

Isaiah 62:1-5
John 2:1-11
January 19, 2025

Hephzibah

Last week we talked about one of the themes in the bible, passing through the waters; as in the waters of the flood, or through the sea in the Exodus from Egypt, or through the Jordan River itself at the entrance into the Promised Land; as in Baptism. These images are powerful and lasting and offer opportunities even for people living in modern times to better understand the meaning of their lives.

It does not always seem so. Many of us, the people of the industrial age, who live in the time of the internal combustion engine, in the age of concrete and steel that builds bridges and great ships that can make crossing oceans and rivers much easier, in the age of flight, of electricity, which only begins with the incandescent light bulb and goes all the way through binary code to the invention of computers and on to the internet and artificial intelligence; have a hard time understanding how the lives of people from simpler times before all this happened, can still have something to teach us (wasn't that a great sentence? It may not be the best use of language either in written or spoken form, but the Apostle Paul would be proud).

But passing through the waters isn't the only image in the bible that can help us understand better the meaning of our lives under God. One of the other ideas is marriage, which, in spite of all the difficulties

of the modern age, and all the changes, still resonates.

So here in the time after the Epiphany, when the journey of the Magi and the baptism of Jesus in the waters of the Jordan have been front and center, we come also to the other incident at the beginning of the story of Jesus: the Wedding at Cana in Galilee. We are told that at the bequest of his mother, in order to save the honor of a certain wedding host, Jesus turned water into wine at the reception, so the party could continue.

Down through the centuries, this narrative, which is called a, "sign," and is the first of the signs in the Gospel of John, has been interpreted as an affirmation of marriage. This application applies not only to the institution of marriage as a social or economic pillar of a society or the anchor of the family, but there is a romantic side, the affirmation of the love between two people in the most intimate relationship we know.

But that is not the extent of the marriage theme, and probably not even the main point of it. In the Old Testament, especially in the prophet Hosea, though also in other places, the nation of Israel is thought of as God's bride, and in the New Testament, the church itself is the bride of Christ. The human institution of marriage, so central to the common life of people in every civilization, is used as an illustration of the relationship between God and human beings.

And all of these years later, even after all the dynamic changes that characterize the lives of the world's people, we still get married, and even baptists who had an historical aversion to dancing, can sometimes still be found dancing at weddings. Maybe even a little champagne?

There are parables about the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and extravagant hosts who invite the world in, and a bridegroom who shows up in the middle of the night, and not an indifferent one or one who has been forced into the marriage, but there is passion. Even the supreme sacrifice of Jesus is called, "the Passion."

Paul, who in addition to writing long sentences very often manages to have something to say about these things, gives the following instruction in the Letter to the Ephesians. Listen to the references to the higher theological idea, not merely the earthly one;

"21 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."

It is not the intent of this sermon to even comment on the biblical view of marriage, or in any way to solve that riddle, except to say, "love each other." Times have changed. The context of our lives have changed the way in which people organize their relationships with each other. Marriage has changed. Both the place and roles of women and men have changed. No matter what people say about their marriages, few fail to reflect all the changes.

But what hasn't changed is the relationship between God and human beings, between Christ and the church. The biblical use of marriage as a metaphor of that relationship has meaning, for it tells of God's unconditional love for each of us. But there is still another way of saying it.

You will notice the inspiring, or maybe imposing title of this message. I am always looking for thought provoking titles and failing to find any. "Hephzibah."

This word is left untranslated in this text. We not only struggle with its pronunciation but with its meaning. It shows up in the prophet Isaiah and in the poetry of the prophet's message, gives its own meaning. Not only does God love, but *delights*. "I take delight in her," is as close as we can come to its meaning.

Love, especially divine love, has a definite, almost desperate ring to it. It suggests a concern for another, so devoted and strong that it is almost painful, and can lead to the willingness to die a sacrificial death for another. Jesus puts it this way,

"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend."

There is a certain pathos, a suffering in which the one who loves is in actual pain for the one they love. But, "delight," is different.

There is an implied joy in the presence of another, a voluntary and spontaneous desire to be with someone. It involves a choice that is not mandatory but that nonetheless can't be helped. It goes beyond duty, holds no consequence that is not gladly accepted. There is no need of a reward.

Each of us has had experiences of family relationships or friendships like that. The old worn out phrase, "wild horses couldn't keep me away," is an attempt to get at the heart of it. Among mortals, marriage isn't always like this, but we hope it will be, and sometimes it gets close enough to celebrate. But with God, and the

relationship with the people, who are called Church . . . it does. The kind and level of acceptance and the willingness to sacrifice for someone is off the charts . . . a delight.

Since this is God's self-proclaimed disposition about people, can it not also be our disposition towards God? Not, must it; can it? Are we free enough to love God in the manner that we have been loved? And with such delight?

Thus we are drawn from a run-of-the-mill wedding reception somewhere in Galilee 2,000 years ago where the host ran out of wine, and Jesus at the bequest of his mother who was a friend of the host, turned several jars of water into wine . . .

into the throne room of the heavenly court, and we are told of God's sacrificial love, we are told of God's delight in us. Hephzibah.

And we can sink a little deeper into the insight of what Jesus called the greatest commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind." Not as a duty, but a delight.

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