

The Hope of Jesus' Return

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Jan. 2, 2022

As followers of Jesus today, just as Jesus' first disciples, we are called to follow Jesus in the absence of His physical presence. It is for this time that Jesus began to prepare His first disciples – and us – on the night before He gave His life on the Cross. We live so much of our lives by the clock, yet there is so much living to be found in expecting the fulfillment of God's time.

In the coming weeks we are going to consider the main message of the book of Revelation. But before we do so I want us to look at how Jesus prepares us for and wants us to think about His return.

Jesus and His disciples were settling around a large wooden dining table, in an upper room apartment somewhere in downtown Jerusalem. Because they had been looking forward to the meal for sometime, emotions were probably running very deep that evening. Indeed, in light of the kinds of things Jesus had recently been saying, feelings were more acute than ever before. Jesus began the evening by saying **"I have earnestly desired"** – an intense verb He uses, denoting deep longing; **"I have earnestly desire to eat this meal with you before I suffer,"** suffer? Jesus? Why? How? **"I have earnestly desire to eat this meal with you, for I say to you, I shall never eat it again until it is fulfilled – the Kingdom of God"** Luke 22:16

Jesus then took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it, and handed it to them saying, **"Take, eat; this is My Body given to you; do this in remembrance of Me"**.

Then came the great surprise, the shock. He told them that very soon He would be leaving them in a physical sense. And that where He was going they could not follow at least not yet. He was returning to the place from which He had come. He was "going home," back to the Father.

Jesus then spends the rest of the evening preparing His disciples – and us end to go on living in the absence of His physical presence.

Jesus says, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my fathers house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you, 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."**

His words are clear. Although Jesus goes away, He promises to come back. And He's going away has a purpose: to prepare a place for us, in His Father's house. When everything is set, He will return to take us to that place so that we might be with Him! A wonderful promise! What the apostle Paul calls **"the blessed hope"**. Titus 2:6
Jesus physical absence is not forever. He is coming back to us. And His physical absence has a purpose of preparing a place.

Now, if that was all we heard in His words, it would be enough to sustain us in this time between His first and second coming. But the fact is, that is not all there is to hear in His words. When we know something of the historical-religious context in which Jesus spoke His words – rich enough without knowing the context – become even richer.

You see the words Jesus spoke at the tender moment during the last supper; echo words used in the Jewish marriage customs of the first century. When we understand something of those customs, we hear Jesus speaking not only of a second coming; but also of the purpose of His first coming, and the consequences for discipleship now. And we gain a new perspective on the meaning and purpose of new covenant in holy communion.

A Jewish marriage technically began long before the wedding day. It began with a so-called "betrothal ceremony" in which a covenant was established; a new covenant was established. Here's how it worked. The prospective groom would leave his father's house, and travel, accompanied by his best man, to this prospective bride's house. There the groom would finalize arrangements with the bride's father in specific settling on the "purchase price". In that time a woman was "bought with a price". I know that's offensive in our time and culture. Sorry.

Then as soon as the groom paid the "purchase price", the marriage technically went into affect. The man and woman are legally husband and wife. She is declared "consecrated" to him, "set apart" exclusively for him. This covenant was then sealed by drinking a cup of wine over which a betrothal benediction was pronounced. After the conclusion of the ceremony, the groom would leave the brides home and return to his fathers house. He would be gone for roughly 12 months. During this time of separation the bride would prepare herself for the wedding. And during this time of separation the groom would prepare an apartment in his father's house. Does this sound like what Jesus did and said? He's going to His Father's house and going to return for us.

Now although the bride and groom did not live together nor see each other during the whole betrothal period – they were, nevertheless, legally and spiritually bound to each other. So "binding" was the betrothal agreement - the covenant - that if the man dies during the twelve months, then the woman was considered a widow. To break the betrothal agreement was the same as divorce.

At the end of the betrothal period, the bride groom, dressed in festive attire, and accompanied by his friends would make his way back to the brides home. Although everyone had a rough idea of when the groom would come, they did not know the exact day or hour. Usually the groom would arrive at night, adding an element of surprise. His arrival would be preceded by a shout:

"Here's the bride groom! Come out to meet him."
 Matthew 25:6. Then with great joy the bride veiled and accompanied by her maiden, would come out to join the groom and his attendants. And then the wedding celebration would start.

This wedding itself begins with the ceremonial word 'take'. The groom 'takes' the bride from her home. Thus the Hebrew expression "take a bride". Numbers 12:1, First Chronicles 2:21.

OK. Now, go back to that tender moment, that Thursday evening in the Upper Room. Jesus takes a cup of wine, gives it to His disciples and says, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood"**. He then tells them He was leaving. Where he was going they could not come... yet! John 13:36. And then He says,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my fathers house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you, 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."

Do you hear what Jesus is saying about Himself? He thinks of Himself as the Bridegroom – the Lover – of the People of God! It is one of the most audacious claims Jesus could ever make. For in the Old Testament only the Living God, Yahweh, the Holy One, speaks this way.

Isaiah 54:4-5, **"Do not be afraid... for your Maker is your Husband."**

Hosea 2 - Speaking of God's people, God says, **"And I will be betroth you to me forever... And I will betroth you to me in faithfulness then you will know that I am Yahweh."**

In those tender moments in the Upper Room, Jesus reveals Who He thinks is the Bridegroom and who He thinks we are in relationship with Him! He thinks of us as His Bride!

