

Sunday, January 20, 2013
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Sermon – “Glimpses of Glory”

Both the gospel writer John and the prophet Isaiah are noted for their descriptive, poetic writing style.

Isaiah’s writing is replete with beautiful images of peace and harmony.

He, (and he is actually three or more writers), is writing first to the Israelites in exile and later to the resettled Israelites whose life is not quite as beautiful as promised.

Isaiah, however, can always be counted on for a message of hope.

For example, he promised the exiled Israelites, “God will come with might, and his reward with him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd and will gather the lambs in his arms.”

Things didn’t turn out exactly like that, but that did not deter Isaiah from offering the promise of today’s reading:

“You shall be called My Delight is in her, and your land married for the Lord delights in you.

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.”

In this text, almost at the end of Isaiah’s writing, the prophet offers an idealized version of marriage to describe the relationship that Israel will enjoy with God.

The marriage metaphor is used frequently in scripture to describe human’s relationship to God.

References to brides and bridegrooms start in Genesis, continue throughout the writings of the prophets and are found in all four New Testament gospels.

Most often the references are celebrating the joy that is experienced at the time of a wedding.

During early biblical times marriages were generally contracted at a young age and arranged by the parents.

There was usually a betrothal period after which the marriage was celebrated.

The central ritual of the marriage ceremony itself was the symbolic bringing of the bride into the groom’s house, followed by great rejoicing.

The bride wore her finest clothes, jewels, if she had them, and a veil.

The ceremony was followed by a lengthy celebration with merrymaking, singing, and feasting lasting a week or so.

Marriages and family ties were the bonds of society.

Marital faithfulness was the ideal.

The prohibition of adultery is one of the Ten Commandments and central to the moral code of the Torah.

Violation of the commandment was seen a sin against God.

It was important that marriages endure to ensure the stability of the community.

Women, outside of marriage had to be cared for and supported by a male member of their family.

Isaiah's description of God's marriage to us provides a picture different than the economic arrangement most often referenced.

If marriage was used to describe the relationship between God and Israel, the potential for love and joy (even in these arranged marriages) must have been present.

Song of Solomon is an entire book of the bible that celebrates marriage with descriptions of wonder and love.

In Jewish tradition this book is considered a religious allegory recounting God's love for Israel and the history of their relationship.

For Christians, it is interpreted as an allegory of Christ's love for the church.

The poem is often used today as a reading at weddings.

The familiar words speak of an adoring relationship:

“The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. My beloved speaks and says to me: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

The ideal of marriage was one of deep love rooted in the soul. Beauty and joy were the byproducts of these perfect unions.

Again, it is unclear whether people actually experienced this depth of love in their arranged marriages or if we are meant to be inspired by an ideal – sort of like the movies today.

In the Greco-Roman setting of early Christianity, women passed in their early teens from the household and the control of their fathers to a husband, often twice their age, such as Mary and Joseph.

Women's primary role was to bear and raise children, preferably sons.

In the New Testament, marriage is often used figuratively in connection with the Kingdom of God with Christ as the bridegroom.

Scripture often provides us with idealized or exaggerated scenarios to make a point.

These idealized descriptions of marriage remind us that the highest ideals are achievable only with God's help.

Of course everyone aspires to relationships that are rooted in love, respect and kindness.

However, just as that is often not the case in today's world, it was unlikely that it was the case in ancient times either.

The message for us is that perfection belongs only to God.

The challenge for us is to spend our earthly life trying to attain some semblance of that perfection.

Marriage works as a metaphor because it is familiar to most people.

In our gospel reading today we find Jesus attending a wedding. He is there with his disciples and his mother.

The wine runs out and his mother encourages him to do something and after some reluctance he turns massive quantities of water into fine wine.

This is one of the best examples we have of Jesus as fully human – hanging out with his friends at a wedding; and fully divine-showing compassion to the bridegroom's family by turning the water to wine.

We must be cautious when we hear this story that we take in all the subtleties – not just the miracle of water to wine and not just Jesus celebrating marriage.

This story is replete with important lessons.

First, it is the third day of Jesus' ministry.

It is notable that this first miracle happens on the third day, as the resurrection will.

The water-to-wine incident is a metaphor for the resurrected life that Jesus will experience and will offer to all.

Resurrection is not just about coming alive again.

It's about a whole new quality of life – eternal life, life of the ages, life lived in the fullness of God's Reign and God's enlivening power.

Glory is the second significant idea.

This glory is the manifestation of God through the human Jesus.

The particular glory to which John refers is “full of grace and truth”.

John is pointing us forward, by showing, in this simple act of compassion, the glory of God that will be fully revealed on the cross.

To run out of wine would have had severe consequences for the bridal couple and their family.

It was the kind of social mistake that could cause them to be ostracized for years to come.

Although much of Jesus ministry involved making the outcasts welcome, here he prevents people from becoming outcasts in the first place – which can be seen as act of compassion.

While the groom and family benefited from more and better wine, they had done nothing to deserve it.

So it is with God’s grace. It is a gift bestowed, not earned.

The final result of this first miracle is that disciples believe in Jesus.

Was it the water into wine that convinced the disciples, or the act of unselfish, unsolicited compassion?

There are those whose faith depends on signs, but there are also those whose faith is rooted in love and trust.

Just like marriage – some people need constant reassurance of their importance, their value, their worth, while other people live with a certainty of the bonds that tie them to their spouse.

All of the biblical stories provide us with a glimpse into the life of our ancestors and our God.

We are reminded that God is pure love, made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ.

We remember that Christ walked among us as a man of compassion and generosity, reaching out to those in need.

We can aspire to the highest level of compassion and love in our relationships but it is only with God’s grace that we will attain them.

It is only when we partner with God that our marriages will be worthy of praise and poetry.

Miracles happen and great marriages might be one of them.

For all the signs of God’s glory in our lives, let us give thanks and praise.

Amen.