

Preparing for the Wedding

John 14:1-3

Call: Matt 11:28-30 (NIV)

Scripture: Titus 2:11-14 (NLT)

I. Intro

Good morning! Today we are gathered here to celebrate a wedding, a sacred celebration. We are here today to say a resounding “Amen” to what God has done and is doing. For a covenant is being proclaimed today, a covenant that is the foundation for God’s holy love to be experienced and displayed. Today we get to celebrate Jesus being the great bridegroom and the church being his bride. It is literally a marriage made in heaven.

Let’s Pray.

Well, Father, we thank you for these words written so long ago. Would you now, through your Spirit, make them come alive in our lives like never before. Amen.

Review

We return to our studies in the Gospel of John today. We are gathered with the disciples in an upper room somewhere in downtown Jerusalem the night before Jesus goes to the cross. Jesus has gathered his followers for a meal and one final teaching. And, what’s the central theme for this teaching? Love. In that upper room that night, Jesus offers the words of institution for communion, revealing the love that took him to the cross. Jesus then washes his disciple’s feet, celebrating the love of service. Afterward, Jesus shares the new commandment: Love one another just as I have loved you. This is how people will know that we belong to Jesus, by our *just as Jesus* kind of love. Today, as I said, we celebrate the love of marriage.

Also, if you remember from last week, Jesus also said that he was only with his disciples for a little while longer before he will leave them. Where he was going, they could not follow, at least not yet (13:33). He was returning to the place from which he had come. He was going back to the Father. Today, he will explain more his comings and goings. So, I invite you into today’s text, John 14:1-3. Hear these words of Jesus.

II. The Blessed Hope (1-3)

1 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (ESV)

A. Do Not Be Troubled

Jesus begins here with a command: do not let your hearts be troubled. The word troubled means to have inner turmoil or inner confusion. Jesus will repeat this command at the end of this chapter, while also adding the command to not be afraid. Anxiety, fear, confusion, turmoil

– don't these words describe many in our world? Perhaps they describe you today? Are your hearts troubled this morning? If so, Jesus reveals here that he knows how you're feeling. He has just told the disciples that he was going away, and that they could not follow him yet. So, the fear of abandonment was rising up in their hearts and he knew it. They've traveled with Jesus for some 3 years, doing everything with him, following him everywhere, becoming great friends with him. And so, Jesus, the great cardiologist, wants to set his disciple's hearts at ease. Do not let your hearts be troubled, he says.

B. Trust

And what's the remedy for a an anxious, fearful and troubled heart? The rest of verse 1: Believe in God; believe also in Jesus. Trust God. Trust also in Jesus. Even though Jesus is going away, they do not have to be troubled or afraid, and neither do you and neither do I. Trust him, especially in what he is about to say in this teaching. So, for the rest of this discourse we get some of the most amazing promises in all of Scripture. And, Jesus says – trust me on this. Throw the weight of your life upon these promises that I'm about to make. And it all begins with verses 2 and 3.

C. Surface Explanation

In these verses, Jesus says that although he is planning to go away physically, he promises to come back. And his going away is purposeful. It is not haphazard or aimless. His absence is purposeful. He is going away to prepare a place for them (and us) in his father's house. Then, when everything is ready, he will return to take them (and us) to that place, so that we may be with him where he is.

These are some of the most wonderful promises in all of Scripture. In Titus, this is what Paul will call the "*blessed hope*," what we read in our scripture reading today (Titus 2:13). Jesus will go away physically to prepare a place for us. And, when it is ready, he will come back and take us to be with him.

I think these are some of the most comforting words in the midst of a pandemic? For me, these promises have sustained me these last few months of study. I have felt troubled at many times. I have felt fear. I have felt anxiety. But, in the midst of all of these struggles, Jesus is preparing a place for me, and will someday come back and take me to be with him.

D. 1st Century Jewish Ears Introduction

Now, if that was all this text meant, that would be awesome enough, wouldn't it? It would be enough to sustain us in this in-between time, between his first and second comings. But, the truth is there is much more to be heard in Jesus' words here. If we had first century Jewish ears, we would hear a whole lot more in these words.

As with the rest of John, on one level, just hearing Jesus' words on their own is wonderful enough. However, adding the historical context behind his words makes his words come alive in whole new ways, at least for me. For example, if you remember, in the first 12 chapters of John, the context of the Jewish feasts lays behind much of what Jesus said and did. Here,

Jewish marriage customs of the first century lies behind Jesus' words. When we hear these words in that context, we not only hear about Jesus' comings and goings, we also hear better the purpose of his comings and the implications for discipleship between his comings.

So, for the next few minutes, I will explain the 1st century Jewish marriage customs.

III. The Jewish Marriage Customs

A. The Jewish Betrothal Ceremony

A Jewish marriage technically began long before the wedding day. A Jewish marriage began with what was called a betrothal ceremony, or what we might call an engagement ceremony. Although the betrothal ceremony was much more formal than our engagements, because it had legal ramifications in the event the relationship fell through.

