

Friend of the Bridegroom John 3:22-36

Call: Isa 12:3-6a (NIV)

Scripture: Hos 2:16a, 19-20 (NIV)

I. Introduction

Well, it sure has been a hard week in our country hasn't it? We are in the middle of a pandemic, then an African-American man is recorded dying needlessly, and now unrest everywhere even in the Bay Area. So, what do we do in these situations? Well, a few things come to my mind. We pray. We pray as Becca did, for ourselves that we can live like Jesus, and we pray for our country and others to live like Jesus. We also recognize that we are not wrestling against flesh and blood. We are wrestling against the spiritual forces of evil and darkness. The evil one is having a field day with these events. And, we soak in scripture, and with the Holy Spirit's help, try to internalize the truths from the living Word, so that we can act according to the Word. After all, this is why we're going through John, to see who Jesus is and how he lived, so we might emulate him. He lived through chaos himself and he overcame evil with good at every step. So, we try to internalize these great truths and live them out in our lives. Today our text holds one of these great truths.

Let's pray. Father, soften our hearts this morning to receive your Word. Help us to internalize your truth so we may live it in our lives. Amen.

In today's text, we encounter John the Baptist again. In the prologue, we were introduced to John the Baptist as a witness. He was not the light, but testified to Jesus, the true light. Then when the story began, the first person we met was John the Baptist. And, John gave Jesus the famous title, "The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And, I showed this famous painting of John by Matthias Grunewald. As I'll explain later, this painting fits for today's text as well.

So, I invite you into our text this morning, beginning in chapter 3, verse 22.

II. The Context (22-24)

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized 24 (for John had not yet been put in prison). (ESV)

After the discussion with Nicodemus somewhere in Jerusalem proper, Jesus now goes out into the Judean wilderness to baptize, and John the Baptist was also there. What is interesting is that in chapter 4, our text will say that Jesus' disciples were baptizing, not Jesus (4:2). So, what is going on here? Well, it could be that John, the Gospel writer, is referring to Jesus as baptizing

with the Spirit, since he is the Spirit-baptizer, or that his disciples are doing the physical act of baptizing under the authority of Jesus, much like pastors do today.

John is baptizing in water, because the water was plentiful there at Aenon near Salim. The precise location is uncertain but the map shows the probable location. And many people are coming to get baptized.

John, the Gospel writer, also adds a parenthetical comment that this happens before John has been imprisoned (24). John, the Gospel writer, is interested in chronology, and this comment helps locate the timing of these events for the readers of the other Gospels. For example, if you know Mark's gospel, you'll know that John is imprisoned almost immediately, in chapter 1, verse 14 of his Gospel.

After setting the scene, now, we get into the story proper, verse 25.

III. The Friend of the Bridegroom (25-30)

25 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease." (ESV)

A. The Question of Purification

Unlike today's world where we do not talk about religion in public, in the first century, everyone was talking about religion. And, on this particular day, the discussion, a word that can be translated as argument, turns to purification. We had seen in the wedding at Cana purification jars, and we made the comment then that maybe John might be alluding to Jesus doing away with all the old forms of religion. In the same way, the topic occurs here in order to raise the question of where true cleansing and purification will come from moving forward.

Deep cleansings. Isn't that what we are concerned with in the middle of a pandemic? We continue to do deep cleanings in our houses and at our businesses, to remove any dirt and any hint of the virus being there. In the same way, we need deep cleansings of our hearts. As Jesus says elsewhere, it is what comes out of the heart that defiles a person. *19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. (Matt 15:19)*. It's our hearts that need to be deeply cleansed, and no amount of religion can do that, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus last week. John's disciples are arguing over this very thing. Where does true purification come from?

B. The Dangers of Competition

That argument leads them to recognize that *all* people are going to Jesus for purification.

“John, everyone is leaving our church and going to that new church down the street!” Isn’t it amazing that sibling rivalry was even a problem at the very beginning of the church.

It is at this point that John begins his final sermon of this Gospel, verse 27. And, the first thing he does is recognize the truth of what we have continued to say since the prologue. God is in control and nothing happens outside of his sovereignty. Jesus’ ministry was from above. If people are being drawn to Jesus, they are being drawn by the heavenly Father. And, if God is drawing them, we should be happy about it. In other words, there is no competition in his kingdom, no room for boasting in his kingdom and no room for jealousy in his kingdom.

