

A Vision of Marriage

16th Weekend after Pentecost – September 23/24, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

John 13:34-35 (NRSV)

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Visions matter. Indeed, they are essential. God gave Isaiah a vision of God's glory and called him to a life of service. Our question today is whether we have a vision of God's gift of marriage.

Ever since we did the series on marriage in 2005,¹ one question has stuck with me more than any other: Why marriage? It certainly isn't necessary for child-bearing and, besides, Genesis 2:20-25, the story of God's creating husband and wife, says nothing about children. I've known plenty of childless couples who exemplify Christian marriage. Children, money, security, safety, companionship – none of these *require* marriage. So again, why marriage?

Making Sense of Isaiah

In our *Thru the Bible* reading program, we've come to Isaiah. We'll be here awhile as we proceed at one chapter a day. In fact, Isaiah's length means that we'll be in it from now until year-end, with the exception of a few weeks in November when we will finish up the psalms.

Few Old Testament books have shaped our Christian faith as has Isaiah. It will be a wonderful and eye-opening experience to read all the way through Isaiah, but it is regrettable that we are reading only a chapter a day. Getting the “flow” and the “big picture” will be hard. Here are a few keys that may help.

First, Isaiah is most likely the work of two authors. The first 39 chapters date back to the prophet Isaiah himself and are set in the context of Judah as it is being threatened by Assyria in the late eighth-century BC. But chapters 40-66 are the work of a prophet during the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC, Israel's darkest days. Isaiah 1-39 and 40-66 are books within a book. You'll even find them referred to sometimes as First and Second Isaiah. I can virtually guarantee you that if you read the opening verses of Second Isaiah (chapter 40) as words written to a people who had lost everything, your heart will be moved.

Second, you will be surprised how much of Isaiah you already know and how much of Christ you will find. George Frideric Handel went to Isaiah 40 to open his glorious oratorio *Messiah*. The chorus, “For Unto Us a Child is born” is from Isaiah 9. When Jesus rose in his hometown of Nazareth to begin his public ministry he asked for the scroll of Isaiah and opened it to chapter 61. He shocked the crowd by announcing that the words were fulfilled in their hearing on that day (see Luke 4). When you come to Isaiah 53, you'll see that it is a summary of Jesus' ministry and his sacrificial death. It isn't hard to imagine a young Jesus finding answers to his purpose and vocation in the words of Isaiah 53.

Third, try to avoid seeing Isaiah as little more than a pile of “predictions.” Instead, see it as a collection of word-pictures from God that help us to understand God, ourselves, and God's faithfulness to his promises to renew and restore his creation. It is a large drama that is played out in this prophetic work.

Finally, your reading will be enriched by some sort of study Bible. If you aren't using the *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*, try to read from a Bible that will help you understand the organization and the context of these writings.

¹The Sermon Background Studies from that series, *Loving for Life*, are available on-line at www.standrewacademy.org. Just scroll down the page to the January 2005 series and you'll find the studies.

Why marriage?

In the Genesis story, the creation of the woman is a gift to the man² and the relationship that is created is a gift to them both, so much so that it explains why men and women alike are willing to leave their parents and their homes to live out the new reality that is their union as husband and wife.³ The apostle Paul understands that this union creates a new reality; the two become one and what one spouse does to or for the other they are doing to and for themselves (see Ephesians 5:21-33).

But still, even acknowledging that marriage is the creation of a union, “one flesh,” doesn’t answer the question ~ *Why?* Here’s my answer.

Marriage is where we can learn to love as God wants us to love. This is why any couple who has been married for awhile will tell you that far more is involved than just “falling in love.” Sooner or later, that experience begins to fade and the real work of being married, of truly loving, commences. As disciples, we understand that the Christian meaning of love is grounded in what we do, not just what we feel. The doing can lead to the feeling, but love begins and grows in the doing. As married disciples, we are called to put our love into practice in a relationship that is unlike any other.

To reiterate, the marriage of disciples is not so much about the feelings of love, as wonderful as they may be, marriage is about the *practice* of love. We do not marry to meet our own needs nor to help us be fulfilled. Marriage is two partners, each seeking good for the other, each sacrificing for the other, each living out a deep and abiding covenant that endures the inevitable difficulties. This is God’s hope for us.

Philip Yancey wrote of his own experience of marriage as the place to learn love: “I went into marriage thinking love would hold us together. I learned instead that it required marriage to learn what love means . . . a unity sealed by God, which enables us to face economic pressures, relocation, illness, and the loss of family and friends, as well as the delights that attracted us to each other in the first place.”

