

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

January 20, 2019

*II Epiphany, John 2:1-11*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

This morning is a beginning.

Following the Krypton-ian prologue in Richard Donner's 1978 *Superman: The Movie*,<sup>i</sup> the first of the series with Christopher Reeve, a meteor runs Ma and Pa Kent's truck off a country road. As the pair survey the damage to their 1940s coach, they peer into the trench the meteor has left behind and, to their great surprise, a winsome toddler looks back at them, opening his arms to the senior couple. Ma Kent collects the child into her arms, and Pa begins changing the truck's torn tire, when – suddenly – the jack slips and this little boy lifts the creaking truck above his head and smiles ... cuing the most familiar bars of John Williams' score [whistle theme music].<sup>ii</sup>

For Martha Clark Kent, the events on that country road are a sign – a sign of God's favor after her years of praying for a child. For Jonathan Kent, the events are a sign of the cosmos' mystery, an affirmation of his Midwestern humility and a reminder of all that he does not know. For us viewers who know how the story ends, the events are a sign of the boy's true identity – that he is Kal-El, son of Jor-El, and he is *the super-man*.

Following the poetry of John's prologue, we hear of Jesus "at a wedding in Cana of Galilee."<sup>iii</sup> Today's Gospel begins, "On the third day," and while on the third day after crucifixion there will be Resurrection, on *this* third day, there will be a less-certain amazement as the disciples seek the meaning of what they witness.<sup>iv</sup>

In the wedding scene, Jesus' mother observes to him, "They have no wine," to which Jesus responds, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."<sup>v</sup> While you who have mothers, I suspect you know the look Jesus received, his response would not have made any friends in the house where my parents raised me, and that attitude would not work for the children in my house now: "Son, you better be Jesus Christ, because if you ever talk to your mother like that again, we're gonna have a serious problem ..."

Even so, Mary knows something Jesus does not – she still has something to teach her boy about Grace and graciousness. The story offers no details about what Jesus expected of "his hour," but clearly these events do not match his vision. Perhaps he expected a more sensational occasion, like the toddler Superman lifting that old truck above his head. Regardless, his mother speaks on his behalf, saying to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you,"<sup>vi</sup> and both Jesus and the servants do as they are told. As the chief steward draws the new wine, the soundtrack cues: [whistle theme music].<sup>vii</sup>

For the chief steward, the wine is a sign of the bridegroom's good taste and generosity. For Mary, the events at the Cana wedding miracle are the fulfillment of promises spoken long-ago – the promise of the angel Gabriel: “the child to be born is holy;” and her own promise: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be.”<sup>viii</sup> For us readers who know how the story ends, the events are a sign of this young man's true identity – that he is the messiah, the son of God – and, like the disciples, we endeavor “[belief] in him.”<sup>ix</sup>

Of this belief, note that John's phrasing does not indicate a cause followed by an effect – the concluding sentence of this morning's appointment does not contain a “therefore.” Rather, the Evangelist scripts the narration with commas and the coordinating conjunction “and,” conveying an assemblage, not a syllogism: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” ... comma, comma, and, and.<sup>x</sup> While these events signal something new and mysterious and wonderful, **the disciples must choose to believe in Jesus' glory** in order to recognize, and, then, to share in the glorious kingdom Jesus' love inaugurates.

As I named in last week's Church service, we cannot turn my remaining time at Good Shepherd into a month-long goodbye. Even so, this morning will be my last Sunday in Communion Café, which, if surreal, merits my acknowledgement. This service has gotten into my bones, and I will miss it. In the company of everyone this morning, please allow me to express my gratitude for our band, Holy Ghost Supreme [applause]: you are at the heart of this Communion Café congregation, and you are so, because of your good hearts. As much as I admire your musicianship, I admire your character far more. Thank you, thank you for your kindness, constancy, and leadership all these years. We give thanks to God *for you*.

Ryan, Julia, and CJ: you three will now carry the institutional memory of how Communion Café came to be, and, for the good of the order this day, I will add to your recollections my version of those events.

See, it came to pass in those days that before I came to Good Shepherd, I received a copy of the “Parish Profile,” a lovely, full-color document describing life in the parish and school, listing the community's facts and figures, and articulating the congregation's hopes for its next rector. The page describing the parish's weekly liturgies listed “Contemporary Worship in the Parish Hall” at 11:11AM. While the warbly “Folk Mass” at the Roman Catholic church of my childhood, and an ill-fated attempt by a high-school classmate of mine to save my soul with a heavy-metal-for-Jesus event in downtown Shreveport, had long combined to disincline me from any form of “contemporary worship,” I kept an open mind and hoped to honor what had been started here.

After my arrival, the *locum tenens*, the priest-in-charge at the time, Kelly Koonce, explained that, as it turned out, the clever timing didn't really work, so the service actually started at 11:30. Including the two musicians, the priest, and anyone who passed through by mistake on their way to the service across the Garth, back in 2009 – when the world was still young – the congregation was about 20, and still new enough to allow for fresh ideas. Thereby, during my first summer, we imagined a reboot of the worship that would move to the evening, and we named this next iteration, “Koinonia,” the Greek word for Christian community.

With this “contemporary” service, we hoped to fulfill the elements of our Eucharistic worship – broadly accounted as Gathering, Reading, Reflecting, Praying, Eating, and Sending – in more familiar expressions. Therefore, we began worship with wine and a light meal at an altar set in the middle of the chancel. We played spiritually-minded secular music during this casual and friendly “gathering” time, before readying to celebrate Eucharist at the same table where, earlier, we had broken bread. With copies of the lessons circulating upon arrival, we shared more widely the responsibilities for reading and reflecting on the Scripture, and we invited members of the congregation to write and pray their own forms of petition, intercession, and thanksgiving. We made our Communion with homemade bread and better-than-usual wine, before sending the congregation with music supported by Ryan, Julia, CJ, and the then-Director of Music on piano.