This is an important point to highlight. Genuine church growth is not from human achievement. It is a divine gift. And, we need to be very careful not to allow competition to enter kingdom work. We are all on the same team. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, *“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit”* (John 3:8). Divine work is mysterious and uncontrollable.

We are not in control as much as we think we are. Sometimes we think we can put the right programs into place, have the right methods, turn all the right knobs and things will magically happen. No. Any church growth is a work of the Spirit of God. That doesn’t mean we don’t work hard and labor for excellence. But, at the end of the day, he is the one who makes it work. And, that means there is no room for competition or envy or jealousy. There is no sibling rivalry.

C. The Image of Marriage

Just like there is no rivalry at a wedding. As John continues his final sermon, he introduces the image of a wedding.

John says, “It’s like at a wedding, there is no rivalry between the bridegroom and the friend of the bridegroom,” in our language, between the groom and the best man. In the first century, the friend of the bridegroom was like the best man, except he had many more responsibilities, which we will explain in a minute. John’s point is that the friend of the bridegroom simply points toward the bridegroom the entire day of the wedding. He is simply a pointer. If there is any kind of rivalry, then it is treachery!

It is interesting that we encounter the image of a wedding again. The amount of references to weddings in these first few chapters of John is significant and worthy of comment. Jesus first entered the public scene at a wedding. You would have thought the God of the universe would have begun his ministry on the steps of the Temple, or maybe the steps of Caesar’s palace. No. He begins his ministry at a wedding. And, not long after that, we get this text of John the Baptist explaining his ministry in wedding terms. Next week, we will meet a woman at a well. Do you know what happens with women at wells in scripture? That is where they find grooms. We’ll talk more about that next week.

But, why so many references to weddings here in the early chapters of John? Well, John, the Gospel writer, probably has a few things in mind, as he normally does. First of all, he wants people to know that the God of the universe stands behind the institution of marriage. After all, God instituted marriage in his first book and culminates it in the last book with the marriage supper of the lamb. Jesus, as God with us, believes in marriage, marriage between a man and a woman. That is God's design, and John wants us to see that Jesus affirms the marriage covenant. Secondly, I think John references weddings so much early on because this is where the entire program is going. Jesus has come to invite all humanity into new relationships with him, deep and intimate relationships that mirror the marriage relationship. Paul will speak of this in Ephesians 5 when he speaks of husbands and wives, but ends the section by saying this is a great mystery, I am speaking of Christ and his church.

D. The OT References to Marriage

In our text today, John describes his ministry in marriage terms. And, his bride and bridegroom language would not be surprising to any Jew in the 1st century. Bride and bridegroom language is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Israel is the bride of God, and God is the divine bridegroom of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is wooed as a young bride by her divine Bridegroom to enter into a marriage covenant with him. God repeatedly speaks tenderly to her in order to draw her into this relationship with him, a relationship described using the image of marriage. Why marriage? Because the committed relationship between God and Israel was to be so deep, so intimate, so permanent, so sacrificial and so life-giving that only marriage language would suffice. You can see then why all of human history can be described as a divine love story. John the Baptist is picking up on this image, and, John the Gospel writer, is repeatedly using this image throughout these early chapters, so we don't miss the divine love story that we've entered into in his Gospel.

E. The Friend of the Bridegroom

John the Baptist then is drawing on all the Old Testament language, making the claim that Jesus is God, the divine bridegroom, which makes him the friend of the bridegroom.

What responsibilities would he have, then, as the friend of the bridegroom? The friend of the bridegroom was called the "shoshben," which was a very honored position, with many responsibilities. He was to send out invitations, arrange, oversee and preside over the celebration. He was also to serve as a witness and contribute financially to the festivities. (Being the father of a daughter, I think I'm going to bring back the position of the "shoshben".) But he would also assist the bride, "ensuring she was appropriately dressed and adorned" (Klink, 219). But, there was one last, all-important duty for the "shoshben", alluded to in our text. "He was to guard the bridal chamber and let no false lover in" (Barclay, 167). When it was dark, he would wait at the door until he heard the bridegroom's voice. It was only when he heard the bridegroom's voice that he opened the door to let him in. At that point, after he had finally brought the bride and groom together, he went away rejoicing! He had done his job! He did not go away sad or jealous. He did not begrudge the bridegroom. His only job was to bring the two together. And, when that happened, he willingly and joyfully faded out of the picture. He was a very important person up until that point, but then he stepped out of the spotlight

because it wasn't about him.