In a betrothal ceremony, a new covenant was established between the prospective bride and groom. And, here's how it worked:

1. To begin the process, the groom would leave his father's house and would travel with his best man to the bride's home.
2. The groom would then meet with the bride's father and finalize all arrangements. In particular, the groom and father of the bride would settle on a purchase price. Sorry ladies, women were bought with a price back then. As soon as this price was agreed upon, technically the marriage went into effect.
3. Next, this new covenant was sealed by drinking a cup of wine over which the betrothal blessing was spoken. So, imagine this scene. We are at the bride's father's house. The groom and father of the bride agree on a price, then exchange a cup of wine. Over this wine, the groom says a blessing which goes like this, "I go to prepare a place for you and when I have prepared it, I will come again and take you to where I am that you may be with me."
4. After the blessing is said, the groom then leaves the bride's house and returns to his father's house. Typically, he would be gone for about one year. During this time of separation, the bride prepares herself for the wedding, while the groom prepares an apartment in his father's house, where they will eventually live. Although the bride and groom did not live together or see each other during the betrothal period, they were legally and spiritually bound to each other. So binding is this betrothal covenant that if the man died during the time, the woman was considered a widow. And, to break this betrothal agreement was the same as divorce.

An example of this betrothal ceremony is of course Mary and Joseph. It is during this betrothal period that Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant with Jesus. And this is why Joseph's first response is to divorce Mary quietly. She has obviously broken the covenant. She has not been faithful. And, it takes an angel to make Joseph believe

what he wanted to believe, that Mary had not been unfaithful, that the baby growing in her had been conceived by the Holy Spirit.

5. At the end of the betrothal period, then, the groom, dressed in festive attire and accompanied by his friends, would return to the bride's home. Although the bride and family had a rough idea of when they would come, they did not know the day or the hour. Typically, the groom would arrive at night, adding to the anticipation and suspense. Upon his arrival, the shout would go up, "Here's the bridegroom, come out to meet him!" And, then, with great joy, the bride, veiled and accompanied by her maidens, would come out to join the groom and his friends.

B. The Jewish Wedding

The wedding would then begin and usually last seven days. It began with a ceremony involving the verb "take." The groom goes to the bride's house and "takes" her from her home, thus the Hebrew expression, "the man takes a wife."

IV. The Upper Room "Marriage"

A. Setting the Scene Again

Now with that imagery in place, let's go back to the upper room and reflect again on what has happened. As I said in the introduction, during dinner, the other Gospels tell us that Jesus takes bread and a cup of wine and gives it to his disciples saying, "This bread is my body for you and this cup is the new covenant in my blood." He then washes their feet. And after washing their feet, he tells them he is leaving, but they cannot follow him yet. He then says, *1 "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will **take** you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*

Do you now hear *all* that Jesus is saying in these words?

B. Jesus is the Great Bridegroom

About himself, Jesus is speaking as the great bridegroom, the bridegroom of the people of God. It's quite astonishing! It's one of the most audacious claims Jesus could have ever made! Because in the Old Testament, only God speaks this way.

- Isaiah 54:4-5: *"Fear not, for you will not be ashamed, for your Maker is your husband, whose name is the Lord of hosts."*
- Isaiah 62:5: *"...as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."*
- Hosea 2:16, 19-20: *"In that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband.' ... And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord."*

Jesus is the great bridegroom!

C. We are Jesus' Bride

Which of course means that we are his bride. His people are his bride. Jesus thinks of us as his bride. We are called his disciples. We are called citizens of his kingdom. We are called sheep of his pasture. We are called members of his body. We are called his sisters and brothers. But, we are also his bride!

1. He has made the long journey from his father's house to our house.
2. He has already finalized the arrangements with the Father. He has already paid the purchase price for us, shedding his own blood.
3. He has sealed the agreement by drinking a cup of wine, declaring this is the new covenant in my blood.
4. He has given us an engagement ring, the Holy Spirit, who is the down payment for life in his Father's house.
5. And, he says to us, "Don't be afraid! Don't be troubled! Trust me. I've gone to prepare a place for you. *In my Father's house are many rooms. And, when I am ready, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*"

What comforting words!

I love my children. I love my mother and my father. I love my mother-in-law. I sometimes love my father-in-law. I don't have grand-children yet, but if I am privileged to have them at some point, I will love them a lot, right grandparents? But, no one holds the place in my heart that my wife does. No one will ever hold the place in my heart that my wife does.

We are the bride of the Father's only-begotten Son! It's astonishing!

D. John's Preparations For Us

Now John has been preparing us for this throughout his Gospel. You realize that right?

- Where does Jesus' public ministry begin? At a wedding feast in Cana in chapter 2.
- And, how does John the Baptist, the preparer for the way of Jesus, refer to himself? As the friend of the bridegroom in chapter 3.
- And, how about the woman at the well in chapter 4? The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at a well. Now, if you know the Old Testament, you'll know what happens to women at wells in the Old Testament? They find a husband. They become wives.
 - Abraham's servant finds a wife for Isaac at a well.
 - Jacob finds a wife at a well.
 - Moses finds a wife at a well.
 - In John chapter 4, Jesus meets a woman at a well. Through their conversation, we find out a lot about this woman, especially that she doesn't currently have a husband. Well, now she does! The Samaritan woman at the well becomes one of the first to be Jesus' bride.

