

This morning is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, the season in which we look back at Jesus' first coming over 2000 years ago and look ahead to his second coming, his final return to judge the world and put an end to sin and evil and death and bring heaven and earth together forever in the new heavens and new earth, themes we looked at over the past three weeks. We are also finishing this morning the Old Testament book of Isaiah, a prophet sent by God to Judah, the southern part of Israel, in the 8th and 7th century BC. This morning, I want to focus on the heart of Isaiah, the second coming, of Christmas, and the Bible.

Remember that Isaiah prophesied to Judah because they had broken the covenant that God made with them at Mt. Sinai. They were guilty of injustice, idolatry, empty worship, and trusting in other nations for their help and protection instead of trusting in God. But this is not just breaking the terms of a contract; a covenant carries with it intimacy, commitment, devotion. **Like a marriage covenant that is broken by adultery, our sin is not just a cold breach of contract, but a heartbreaking betrayal of a sacred relationship.** This is why you hear language like this in Isaiah:

Isaiah 1:21 - See how the faithful city has become a prostitute! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her— but now murderers!

And you hear similar language about Israel in the other prophets:

Jeremiah 3:1 - "If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers— would you now return to me?" declares the Lord.

Hosea 1:2 - When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord."

Ezekiel 16:32–33 – "You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband! ³³ All prostitutes receive gifts, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors."

Over and over, God likens Israel's rebellious breaking of the covenant to marital infidelity, and their trusting in other gods and nations as giving themselves in prostitution to other lovers. Sin and rebellion is not just about breaking a contract, breaking a rule, but about breaking a love relationship, breaking the heart of God. But the good news is that judgment and separation is not the end of this love story:

Isaiah 54:5–8 - For your Maker is your husband— the Lord Almighty is his name— the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. ⁶ The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God. ⁷ “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. ⁸ In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord your Redeemer.

Isaiah 62:1–5 - For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, till her vindication shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. ² The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. ³ You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord’s hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴ No longer will they call you Deserted, or **name your land Desolate**. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. ⁵ As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

God will restore and redeem His people, bringing them back to Himself. Not only because He is a forgiving God, but because of His Hesed – His lovingkindness, his covenantal love for them. This is the heart of God in Isaiah, and the heart of God in Christmas and in His second coming and throughout the Bible: the heart of a God who loves us and wants us to have life to the fullest, and know that this eternal life is only found in a relationship of love, intimacy, and commitment with Him. Consider the culmination of all things in Revelation 19 & 21:

Revelation 19:6–9 - Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. ⁷ Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.) ⁹ Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”

Revelation 21:2–10 - I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now

among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things **has passed away.**” ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸ But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, **the sexually immoral,** those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” ⁹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

In the end, when Christ returns and judges and destroys all evil and we are with Him in the new heavens and the new earth, our relationship, our coming together with Him, is described by using wedding imagery. It is the wedding of the Lamb, and the bride has made herself ready. **The people of God are described collectively** (not individually) as the bride of Christ, and on the last day, as we come into eternity, the occasion is described as a wedding with a wedding feast. What does this all mean?

I want to take you through the Bible to find clues as to what this all means.

1) Earthly marriage is temporary, a sign pointing to a greater reality

The first clue to what it means comes from Matthew 22. In this chapter, a group of religious leaders called the Sadducees, who did not believe in life after death, ask Jesus a question in hopes of exposing how ridiculous views on the afterlife are:

Matthew 22:24–28 - “Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. ²⁶ The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. ²⁷ Finally, the woman died. ²⁸ Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?”

Interesting question, which I'm sure people have thought of. **If I've been married a couple of times, how awkward is that going to be in heaven?** Am I going to be a polygamist in heaven? **And if heaven contains all good things, will there be sex in heaven?** Let's look at how Jesus responds to the Sadducees:

Matthew 22:29-33 - Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. ³⁰ At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ³¹ But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." ³³ When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

Notice how Jesus responds. In heaven, there will be no marriage. There will be no sex. They will not be necessary. **Jesus responds by saying that if you think there is marriage in heaven, you don't understand the Scriptures or the power of God – you don't realize that there is something greater in store.** Maybe some of you are familiar with the Mormon teaching about how we are married for all eternity. Jesus exposes that to be a false teaching. If you are married, you and your wife will no longer be husband and wife in heaven; the long-lost reunion with your departed spouse that is so popular in culture may not be exactly as you envision in your head when you arrive in heaven. Not that you won't be reunited, but Jesus is saying that **the joy of marital oneness that you experience on earth will be nothing compared to what you will be experiencing in eternity, in the presence of God.** That's worth considering for a second. **As great as marriage, companionship, sex, and raising children can be on earth, Jesus says that you won't even be thinking about those things once you are in the presence of God, because there's something there that will be so much greater than even the best married life here on earth.**