I have had the privilege of being the best man in a few weddings. And, I have to say that my best man speeches were pretty awful to the say the least. I tried to be funny, but I discovered being funny was not my gift. I didn't do this, but what would have happened if I would have made my speeches all about me? What if I would have stood up at the reception and talked all about me? That would have been quite awkward and completely inappropriate.

John the Baptist, as the friend of the bridegroom, had one job to do. He was to bring the bride, the church, to the groom, Jesus, and joyfully get of the way when his job was done. The marriage made in heaven was now complete. As he says, *"This joy of mine is now complete. He must increase but I must decrease"* (John 3:29-30). In other words, it's not about me!

This is John's motto, the motto he lived by: he must increase and I must decrease. On this painting, those are the words written in Latin above John's extremely long finger. He has arranged the marriage of the bride and the groom. His task is now completed and he is happy to fade out of the picture, because it's not about him.

Well, just like in last week's text, John, the Gospel Writer, now gives his interpretation of this scene beginning in verse 31.

IV. The Bride of Christ (31-36)

31 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. 33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (ESV)

A. The Introduction

John now interprets the scene. And, he once again makes it personal, inviting us to become the bride of Christ. He doesn't use the bridal language, but this is where he is inviting us. For us men, being called a bride may not be our first choice, but this is the language of Scripture.

B. The Differentiation

John begins by distinguishing Jesus' ministry from John's. As similar as Jesus' and John's ministries appeared on the surface, they were not equal. John is not from above; Jesus is. And, that's the crux of the matter. Jesus is from God, and John is from the earth. It means Jesus is above all. John repeats this phrase so we don't miss it. But, it also means that because Jesus is from above, he can bear witness to God. Out of God's great love, he has sent his son in order to, as the prologue said, *"make him known"* and here, *"bear witness about him"* (John 1:18; 3:32). And, John says he bears witness to God in three distinct ways. First, Jesus utters the very words of God. His words are God's words. Secondly, God has given Jesus the Spirit without

measure, which allows him to be the Spirit-baptizer. And, thirdly, God has given all things to Jesus, as the great Colossians hymn celebrates. All things in heaven and on earth were made by Jesus, through Jesus and for Jesus. This means Jesus has authority over all things, including you and me. And, it also means Jesus holds the future. The future is securely in *his* hands.

C. The Invitation

And, as John will do over and over again throughout his Gospel, we are invited to respond to these statements. We are invited to either reception of Jesus or rejection of Jesus. Either we receive Jesus as the one from heaven who utters the Words of God, or we reject his words. Either we receive Jesus as the one from heaven who has the unlimited measure of the Spirit, or we reject him. Either we receive Jesus as the one from heaven who has authority over all things or we reject him. Reception means we enter into a deep and committed relationship with Jesus, becoming his bride culminating in *zoe* life, eternal life. Rejection, on the other hand, leads to the wrath of God. There is no neutral ground.

I'd like to now look at reception and rejection more closely, beginning with rejection.

D. The Rejection

Just like last week, John ends this text by giving the consequences of rejecting Jesus. This is common in John. He gives both sides of the coin, both sides to the decision.

To reject Jesus is to "*not obey him,*" verse 36. This is to reject the very love of God, and to receive the wrath of God. This is the only use of "wrath" in this Gospel. Joel touched on it in his sermon two weeks ago, but how should we understand the wrath of God? This divine anger of God is commonly misunderstood, because we typically consider wrath from a human perspective. JI Packer helps us here. He says "Nobody stands under the wrath of God except those who have chosen to do so. The essence of God's action in wrath is to give men what they choose, in all its implications: nothing more, and equally nothing less... God's wrath is not the capricious, arbitrary, bad-tempered and conceited anger which pagans attribute to their gods. It is [also] not the sinful, resentful, malicious, infantile anger which we find among humans. It is a function of [God's] holiness" (Packer, 184).

Packer helps us to see that the living God is not morally neutral or morally relativistic. The living God is altogether holy, which means that his holy nature recoils against all that distorts his desires for this planet. And, his desires for this planet are for all to receive his Son who he sent out of his great love. To reject his Son and continue rejecting him is to reject and continue rejecting God's love.

But, there is hope. Hope is found on the other side of the coin: reception of his Son.

