

2 December 2009
Advent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Royal Wedding: The Betrothal”

Text: Genesis 3:14-15; Luke 1:26-35; Ephesians 5:25-32

The Scriptures use the image of a Bridegroom and bride to give us a picture of the relationship of God in Christ to us, the church. That’s remarkable. To think that God wants that kind of relationship with us. So intimate, so close, so personal. The union of a man and a woman as one flesh is as close and united as two persons can be, and this is how God wants to be with you and me. He doesn’t want to be a God far away, or unapproachable, or unknowable, but a God who promises to be with us *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish*, in a union that not even death can part. That’s remarkable, to have such a God.

It’s even more remarkable when you consider *when* God made this promise to us, when He *betrothed* us. For that’s how marriages start - with an engagement, a betrothal, a promise made by a man and a woman that soon we will be married. Betrothals used to be much more serious matters than engagements are today. Today, it seems as if engagements are more like stating a wish than making a promise. But it was not always so. Until modern times, betrothals were as legally binding as marriage. It was truly a promise made, which the marriage completed.

So when did God make such a promise to us? You heard it again tonight - it was right after Adam and Eve fell into sin; right after they turned their backs to God; right after they decided the word of satan was more trustworthy than the Word of God; right after they became dirty, rotten, smelly, stinkin’ flesh. It was when Adam and Eve were at their most undesirable, that God *pledged them His faithfulness*. He did not reject them, but promised that He was with them, on their side. He promised to undo what they had done; namely, that one of the descendants of Eve - ***the offspring of the woman*** - would come and bruise satan’s head. And so, in love, God betroths Himself not to a beautiful, pure bride, but to a sinful, impure bride.

Now, the words of God’s promise here are important, and help us see the marriage imagery here. For here, God calls the one who would come and bruise satan’s head ***her offspring***. Hers, and hers alone. There is no mention of “his” offspring here. His mother would be a woman, but he would have no earthly father. A situation to which one would ask: *How can this be?* Which was Mary’s very question when the angel Gabriel came to her and told her that she was going to be a mother. How could **she** be a mother when there was no **he**? And Gabriel answers: God will be

his Father. He will be both the Son of God and a son of man. God and man united **in one flesh**.

And so God's promise in the Garden to Adam and Eve really was a betrothal - a promise that soon there would be a marriage, a uniting. That the division between God and man, caused by sin, would be overcome, and God and man would be one. And this promise was fulfilled at Christmas, when in Jesus, God and man become one flesh, and when the one flesh God-man bruises the serpent's head by ascending the cross to atone for the sin of the world. That in Him, the sin that separates may separate no more. That in Him, we be reconciled to God in the forgiveness of our sins.

And no bridesmaid are you in all this - for to you also God has pledged His faithfulness and joined you to Himself. Where? When? Well, when just like Adam and Eve, you too were at your most undesirable; when you were at your dirty, rotten, smelly, stinkin'est moment - God did not reject you, He baptized you. He washed you in water and the Word. For to do so, Paul told us tonight in Ephesians, is why Christ has come. For you were foul and wretched and dead in your trespasses and sin, until your Saviour took you to Himself and made you one with Him. One flesh, that your sins be forgiven. One flesh, that the separation between you and God be overcome. One flesh, that you be His in a union that death can never end. For joined to Him, all that is His is now yours. His life, His salvation, His victory over sin, death, and the devil - all are yours in Him.

For as a husband and wife give themselves completely to one another, so has your Saviour given Himself completely to you. Even though you had nothing to give to Him. St. Paul calls that a mystery. And indeed it is.

But what Christ has also done is unite us to each other. For Jesus is no polygamist! We are not a whole bunch of brides, but one bride, the church. And so united in Christ, we are also united to one another, to give ourselves completely to one another. And reconciled to Christ, we are reconciled to one another, to forgive one another. That there be no yours and mine, nor aloneness in joy or in sorrow, but all that's His be ours, as we live as His bride in this place.

And when we fail to live as His bride - when we roll around in the slime pit of sin, when selfishness gets the better of us, when we follow in the footsteps of our first parents and consider the words of Satan and the world more trustworthy than the Word of God - what then? Divorce? No. Though we be unfaithful, our Bridegroom remains faithful. He will not deny us the forgiveness we need, and rejoices to welcome us back. So great, so remarkable His love. That *what God has joined together, let no man separate*. (Matt 19:6)

And so to this Royal Wedding, you have not only been invited, you are the guest of honor. The Bride, in royal splendor. And do not let the fact that you, me, or our church, do not look very splendid fool you. Things are not what they appear - things are what God calls them. And to you He has given His promise and has betrothed you to Himself. What we are will one day be made known (1 John 3:2). Until then, we cling to His promise, living by faith, not by sight. Waiting and preparing for the Wedding Feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which will have no end.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.