CS Lewis put it this way, when asked about sex in heaven: "I think our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time. On receiving the answer, "No," he might regard absence of chocolates as the chief characteristic of sexuality. In vain would you tell him that the reason why lovers in their carnal raptures don't bother about chocolates is that they have **something better to think of.** The boy knows chocolate; he does not know the positive thing that excludes it. We are in the same position. We know the sexual life; we do not know, except in glimpses, the other thing which, in Heaven, will leave no room for it."

Our first clue about why the Bible uses wedding imagery to explain heaven is this: **In heaven, we will no longer be married or have sex, because both of those are signs pointing to a greater reality, and once we have that reality, we no longer need the signs.** So what is Christian marriage, and what is it a picture of? What is it a window into? **What is the greater reality to which the sign of Christian marriage is suppose to point?**

2) Christian marriage is meant to be a sign pointing to Christ's relationship with His people

The second clue is found in Ephesians 5:21-33:

Ephesians 5:21–33 - Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should **submit to their husbands in everything**. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. **He who loves his wife loves himself**. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Look at how many times Paul compares the relationship between the husband and wife to the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church. Apparently to Paul, a marriage is more than just a coming together of a man and wife. In some mystical way, marriage is supposed to be an earthly picture of God's love for his people. In the ideal marriage, the way a husband and wife complement each other and relate to each other should be a witness to the world about God's love for his people and His people's love for Him. And of course we do this imperfectly, but the primary purpose of marriage is made clear here: it is not primarily about romance, or friendship, or having children, as important as all of those things are.

It is primarily concerned with providing an image to the world of the relationship between Jesus and His people through the way we love and relate to each other.

3) In the new heavens and the new earth, we will have the love, intimacy, joy, and security we have longed for in earthly marriage

On that final day, when we are united with Jesus, in the presence of our God, all of our earthly longings will be fulfilled perfectly forever in Him. This is why there is so much language about weddings, brides and grooms throughout the Bible, and especially in Jesus' teaching, when alluding to God's love for us. Let me give you a little background on marriage in Jesus' day, because I think it will shed more light on what I'm saying. In Jesus' time, **families often lived in clusters of buildings** which were built around a central courtyard, and immediate and extended families all lived together. When a son was old enough to get married, **he and his family would find a girl that he was interested in marrying**. Remember that there was a bride price, a dowry, that would be paid in exchange for the young woman's hand in marriage (remember also that the girls were usually about 13 or 14). If the fathers agreed on the terms of the marriage, there would be a celebration to announce their engagement. At this celebration, **the groom would offer the young girl a cup of wine to drink as a proposal to marriage, symbolizing that he wanted to make a covenant with her and that he'd be willing to give his life for her**. Even though the parents had agreed on the terms, the young woman still had the right to refuse his offer of marriage by not drinking the wine. But if she wanted to accept, then she would drink the wine. If she drank the wine, then the groom would give a speech about their future together. And then the bridegroom would go back home and build an addition onto the family home. The father would then inspect the home, looking to see if it properly honors his future bride. And when his father declared that the building was complete and done well, then he could marry his wife and bring her home.

Does this sound familiar? Listen to what Jesus says to his disciples in John 14:1-6:

John 14:1-6 - "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ **You know the way to the place where I am going.**" ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Once the bridegroom had the Father's okay, he would gather his friends and head out to find his bride-to-be. Remember that she has been home in her family's insula, preparing herself for the bridegroom's return, which will happen whenever he finishes preparing a place for them to live. **The bride-to-be, in order to let the bridegroom know where to find her, would fill a lamp with oil and set it in her window every night**, so that when he comes, he would know which room in the insula is hers. And so the bridegroom would come to the bride's town and blow the shofar or trumpet to let the bride know that her wedding day had come. He would find look for the oil lamp, find his bride, and they would gather their friends and family and process back to his house, where they would consummate the marriage and then begin the weeklong celebration.