Last week, we read Jesus’ appeal that his disciples abide in him, that the branches stay connected to the vine so that they could bear abundant fruit. Further, we saw that the fruit are acts of love. We are to love others as Christ loves us. And God’s hope is that we will learn this love and practice this love in marriage, a sort of school of love. We can certainly learn love in lots of other places. After all, neither Jesus nor Paul were married. But those who have been married know that it is a unique relationship.

A person still might ask, “Why do I need to get married, so long as we are committed to each other?” Here, we have to trust God. God created marriage, husband and wife, as part of his plan for the cosmos. Marriage is God’s grace at work. It is God’s gift to all people. It is important to see that marriage is not part of God’s Law brought to the Israelites by Moses. Marriage is a gift bound up with the very creation of humanity. It is a gift even to those who do not know God. It is a gift that we are to accept gratefully.

A vision of marriage

Vision statements of one sort or another have long been the rage in corporate America. It makes sense. If you don’t know where you want to go, it can be pretty hard to get there. But those who are charged with writing such statements soon discover that the writing is hard and building consensus even harder.

Isaiah has a vision of the throne of God, complete with seraphs, smoke, and the rest. This vision of the glory of God would shape the rest of his life, lending form and purpose to his vocation. How many of us have a vision of marriage? I remember a wedding where the couple wrote their own vows, expressing a vision that stressed the individuals and not the union. For them, marriage was the place where each could be all that they could be, or something like that. But marriage is about the union, a sacred and mysterious union. When the minister says, “I pronounce you husband and wife,” a new reality is spoken into existence.

I’m sure that for many people, the creation of this union called marriage is, at best, sentimental. But it is quite real and very concrete. Grasping this lies at the heart of the Christian vision of marriage, a vision that begins with God.

²Isn’t it interesting that Adam’s relationship with God is not enough; God knows Adam he needs a “helper” of his own kind. God is inherently relational (an eternal community of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit) and creates humans who are inherently relational as well.

³We proclaim that God is both One and Three. How this can be is a mystery to us, but we still claim that it is true. In the Genesis story, Adam and Eve are two people, yet their union creates “one flesh.” In the passage from Ephesians, Paul acknowledges that there is a huge mystery here too, one that is beyond his understanding. Perhaps we ought to try and recapture our own sense of wonder at the mystery of sacred marriage.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

September 24-30

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Titus; Isaiah 10 The emphasis in Paul's letter to Titus is that God's people must be and do good. This is esp. true of church leaders!</p>	<p>Monday Jeremiah 1-3; Isaiah 11 Jeremiah's call and commission; God pleads with Israel to repent</p>
<p>Tuesday Jeremiah 4-6; Isaiah 12 Messages about the coming destruction of Judah</p>	<p>Wednesday Jeremiah 7-9; Isaiah 13 Jeremiah stands in the temple doorway and pronounces the temple a "den of thieves."</p>
<p>Thursday Jeremiah 10-12; Isaiah 14 The covenant has been broken and Jeremiah brings word-pictures of the coming consequences - exile.</p>	<p>Friday A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Saturday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	

Sermon Notes

Talking the Walk: Letting Christian Language Live Again by Marva Dawn

Words matter – especially to the people of God. God spoke creation into existence. God has revealed himself to us both in what he has done and in what he has said. In this volume of seventy-two brief essays, Marva Dawn reflects on the meaning of and our use of key theological words. Many of these words are ignored, some have gotten a bad reputation, and some are simply trivialized. As Ms. Dawn puts it, her goal “is simply to ask what might be good about the original words.” The book is very suitable for daily or weekly devotional reading or for small group discussions, as each brief essay is on a particular word. I’m sure you’ll be both informed and moved by her reflections. Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore.

Scott’s class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you’ll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewcccl.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Marriage can be difficult. I know, I’ve been divorced. And it is tempting to focus on the difficulties in staying married or the challenges posed to marriage by our society’s often cavalier attitude toward marriage and divorce. But perhaps the place to start is by asking ourselves what marriage is all about. This is what I mean by having a vision of marriage in general, as well as your own.

You might try writing a vision statement of *Christian* marriage, especially if you are reading this as part of a group. If you are married, you and your spouse could try writing a brief vision statement. As with all vision statements, it should set out, in a brief paragraph, the essentials of what you believe marriage ought to be. The key is start from God’s place, using this union of two people into “one flesh” as the beginning and Jesus’ sacrificial loving as the theme.

How might we guide our children as they contemplate a serious relationship or living together or perhaps marriage? Whether you are a parent or not, imagine that your child came to you and said he or she was very committed to another person, wanted to live together, but simply didn’t see the point of marriage. What would you say? What if your son or daughter were a believer? If not? Would their age matter? How? How might you try to shape their vision of marriage.