

## Here Comes the Bride

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, January 17, 2010)

Isaiah 62:1-5 <sup>1</sup> For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.  
<sup>2</sup> The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.  
<sup>3</sup> You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.  
<sup>4</sup> You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.  
<sup>5</sup> For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Ephesians 5:25-32 <sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup>in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, <sup>27</sup>so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup>In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup>For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, <sup>30</sup>because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup>“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” <sup>32</sup>This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

John 2:1-11 (The Message) <sup>1</sup>Three days later there was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. <sup>2</sup>Jesus and his disciples were guests also. <sup>3</sup>When they started running low on wine at the wedding banquet, Jesus' mother told him, “They're just about out of wine.”

<sup>4</sup>Jesus said, “Is that any of our business, Mother—yours or mine? This isn't my time. Don't push me.”

<sup>5</sup>She went ahead anyway, telling the servants, “Whatever he tells you, do it.”

<sup>6</sup>Six stoneware water pots were there, used by the Jews for ritual washings. Each held twenty to thirty gallons. <sup>7</sup>Jesus ordered the servants, “Fill the pots with water.” And they filled them to the brim.

<sup>8</sup>“Now fill your pitchers and take them to the host,” Jesus said, and they did.

<sup>9</sup>When the host tasted the water that had become wine (he didn't know what had just happened but the servants, of course, knew), he called out to the bridegroom, <sup>10</sup>“Everybody I know begins with their finest wines and after the guests have had their fill brings in the cheap stuff. But you've saved the best till now!”

<sup>11</sup>This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Biblical scholars suggest that there were actually three prophets by the name of Isaiah, or if there was only one Isaiah, he clearly had three different ministries. The first Isaiah, basically chapters 1-39, is from the time before Israel was defeated by the Babylonians. Chapter 1 pretty well sets the scene with the words of judgment by God, as spoken by Isaiah: “**Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged.**” With these words, Isaiah is describing the relationship, the broken relationship, between God and God's chosen people. But note this word “estranged” which we often associate with divorce. Did Israel divorce itself from God?

Second Isaiah, or the second ministry of Isaiah, takes place during the time of captivity. Chapter 40 begins with words that are familiar to many of us, where the prophet proclaims, **Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term.** This word of comfort was exactly what the people of Israel longed to hear as they suffered in exile, far removed, in their eyes, from a God to whom they longed to reunite.

Chapter 60 brings in a new era, when the third Isaiah, or the third ministry of Isaiah, begins to take place after the people have returned from captivity. Isaiah speaks with new confidence and optimism, again with words that are familiar: “**Arise, shine, for your light has come; and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.**” It is within this context of God’s mercy and the return of the people from captivity that we read today’s lesson. Verse 5 reflects optimism with an image that is familiar to us all, the image of a marriage. Isaiah tells the people of Israel: “**As a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you. And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.**” These are words of a new beginning. The sad names of defeat and captivity are changed, just as a bride most often changes her name after the wedding ceremony. The people of God are no longer called “Forsaken” and the land is no longer called “Desolate.” But the people will be called “Hephzibah” which means “My delight is in her” and the land will be called “Beulah” which means “married” – married to God.

Paul picks up some of this same imagery when he writes about the relationship between Christ and the Church. The passage from Ephesians that was read this morning is a bit controversial, especially the verses proceeding our lesson where Paul tells wives to “be subject to your husbands.” But I encourage you not to strain over this issue and lose the image Paul gives us in verse 25: “**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.**” Don’t struggle with Paul’s teaching about the relationship between husband and wife, but go the other direction, use the image of a married couple, an ideal married couple, as an analogy of the relationship between Christ and the Church. This is the same image Isaiah uses to teach the people of Israel about God’s love for his people. And it applies just as much today to the relationship between God and God’s people. Imagine a marriage, a perfect marriage, and you will see Christ’s love for the church.

I love to do weddings. It is one of the most enjoyable things a pastor does. One of the things I like to see is the groom’s expression when the bride appears and begins to walk down the aisle. Almost every groom is transfixed by the beauty of his bride. I remember one groom just gasped and said, “Wow” when his bride appeared through the opened doors. Can you imagine God taking a look at you, and gasping, and just saying “Wow!” That is how much God loves us when we gather as the church, that is the relationship between Christ and the church. How would that make you feel if as we started our processional hymn, we heard God just gasp and say, “Wow!”

Some people try to make our Gospel story into something cheap. I am not just talking about silly jokes we might tell about changing water into wine, or even the temperance debate over whether it was water or grape juice or wine, or why Mary was pushing Jesus to get going and do his thing, or even why Jesus seemed so reluctant at first. No, we need to look deeper, to the symbols and significance of this event. There is so much symbolism in this event – let’s start by looking at those jars. John just tells us that they were stone water pots used by the Jews for ritual washing. They would have been called “Purim jars.” Purim jars were used to keep water for purification. On the festival of Purim, the people would wash with this water to purify themselves for worship. We no longer wash ourselves to symbolize purification, we simply bow before God in confession. Just as Jesus changed the water to wine, which the wedding guests drank and enjoyed, so Jesus purifies each one of us through forgiveness, as we also receive the wine, which we sometimes call the cup of blessing, Christ’s blood, shed for our forgiveness. The wine that Jesus created in Cana can also be a symbol for the blood of Christ, a foreshadowing of the Lord’s Supper. Even the wedding can become the analogy of Christ’s relationship to the church, and through our participation in the church, a marriage becomes a symbol Christ’s relationship to each one of us.

Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear all of this symbolism find greater meaning in this story. Because in this story of Jesus changing new water to wine, at a wedding feast, he not only foreshadows his sacrifice for our sake, but he also fulfills the vision of Isaiah and passes on a new vision to Paul - - - and to us, if we listen. Just like the people of Israel in Isaiah’s time, we are called back together, called back to God. Just as Jesus changed the water in the Purim jars into wine, wine that is symbolic of his life, wine that is given to us in communion, so we too are purified through forgiveness in Christ. And we are changed as we enter into a new relationship with God, a relationship that through Christ makes it possible for us also to be called, Beulah, married, as spoken by Isaiah, and as the gathered community, the church, we become beautiful, a bride, married to God. Amen.