

*St. Thomas's Episcopal Church*  
*January 19, 2025*

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. ~John 2:1-11

Some invitations you just can't turn down, and that was certainly true when I was asked to be part of not just a wedding, but an entire wedding weekend for a friend in a beautiful spot called Fisher's Island off of New London, Connecticut. I joined the family and the wedding party a day early for the rehearsal since I was going to be playing the organ. I arrived at beautiful St John's on Fisher's Island, got to know the organ a bit and then greeted the minister who would be presiding at the wedding. He was tall, distinguished looking; a somewhat older man who was very nice, but appeared to be perhaps a little bit rusty in the rehearsal. And so as he walked us a bit haltingly through our paces, I occasionally gave him advice, a few tips, a few pointers, if you will. And the rehearsal finished up having all gone just fine. I got into the van with the wedding party to head over to the rehearsal dinner and one of the ushers turned to me and said, "Alan, nice job in there." And I said, "Thank you so much." And he said, "Yeah, I was especially impressed with the way you handled Senator Danforth."

I was mortified. I mean, did I really just behave that way with John Danforth, senator, yes, but also Episcopal priest and quite a catch as wedding officiant? I felt terrible and needed to make a plan, so I basically did what any mature self-realized adult would do. I decided that *I would avoid him for the rest of the weekend*. You know, if he if he walked one way, I would walk the other way. A great scheme, but it only really lasted for a very short time because I went to get a few appetizers, turned around and there he was standing right in front of me. I was about to say something apologetic but before I could he had already started speaking. "Alan, oh my gosh, so glad I ran into you. I just wanted to thank you so much for all the help you gave me at the rehearsal." Again I started to offer some kind of explanation and he said "Oh gosh, certainly no need to apologize. Look, we all need each other. We need each other. And look at this occasion. Isn't that the whole reason we're here?" It was a wonderful life lesson in many ways and I've thought a lot about it since. What I learned that day has lingered with me. But what's also lingered is a sense of what can happen when you *see somebody close up* that you might not in ordinary circumstances. What can we see and learn about someone in a rare glimpse close up, especially a public figure where you usually only see from a distance and in broad strokes.

The Epiphany season is **the season of seeing close up**. It's a beautiful, beautiful season. In the orthodox church it's considered among the most holy seasons. We tend to parenthesize it a

bit. Why do we do that? The glory of this season is *to see our Savior close up*, to watch all of the things he does, all of the people he loves, all the stories he tells, to watch him close up. And here it starts with this extraordinary moment, a wedding, and not just a weekend but *a full week* of celebration, festivity, bringing the neighbors in, rich and poor, young and old—the extended family, most of whom wouldn't have had access to such good food and drink and the luxury of taking such time. This is what we did as a people: we gathered to celebrate love, to celebrate this expanding of the kin group, all that that a wedding signified and that was so important in the ancient world. We gathered to celebrate all of that lavishly.

Here we are in Luke's year but we turn to John's gospel for the first of these close-up moments. They call John the mystical gospel, and it is in so many ways: Word made flesh, the Word who was with God, the Word who was God. Yes, that's mystical. The real magic of John, though, is that John *invites us to see Jesus close up* in beautiful real-life encounters with Nicodemus, for example, close up, hearing him talk, savoring that well-known long conversation; with the woman at the well hearing every word of the rich and moving conversation with her, lingering over a rare close-up moment. That's the signature of John. Thomas touching Jesus' side close up! Mary, in the garden, trying to hold on to Jesus close up! Jesus with another Mary and her sister Martha, the commotion and the crowd, the grief and the emotions close up; seeing in such raw, vivid detail that he was late coming to be with them all after their beloved Lazarus had died, seeing his own raw emotion when he cleared the temple. Beholding Jesus as he cried. It's really the extraordinary humanity of this gospel and *seeing Jesus close up* that is its signature element.

And so today, what do we see when we get this chance to see Jesus close up? Well, we see a lot, but I want in the few minutes that I have to highlight just two things.

♥First of all, we see that Jesus, despite his power, doesn't draw attention to himself or to his power. It's an extraordinary scene where he almost retreats. People who could be named are not. It's not about that. Mary is *his mother* and even *woman*. What stands out is the crowd, the energy, the emotion. Jesus doesn't seek any attention for what he does as one might think he would. What he does is extraordinary, of course, changing water into wine, but that's not why he does it. He's defies the laws of nature as **a sign**, in John's language; a sign that says no matter how little you feel you have, Jesus will always fill you abundantly. No matter how far outside the circle you may feel Jesus will bring you in fully. No matter how much we may feel that our well has run dry, Jesus will fill it up. It's not about his ability. It's not about his power. It's not about him. It's a sign. It's a sign of God's abundance, God's grace, God's never failing love, the endless well of love.

♥Second, and finally, when we get this rare chance to see Jesus close up, we see something else extraordinary: that he reveals himself not to those who have power, not to those who we might expect, not to those sitting at the head of the table. not to those where he might be building a network. No, he reveals his power to the servants and maybe that is the network that he's building after all, because that's us! He reveals his power to the ordinary folk who were there, and here, of course, seeing Jesus close up, we see exactly who he will be: the one who will wash feet, the one who will give himself to us all as a gift. so that he can abide in us and we can abide in him for eternity. It's the gift he came to give for all of us, to all of us ordinary people in those moments where we feel the most empty. In those moments where we feel everything has run out, he comes to say, I will always be there to fill you abundantly until you overflow with grace and love.

A brief coda on this holiday weekend about **seeing closeup** as I work my way through an extraordinary biography of Martin Luther King Jr. I hoped to have it finished by tomorrow. I won't get there. It's 500 pages or so. It's beautifully, beautifully written. And how wonderful to see King close up. I have a long list of favorite quotes from this man who's known for his words and rightly so, and for his public works and rightly so, and for his legacy and rightly so. But to see him close up is to understand his words in another way. One quote which I've always loved so much is his notion that *forgiveness is not an occasional act; that forgiveness is a permanent attitude*. And to see King in his hospital bed, surrounded by doctors who don't think he's going to make it after an attempted murder, issuing forgiveness to his assailant as the doctors think they're about to lose him is to see him close up and to hear those words in a new light. In what could have been his last words, he simply said, *please forgive her*.

It's extraordinary what you see when you see close up, what you learn when you see close up, what you savor when you see close up, what's affirmed when you see close up; and so today what is affirmed is yes, indeed that God of grace and that our God of endless mercy and that our God of endless abundance will walk us all the way towards that moment where he will give himself; when when he will give us the gift of himself so that we can abide in him forever, and he can abide in us forever. That's the ultimate gift and it sounds like too much to be believed. Impossible. And yet today we see it close up. For seven radiant weeks we will get to savor this season of light. Let's enjoy it together, this beautiful time when we walk with him along the way each week, seeing him close up. Thanks be to God. Amen.