetic Champions Compose*, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Dave Matthews, "Pig," from *Before These Crowded Streets*, 1998.