Maybe you're already hearing some of the allusions to the way Jesus talks about His people and specifically His second coming. Remember the speech that the bridegroom gives to the bride-to-be about their future together? The typical speech goes something like this: *"My father's house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare and place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."*

How beautiful is that? Jesus is echoing what was communicated in the Old Testament prophets, and what will be echoed by Paul. He is using the imagery of marriage and a wedding in order to communicate to his followers the depth of God's love and commitment for his people. Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them in heaven, where the family of God will live with the eternal Father while they await the final resurrection and the new heavens and new earth. And He tells them that He will come back for us, to take us away to be with Him forever. Isn't that amazing? And I think that understanding Jewish weddings of Jesus' day adds more understanding to other passages about his Second Coming as well, such as **Matthew 25:1-13**, the parable of the ten virgins who took their lamps to wait for the bridegroom, **Matthew 24:36**, where Jesus says that only the Father knows the timing of the Second Coming, just as only the earthly father would know when the new rooms would be ready, and the references to the trumpet signaling the second coming in **1 Corinthians 15:52** and **1 Thessalonians 4:16**.

Why is there so much wedding language when heaven is discussed? Think about it this way: **what language would you use to describe the love, the intimacy, the joy,**

the security, the celebration found in an eternal relationship with God? Wedding language is the best language we have on earth to communicate the depth of love, commitment, joy, security, and ecstasy that is found in a relationship with God, both now and eternally. At the end of time, the writer of Revelation describes eternity as a wedding, the coming together of the bridegroom, Jesus, and his bride, the church. **Out of all the possible imagery that could have been used to describe heaven, God chose a wedding, the beginning of an eternal union.** By using this language, the writer of Revelation is communicating that eternity will be the perfect union between God and his people, where we enter into His eternal love, security, and joy forever. Our time in the new heavens and new earth are going to be one long celebration of this love and union.

That is the heart of the second coming, the heart of Christmas, the heart of Advent, the heart of Isaiah, and the heart of the Bible. The lover of our souls uniting with us forever, not in some cheap, graphic sense but in the truest sense. We will finally have the love, the intimacy, the joy, and the security we have longed for.

What does this mean for us today?

1) Marriage is not the ultimate answer to your longing for love

And your spouse, ex-spouse, or spouse to be is not the ultimate answer to your longing for companionship, security, love, joy, and ecstasy. Your marriage, your desire for marriage, or your lack of a marriage, is a sign pointing to the greater reality of a relationship with Christ, that you can begin to have now and will continue for all eternity. Do not idolize your spouse or marriage – our relationship with Christ is what completes us. Your spouse can not be your salvation, your strength. In fact, the Bible is very high on singlehood. Consider how Jonathan Edwards put this truth:

“God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.”

2) Christian marriage is meant to be a witness to the world

Our imperfect earthly marriages are supposed to be a window that allows people to see God's deep love for his people. Marriage is not primarily about happiness or raising kids, but about giving the world a picture of Christ's love for the church. When a bride and groom come together in marriage, it is a picture of what will happen in eternity, when we enter into a perfect union of love and bliss. Weddings are supposed to bring us hope, the hope of what is possible, how love can conquer fear and loneliness and past hurt. Yes, there are Biblical reasons to get divorced. But if you are a Christian in a marriage to another Christian, then fight with all you can for the health and permanence of that marriage, because it is not primarily about your happiness but about your witness to the world of the love of Christ.

But while our imperfect marriages rarely do that completely, one day we will finally experience a love that will drive out all fear, eradicate all loneliness, and wipe away every tear from our eyes. We will not need marriage in heaven, because in eternity, we will have the real thing. Practice forgiveness and grace, and in doing so you will give the world a glimpse of God's love for us.

3) Thirdly, purify yourself like a bride for her husband

Think about his appearing as a wedding. How long does it take you to get ready on a Saturday? For work? For church? For your wedding? Why? We prepare because the day is so important, and we want to look spotless for our spouse. John writes in **1 John 3:2-3** - Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³ All who has this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Purify yourself for that day. Get to know Him now, and prepare yourself to be joined to your groom. Only have eyes for Him.

4) The Christian faith is not a religion, but is about a deep, intimate relationship with God.

The end of all things is like a wedding – the inauguration of the most intimate of relationships. Everything you've been looking for in another human being is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. And the one thing that can't be found there – sex & marriage – will pale in comparison to the intimacy and ecstasy of being with Him for all eternity. Christmas is about our faithful and loving God breaking into history to rescue us and bring us back to Himself, that we might love, worship, and enjoy Him forever.

John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Give your heart to Him this morning, whether it is for the first or one hundred and first time.

Let me close with the words of JI Packer:

JI Packer – “Hearts on earth may say in the course of a joyful experience, ‘I don’t want this ever to end.’ But invariably it does. The hearts of those in heaven say, “I want this to go on forever.” And it will. There is no better news than this.”