Yes, we are His disciples – gladly so! Yes, we are citizens of His Kingdom – gratefully so! Yes, we are the sheep of His pasture. Gladly! Yes, we are members of His Body. Yes, we are His sisters and brothers and we are included in the inner life of the Trinity. And we are also His Bride!

He has made the long journey from His Father's house to our home. He has come to woo us to Himself. He has come for the betrothal service. He has paid "the purchase price" for us - shedding His own blood. He has sealed the agreement by drinking a cup of wine, declaring, **"This cup is the new covenant in My blood."** He has given us an engagement ring: the Holy Spirit who is the down payment, the first installment on life in the Father's house. [2 Cor. 1:21, Eph. 1:13-14].

He says to us, **"Do not be afraid. I have gone to my fathers house to prepare a place for you. When I am ready, I will come**

back [literally – "I am coming back" – present tense, already in process] I will take you to myself that where I am you may be also".

That Jesus chooses us to be His disciples is wonderful enough. Is it not? That He chooses us to be members of His Body... Glory! That He chooses us to be a sister or brother... Glory! But that He chooses us to be His Bride?

We? The Bride of the Father's only-begotten son? Can it really be? Yes, it can. It is. We are.

And the apostle John - the author of the Gospel of John - has actually prepared us for this amazing fact in the way he composes his chapters. In John 2, Jesus begins His public ministry - where? At a wedding in Cana of Galilee, where He turned water into wine. Just coincidence? Or a signal of why He has come into the world? In John 3, another John, John the Baptist, the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus, speaks of himself as what? As **"the friend of the Bridegroom"**. As John the Baptist sees people flocking to Jesus he says, **"He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice"** (John 3:29). John the Baptist sees crowds flocking to Jesus and rejoices that the Bridegroom is gathering His Bride to Himself.

Then John 4, the story of the woman at the well. If you know the larger Biblical story, you know that in the O.T.

there are a number of stories of women at wells. What happens to these women? All of those women at the well stories? They are being chosen as someone's wife. Abraham's servant finds a wife for Isaac at a well - Rebecca. Jacob finds a wife at a well - Rachel. Moses finds a wife at a well. In John 4, Jesus meets a woman at a well. So is she going to get a husband? He asks her to go get her husband. **"I have no husband,"** she says. Now she does! Is not the Samaritan woman at the well the first of these who the Father is calling to be His Son's Bride?

"The Churches one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is His new creation by water and the Word. From heaven He cam and sought her to be His Holy Bride."

Living in the wonder of Jesus' commitment to us is wonderful and has many important implications. I want to look at those now.

First. Intimacy. **"Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."** Revelation 3:20. Our desire for Jesus is nothing compared to His desire for us.

Second. Security. A deep sense of security. For Jesus has sealed the Marriage Certificate in His own blood! He is committed to us *"for better or for worse as long as we both shall live"*. There's security in this marriage covenant. It means – get this – that when the worse in me comes out and it does, and it will, I need not fear losing Him. He is

not a starry-eyed lover: He does not ignore or close His eyes to the blemishes He sees in me or you when He calls us to Himself. He saw the "worse" in me when He proposed! He's not surprised when the wrinkles show. He sees them all even ones I do not see! Which means that He will never discover something about me or you that will make Him cancel the covenant. We will never hear, *"Wow, if I had known that about you I would've not gotten into this relationship."* He chooses us just as we are and will stay with us *"for better or for worse"*.

Living out of this image of our relationship with Jesus gives us greater motive to remain loyal to Him. We are His Bride. What are we doing fooling around with rival lords? Our true lover calls us for exclusive devotion. His call is based purely on the fact that all other lords eventually let us down. But His call is based mostly on the fact that He will settle for nothing less than an our being wholly His.

Living out of this image of our relationship with Jesus gives us greater reason to endure the tough times until He returns. For we can now see the difficulties differently as part of the process by which the Bridegroom is helping us get ready for the wedding. He is using the difficulties to remove the spots and get out the wrinkles. He's actively working to be able to present us as a Bride. As Paul puts it **"having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and blameless"**. Eph. 5:27. We are becoming

more like Him, beginning to reflect His own beauty and grace and wisdom and gentleness.

Living out of this image of a relationship with Jesus also simplifies the challenges of discipleship. By simplify, I do not mean make easy; I mean clarify, bring us to essentials. Living out of this image disencumbers our over burdened lives. As His Bride we do whatever it takes to stay in love, to grow in intimacy with the Lover of our souls.

The apostle Paul says to the church in Corinth, **“For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”** 2 Cor. 11:2-3

Living with this image of our relationship with Him will keep alive in us the longing for His return. When you are in love you long for the presence of the beloved. The early church was in love and longed for His appearing. As someone has said, *“Those who love Him best long for Him most”*.

And living with the image of being the Bride of Jesus gives us another window into Holy Communion. In this meal we are reaffirming betrothal vows. Our Bridegroom reaffirms His betrothal covenant. Over the uplifted cup He once again declares for all to hear: **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”**. He is 100% committed to bringing us Home

spotless. He says to His Church, ***"I love you, you are mine. I give you myself as long as we both shall live."*** And we the Bride-to-be once again accept His marriage proposal. As we take the bread and cup into our hands, as we eat and drink we are saying, ***"Yes, Jesus, I welcome Your love: yes, I am no longer my own: You have bought me with a price: I am gladly Yours"***. Jesus says to us,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my fathers house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you, 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." John 14:1-3

Come, let us gather now at the table, where the Lover of our souls brings us again to the greatest act of His love. He died to rescue us.

(Drawing from the writing of Rev. Darrell Johnson)