E. The Reception

What does it mean to receive Jesus? Receive is another one of those favorite words for John. Receive is set parallel to believe in our text today, in verses 33 and 36. It travels frequently with believe, as it was set parallel to believe in the prologue as well.

What is John getting at with this word? In the first century, “receive” had a wide range of meanings. Like in our time, it would have the nuance of welcoming and letting someone into your home. When a guest would come to the house, they are received, they are welcomed and let into the house. But, in the first century, receive also had larger implications than how we might think of it in the West. To receive someone was to now rearrange one’s entire schedule, even life, to now serve this new guest. But, what John is saying, is that out of God’s great love, he gives his Son, so that we will receive him into our life, and therefore, rearrange our life around him and place all of our resources toward serving him.

In our world, where we so easily separate belief and behavior, we speak of receiving Jesus, and then people go back to their old way of life? We speak of being born again with no call to a change in lifestyle? Not in the first century. You cannot receive a guest in the first century without huge implications for your schedule and your life.

I am reminded of Robert Boyd Munger’s little book called “My Heart, Christ’s Home.” It was written 70 years ago, but is still relevant today. In there, Munger imagines walking through each room of his heart with Jesus. As he welcomes Jesus into each room, Jesus shows him how to rearrange each room to serve him. Open those shades, move those chairs, remove those screens, etc. Every room gets rearranged to serve Jesus, the bridegroom.

And, we say, “Of course!” Of course each room is rearranged. After all, this is a marriage relationship defined by service. Jesus, the bridegroom, served us by lovingly going to the cross, forgiving our sins and redeeming us. We respond by rearranging our lives to love him and serve him. That’s how a marriage relationship works. In other words, it’s not about me.

And, we are back at John the Baptist’s motto, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” These are words to internalize. And, that brings me to two final implications from our text. Number one comes from this last paragraph, verse 33.

V. Final Implications

A. Walking Stamps

When we enter into this deep relationship, John says, we set our seal on the assertion that God is true. Seals or stamps were used extensively in the ancient world to certify the truth of something, kind of like a notary stamp today certifies the authenticity of a document. When we receive Jesus into our lives and rearrange our lives to serve him, we are attesting to the truth of God. We are certifying the truth of the heavenly origin of Jesus. We are attesting to the truth that the living God has been revealed in Jesus. We authenticate Jesus as the way, truth and life, when we live for him (John 14:6).

We are walking stamps! We stamp truth into our culture when we serve Jesus. To a culture which doesn’t want to acknowledge truth (otherwise they will have to change), we stamp it everywhere. Everywhere we love God and others; everywhere we serve God and others; everywhere we serve the bridegroom; we stamp truth. And, this is what our culture needs to

see right now from the church. They need to see the church stamp the truth of Jesus everywhere: to love and not hate, to actively care without judgment, to speak the truth in love both on-line and in person, not words of antagonism and discord.

Right now, I have been so encouraged by our deacon ministry. They are loving and serving people everyday. They are stamping our culture with the truth everywhere. Thank you Deacons and to all who are serving with them right now.

B. The Quest for Joy

And, lastly, the question of joy. Especially during this pandemic, where do we look for joy and contentment? What is it that will truly bring us joy? As kids, we look to good grades, athletic accomplishments, a car, a significant other, ice cream and the new iphone, etc. As adults, we look to a bigger house, a bigger car, a better job, ice cream and the new iphone. But, after each new toy comes our way, it is not long before the joy and contentment fades. And, we are left wanting more. John said, “He must increase; I must decrease.” It’s not about me. When John lived his motto, joy abounded. He says it this way, “*My joy is now complete*” (3:29). The more we live by the motto “he must increase; I must decrease,” the more joy and contentment will grow in our lives. Because it is not about me. It is not about you. It’s all about Jesus, our divine bridegroom.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, Jonathan Edwards once said, “The creation of the world seems to have been especially for this end, that the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse” (Reeves, 22). What God has joined together, let no man tear asunder, and let us do the divine dance forever and ever, beginning with this final song from James.

Benediction

May you receive the Son so that He may dwell in your hearts through faith—And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Eph. 3:17-19 NIV

And, then, go and joyfully stamp Jesus around our culture this week.

Amen.

Resources

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Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT)

Packer, J.I., *Knowing God*

Reeves, Michael, *Rejoicing in Christ*