

Defining moments: Psalm 36:5-10; Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

In the Lectionary
January 13, 2004

Even the Messiah had to adjust his schedule when events took a surprising turn. The story of Jesus' coming-out event as told by John demonstrates his spiritual flexibility.

"My hour has not yet come." The phrase suggests that Jesus had hoped for a more carefully chosen setting for his first presentation of himself. In the political turmoil of first-century Judah, the way one called attention to oneself could be a matter of life or death. Jesus, understandably, wanted to take on the heavy mantle of leadership in a considered manner. He did not want to stumble awkwardly onto the public stage.

Then came unexpected circumstances. He attended a wedding; the celebration went on and on; the wine ran out. A host family faced serious embarrassment. Mary, put in the rare role of a stage-managing mother, was confident her son could redeem the situation. Jesus objected. "My hour has not yet come."

The story fails to mention one of its most surprising but covert features: the ease with which Jesus surrendered his preplanned strategy and embraced a new possibility. He surely preferred whatever had been plan A; but he moved smoothly into plan B—the opportunity presented by unexpected circumstances.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for hour, *hora*, is more often used in reference to *kairos* time than to *cronos* time: "The hour [hora] comes and now is when the true worshiper . . ." *Hora* is used in many gospel stories of mighty works to identify the moment of healing, and in those cases it is usually translated "instantly."

Cronos time measures ordinary occurrences, events that "creep in this petty pace from day to day." *Cronos* time leaves the impression—often false—that we can control it, can enter it into our Palm Pilots and deal with its events on our own terms. *Kairos* time, by contrast, represents discontinuity, when an unexpected barrier forces one to move off a planned course and adjust to new realities. Jesus had one schedule in mind. Circumstances pushed him in another direction. His hour, his

kairos moment, appeared before he wanted or expected it.

The wedding scene in Cana may have been constructed from a real event in Jesus' life. But the careful reader will recognize the hand of John reconstructing the scene, building in multiple layers of symbolic meaning. At least three interpretations present themselves.

The first possibility is to see the story as a description of the contrast between what Jesus was about to offer and the inadequacy of ancient Judaism. According to this view, Judaism had exhausted itself. What was left was watery and tasteless. The finely fermented wine of Christianity was about to supplant it. Unfortunately, this interpretation is consistent with an anti-Jewish theme that runs through the Gospel of John.

A second interpretation of the story focuses on the joy that characterizes the emerging realm of God. The setting was perfectly designed to point in this positive direction. Jesus had an opportunity to announce himself to people brought together by the exquisite happiness of the merging of two lives. His coming-out event was a party within a party, a celebration within a celebration. The work of Jesus began in a life-affirming setting. The sign of his ministry would be wine, a symbol of human conviviality and gladness.

Interpreted at the level of joy, all traces of anti-Semitism disappear. This level builds appreciatively on Jewish tradition. The theme of joy is reflected in the Hebraic lessons for the day. The 62nd chapter of Isaiah begins with a wedding metaphor; the vindication of the divine will mean that Judah is no longer forsaken or desolate, for Judah will be the bride of none other than the Holy One. The psalm centers on *hesed*, the steadfast love that binds divine and human, the same force that holds bride and groom in secure relationship.

The third and perhaps most profound layer of meaning shows how the disruption of cronos time can be transformed into an event of kairos time. Jesus had been expecting an introductory moment that he could identify and control. Instead, his hora came upon him unexpectedly, pushed on him by circumstances and by his persistent mother.

The destruction of carefully constructed schedules causes people either to despair or to seek deeper sources of strength. A few years ago the news services carried an account of a wedding that was aborted by the groom at the last moment. The

intended bride was left with her tears and enough food for an elaborate reception. Rather than waste the food, she sent messengers out to gather the homeless of the city. They were nourished by a feast planned for a very different group. This event represented more than a simple effort to find consolation in a tragic event, more than the classic shift from lemons to lemonade. In her personal tragedy, the young woman recognized the possibility of significant witness. Cronos was transformed into kairos.

I have observed many such transformations. A vocational reversal forces a reevaluation of a person's basic goals, causing a move into a style of work that is more productive and satisfying. A chronic illness closes doors so rapidly that every element of a worthwhile life seems beyond reach. The ill person makes the psalmist's question her own: "From where does my help come?" Cronos into kairos.

One's hour comes—the kairos moment presents itself—at the intersection of mangled plans and spiritual openness. Jesus demonstrated a creative response to an otherwise disconcerting surprise. The demonstration did more than launch him toward his goals; it embodied his goals.