Even recounting this plan, I am struck by what a great idea it was ... and what a total bust it proved to be. While the contemporary crowd was up for attempting an evening service, the extant 6:00 congregation was wholly unimpressed and let me hear about it. I wince when remember the playlists I arranged on my iPod, and the tractor-beam of traditional, Episcopal worship in that space proved too much to overcome. So, we gave it yet *another* shot.

For the following fall, we moved the service back to the morning and back to the Parish Hall. However, we were also bringing back parish breakfasts in that room, and we knew we would not have time to “flip” that space for a seating change. Therefore, we retitled the worship Communion Café and all the seating was to be around the same café-style tables at which the parish had just eaten their breakfast. We assigned teams to clean, and, together, we made it work.

By that time, the Director of Music had returned to a focus on the traditional music in the Church Building, and the band’s identity began to emerge. Instead of playing pre-recorded music, “Holy Ghost Supreme” – the name they chose – performed appropriate[-ish] pop music as a prelude. In the worship itself, we established a standard for congregational singing to include one, old-time Gospel song, along with music from our *Hymnal, 1982*, set to contemporary instrumentation.

Over the years, “Making It Work” would become a motto for Communion Café. Before, during, and after construction, this worship was a moveable feast, meeting at one point in the Choir Room of the Administration Building, which could fit not more than 40, a scale that was not a problem, because we never had anything close to that number attempting to attend. And then it happened. I don’t know what exactly – what synchronicities came to pass, what the alchemy of the magic was – but when we started construction on the Church Building, we made the unconventional decision to slot Communion Café at the same time as our primary, traditional service, which, by necessity had moved into this space in the PLC. And Communion Café really began to grow. Seemingly overnight, 40 became 60, and 60 became 90. We entered triple digits, and we now brush against 200 Sunday after Sunday. We haven’t looked back since.

For those with eyes to see, remnants of those earlier days remain discernable in our current form, from the rockin’ preludes<sup>xi</sup> to the café tables still dotting our rows of chairs. Knowing how the story ends, then, it might be easy to forget this worship’s humble beginnings. Even so, consider that Communion Café’s attendance is now almost *quadruple* the median Average Sunday Attendance, or “ASA,” of all congregations in The Episcopal Church.<sup>xii</sup>

Realize that this service's ASA would rank in the top 10% of all congregations, and this service's growth – tripling in a matter of only a few years – is an outlier by orders of magnitude (if there is another congregation or service that's increased by this multiplier, I will need to see it to believe it).

A transition in leadership is an occasion to find time and permission to take stock, and brothers and sisters in Christ, I encourage to see what you have done, to recognize what you have inaugurated, and to celebrate this good news! For us who are here every Sunday morning, we can easily underestimate the significance of what is happening, but, from the perspective of the larger Church and even mainline, Protestant denominations, Communion Café – *be sure* – that this is scarcely less magical than water turned to wine.

For me, this service is a sign of this community's deep well of patience and goodwill; a sign of God's surprising Grace; and a sign of very good things to come for this parish, for this neighborhood, and for this city. Friends, I pray that like the disciples before us, that you, too, would choose to believe that in Communion Café something new and mysterious and wonderful is underway, and in seeking its meaning, I hope that you will see that this morning is a beginning ... and, in it, let there be rock, let there be Love, and in all that we do, may God be praised. *Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> *Superman: The Movie*. Directed by Richard Donner, performances by Christopher Reeve and Margot Kidder. Warner Bros. 1978. While the sequels are progressively worse (Along with *Congo* and *Pushing Tin*, I include *Superman III* on my "Worst Movies Ever" list), Donner had some well-executed, good ideas in the first film, the stage-setting opening among them. Recall that Donner had to tell a story that most already knew, balancing when to attempt to suspense, and when to offer moments like this one, when we as viewers know what's coming, but can still find satisfaction in the scene's execution. Even 41 years later, this sequence still works for me.

<sup>ii</sup> One of my brother-in-law's favorite challenges is to whistle consecutively and without hesitation, the John Williams soundtracks to the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Superman* franchises. While different, the respective themes are similar enough to cause confusion and no small measure of anxiety when whistling from the pulpit.

<sup>iii</sup> From "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 423. "Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee."

<sup>iv</sup> John 2:1.

<sup>v</sup> John 2:3-4.

<sup>vi</sup> This detail feels honest and real to me, Mary conscripting Jesus through triangulation that she knows he hears.

<sup>vii</sup> Obviously, there are big problems suggesting any comparisons between Jesus and Superman – and that's not my intention here. Rather, I appreciate the similar narrative strategies to establish settings and to launch the stories, and I intend to point more specifically to the ways in which characters in the respective dramas experience and interpret the events differently than do we, more-knowing viewers and readers.

<sup>viii</sup> Luke 1:35, 38. By making appeal to Luke, I mix my Gospel references here, but I believe the spirit of the observation is on the mark.

<sup>ix</sup> John 2:11b.

<sup>x</sup> John 2:11a.

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<sup>xi</sup> In the audio of this sermon I ad-libbed a reference to Richie Sambora and Jon Bon Jovi. As an homage to my hair-metal roots, the band surprised me by playing a super-fun, rousing version of “Livin’ On A Prayer” as a prelude.

<sup>xii</sup> All of these metrics are according to the “[Episcopal Domestic Fast Facts: 2017](#),” published on The Episcopal Church’s “Research & Statistics” office. Communion Café has grown from an ASA of about 65 in 2014, to an ASA of about 200 in 2018.