

**Sermon: A Bride Married to Amazement****Scripture: Revelation 21****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 10, 2023**

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I've got wedding on the brain still. My family and I are still basking in the afterglow of our eldest daughter, Haliana's wedding, which we held down in Ripley last weekend. This has been a big year for our family. The last time I was up here preaching it was in the aftermath of my 30-Day retreat and my father's death and now it's in the afterglow of a big family wedding. Funerals and Weddings. They are some of the biggest moments in one's life and have similar dynamics.

Last Spring as I was reflecting on my father's dying process I preached on Lazarus' death and I spoke about the effect that dying and death has on the wider community, saying that the hole left by the death of a loved one creates something of an in-gathering of presence and love to fill in the gap. Well, the same is true of weddings, I've realized, though it's not the absence and departure of someone that creates this in-gathering, centripetal pull of love and presence but rather it's the unifying of two people in an expression of love. Death and marriage, both generate this outburst of energy that then creates the inflow of love in both instances. I mean don't get me wrong, both death and marriage can also bring out the crazy in people and families too but usually that is far overshadowed by the love, the love that gathers and swells and lifts everyone up.

Death and Marriage. Marriage and Death. And these sit front and center in our understanding of God in relation to us, according to our sacred scriptures. Of course, what would texts of wisdom and guidance be unless they spoke to the fear of death and the joy of relationship, which of course are linked because a big part

of the fear of death is the severing of relationship. And if there's one promise, point of hope, that comes through the arcing narrative of the Biblical story it would be that death doesn't actually have that power to sever us from one another or from the presence and love of God. There may be weeping in the nighttime of our lives but joy is promised for the morning whenever morning finally arrives.

The Biblical story begins with relationship and union. All the way back in Genesis, when God created the human being to be in covenantal relation with one another and with Godself, a marriage of sorts that involved mutual agreement, fidelity, trust and sacrifice one for another – and so it was a relationship of LOVE that humanity was invited into. It's there at the very beginning and as we heard read from the last book of the Bible, it's there in the very end: the image that John of Patmos uses for the fulfillment of time is a great wedding feast. It begins in union in the Garden of Eden and ends in union in the garden of the new Jerusalem (or the church from a Christian perspective). In between is the struggle of falling away from one another and coming back together and falling away and back together... but the point is that it's a union of love from which we came and union of love to which we are going.

That's why the marriage motif is so strong throughout the scriptures because our belief, our understanding is that God is love and relates to us not in power and control, not as a boss or a military commander or a King with his subjects or even as a coach, determining our lives, but rather God relates to us as spouse, a mutual partnering of willing love. Wow. I mean it's a remarkable claim that this is what the Sovereign of the Universe does! God seeks us as God's

beloved. Which also means we can reject God's advances, which we humans have a penchant for.

In the prophetic literature marital imagery is what the prophets use to cry out to Israel. They say Israel is an unfaithful wife – of course the woman gets the bad rap – and speak of her turning from God's love to become a harlot or prostitute and the ruin of Jerusalem and Israel's exile is the direct result of this spousal unfaithfulness against God. In the end, as Jeremiah describes it, the final restoration of Israel will involve the restoration of the marital bond between the people of Israel and God. When Jeremiah says "I will bring my people back and you will be my people and I will be your God" he's directly referencing wedding vows that were said - my people will be your people and your people will be mine.

And then as we move into the New Testament we see the marriage motif as strong there as ever. Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom in a rebuttal against the Pharisees, saying that the wedding party doesn't fast when the bridegroom is with them. And John the Baptist in John chapter 3 refers to himself as a groomsman preparing the bride (the Hebrew people) for Jesus as the bridesgroom and the church begins to take on the role of bride in the metaphor. You'll remember that Jesus' first miracle is at a wedding feast and his turning of water into wine is a prolonging of the wedding feast which would have collapsed under the weight of running out of wine.