John's been preparing us for this wonderful truth throughout his entire Gospel, that we are the bride of Christ.

So what are some of the implications of this image for us today? I have five.

V. Implications

A. The Intimacy

First of all, the bride imagery speaks to the deep intimacy we have with Jesus. Indeed, scripture affirms throughout that marriage is the closest link where humans are joined together. This is Paul's argument in Ephesians 5 where Paul returns to Gen 2:24 as the basis for marriage, *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"* (Eph 5:31). In the next verse, Paul then explains that this intimate link provides the model for the depth of intimacy experienced between *"Christ and the church"* (Eph 5:32). Paul completes his argument by calling this intimacy "'great' because it is so profound and significant" (Arnold, 397). Jesus desires a deep intimacy with him.

B. The Security

Secondly, the bride imagery speaks to the deep sense of security we have with Jesus. For the bridegroom has sealed this marriage certificate in his blood. He is committed to us "for better or for worse, in sickness or in health, as long as we both shall live." And we're going to live with him for a long time! This means that when the worst comes out in me, I don't need to fear losing him! He's already seen the worst in me! He saw it when he proposed, and he still proposed! *"While we were sinners, he died for us"* (Rom 5:8). He's not going to be surprised with any wrinkles in me, and I have a lot of wrinkles. This means he will never discover something in me or you that will make him want to cancel the covenant. I will never hear Jesus say, "Well, Shawn, if I had known that about you, I would never had proposed." He will never say that to any of us. He's the great lover! He chose us just as we are and will stay with us for better or for worst.

C. The Motivation

Thirdly, since we are his bride, we have great motivation to remain loyal to him! We don't want to be fooling around with other lords and other lovers. His great love keeps calling us to exclusive devotion to him. His call is grounded, at least in part, in the reality that every other lord, every other lover, will let us down. But his call is also grounded in the fact that he wants exclusive devotion to him. So, he pursues us, he pursues us in countless ways. For one thing, he pursues us through all the love letters he's written to us. He pursues us through his loving prayers for us, especially the prayer coming up in chapter 17. He pursues us in the act of communion as we remember his sacrifice. And on and on it goes. So, when he comes, he doesn't want to find us in another lover's bed. He calls us to loyalty.

D. The Clarity

Fourthly, the bride imagery helps clarify our path of discipleship. Living out of this image helps us see the importance of creating space in our lives for him. As his bride, we'll do whatever it takes to stay in love and to grow in intimacy with him. When I had first fallen in love with Suzanne, I was working as a satellite engineer, putting in long hours. I was working 12 hour shifts, two weekends a month, and yet, I somehow always had time for her. We did long walks,

long conversations, long dinners. I somehow had lots and lots of time for her! So, reflecting on this image clarifies our path of discipleship as his bride.

E. The Longing

And, finally, keeping this image in mind will keep us alive in longing for his second coming. Because when you are in love, you long for the presence of the beloved. After all we are made for eternity. Sometimes we forget that, that eternity has been placed in our hearts.

I read an article recently called “Two Minutes to Eternity” which articulates well the meaning of life. It was written by a father who had two children who died very young. One of them, named Toby, only lived two minutes. And after this father went through the grieving and sorrow and darkness, he wrote this article. And, he asks the question, “Why did God make Toby to live two minutes?” And, it opens up the question, “Why did God make anyone to live however long we live?” Why did he make me to live 50 years? Why did he make you to live however many days you’re going to live? Why did he make any of us to live as long as we are to live? At the end of the article, this grieving father arrives at his answer, and it’s not a cheap answer right, because this man and his wife suffered terribly. His answer is this: God didn’t make any of us to live two minutes or 50 years or 80 years. God created Toby and us, every one of us, to live for eternity. And, deep down, every part of our being knows it. We were made for eternity. Eternity has been placed in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:9) (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1994/may-16/minuteseternity.html>).

And, so, we long for his second coming when he will take us to be with him where he is. And we’ll participate in the wedding feast of the lamb. In Revelation 19, John speaks of the bride beautifully arrayed in her wedding garments being invited to a great feast with Jesus, the great bridegroom. This is what is in store for those who trust him and his promises. So, when we keep the bride image in mind, we stoke our longing for his return and our presence with him forever. Someone has said, “Those who love him best, long for him most.”

VI. Conclusion

Don’t let your heart be troubled. Don’t be afraid, Jesus says, “I’ve gone to prepare a place for you. *In my Father’s house are many rooms. And, when I am ready, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also*” forever and ever.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Benediction

Now receive this Benediction from God through Isaiah the prophet and John the evangelist (Isa 41:10, John 14:1-3):

Don't be troubled! Don't be afraid!

for I am with you;

I am your great bridegroom.

I will strengthen you,

I will help you,

And I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Though I have gone away physically,

I will come back and take you to be with me where I am.

That's a promise. You can trust me.

Go in peace.

Resources

Arnold, Clinton, *Ephesians (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, *John: The NIV Application Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John (Regent College Course)*