And still further there's the parable of the bridesmaids running out of oil and another parable of the invitation to people on the street to come to the wedding feast since the inner crowd didn't initially respond to the invitation. And then in the Gospels there's that reference that you often hear at funerals in John chapter 14 when Jesus says - in my father's house there are many rooms and I am

going ahead and preparing a place for you? That is specifically a reference to the practice of the groom building another room onto his father's home, a Chuppah in Hebrew, where he can then bring his bride to start their new lives together.

And then finally the culmination of salvation's story in the Bible, the end of time is seen as a great wedding feast where the lamb of God is seated on the throne and invited are all those whose wedding garment has been purified by his blood. The New Jerusalem and the Church are in the role of bride and God in Christ the groom in the final celebration of a love feast. "I saw the holy city of Jerusalem coming down from the heavens adorned as a bride on her wedding day." And before that in Revelation 19 John has this vision of a great multitude shouting "Halleluia, for our God reigns, rejoice and be glad and give Him glory," it says, "for the wedding of the lamb has come and the bride has made herself ready! Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the lamb!"

That's a very quick and rather inadequate survey of the wedding motif in scripture, but as you see, the Biblical writers understood that there was something about the marriage covenant made in love and the spousal relationship, that spoke to the truth about God and our relationship with the Sovereign of the Universe. And so I'd like to lift up 3 remarkable things that the use of this motif suggests to us, surely there are others but here are three:

1. First of all, to frame our relationship with God in the context of marriage, a wedding, and the spousal relationship is to frame it centrally in terms of love AND one of the central attending elements of most every wedding is JOY! The joy that derives from deep and committed love. Sometimes, in church we get so serious about our faith and we get so morose about our sins and needing to do better and we envision God or even Jesus with a

furled brow and a condemning finger, when it's supposed to be about love, love that brings joy. Jesus' first miracle after all was turning water into wine to ensure that the party continued! What a guy! God wants our love and God wants our joy. It reminds me of a Mary Oliver poem where she uses a marriage analogy in talking about death, she writes:

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse  
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;...  
When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

2. Secondly, as I mentioned at the outset, there is something about both death and marriage, unlike any other events of our lives, that draw unto us the presence and love of others. There is like this concussion of energy at death and marriage that brings people rushing into the space created. One of the remarkable things we experienced last weekend at Haliana's wedding was this glorious coming together of different circles of people, different families and bloodlines, into unity and togetherness created by the love being shared and experienced by the couple in the center. To say there's something marital about our relationship with God is to say that in and through THAT relationship others are brought inside and included, others are caught up in the love and the joy and drawn together. That's the effect that the love-force of God has. Others aren't excluded and pushed away but gathered in and made a part of the new family that is becoming. And that is the promise in the end.

3. And third, the Book of Revelation is an account of the vision that was given to John of Patmos about the culmination of all things, the end of time, the apocalypse or unveiling at the end and what he saw was a lot of mighty bizarre things – beasts with multiple heads and horns and angels with many faces and many wings and the defeat of the devil, and choruses of people and angels... but front and center in the midst of it all was, what? A wedding feast! The wedding of the lamb of God to the people of God. And so we see through John of Patmos that at the end of all things at the fulfillment of all time there is a beginning actually, not an ending at all. When time comes to an end, when death has done its deed, when all is finished, there's a joyous wedding feast that marks a new beginning.

Tracy and I who had our 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary yesterday watched all watery-eyed that day as Haliana and Daniel walked out of the chapel and feasted and danced at the reception, and then we walked them to their car the next day as they left for their honeymoon. And we turned back into a strangely quiet, empty, still house, all the wedding festivities concluded, and watched through the window as they drove away to begin their new life together as husband and wife.

Peter Gabriel, in one of his latest songs, sings "There goes the sun, back from where it came. The young move to the center, the mom and dad the frame." And life in all its abundance and love in all its mystery continues, world without end, amen, amen.

