

The Weight and Glory

The Weight and Glory of a marriage can only be fully known after death do we part.

You know that, Henry.

You too, Uncle Gene.

And so do you, Nancy, and Patsy and Mildred, and dear Fane, and so many others of you.

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I know it too.

A few days from now marks the 23rd year since my wife Isa lay in my arms at 4:15 that morning of February 1st, and, at 39 years of age, gave up her last breath after a year-long struggle against cancer.

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I speak to you about marriage today because the word we have from the Lord today is all about marriage, from Isaiah's beautiful poetry to the crisis at the wedding in Cana.

There are so many ways we imagine our relationship with God.

Some think of God as the one who set the whole bloody mess in motion and then went on a long holiday (that's the god of our American civil religion – which is why we say we trust in god, but we make sure we have plenty of gold and tanks on hand).

But Christianity describes God as the father who gives his demanding son his share of the inheritance early, only to blow it and come home with his tail between his legs, and seeing him from far off, comes running with abandon welcoming the boy home.

Christianity tells us God is like a woman sweeping every dark corner looking for the lost coin or the mother hen who gathers up her chicks under her wings.

All of these, and so many more, are ways we can understand God's relationship with us.

But by far the most enduring image, from the prophets down to Jesus and right through St. Paul all the way to the very last book of Revelation, the insight, the glimpse, the metaphor, of the relationship between God and God's people (that would be you); is marriage.

Isaiah shouts out this morning:

"For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your builder marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you."

Jesus has no patience for the fat cats and Dudley do-rights who complain about his parties with the outcast and the lost, telling them:

"When you're celebrating a wedding, you don't skimp on the cake and wine, you feast!" Lk. 5:34.

And it is the Book of Revelation that ends with this holy vision:

"I saw Heaven and earth, newly created. I saw holy Jerusalem, newly-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband." Rev. 21:1-2.

We have a young couple planning their marriage for this March, Eric and Lisa.

Like every one of us who've been there, they want the day to be perfect, the memories lovely, the lighting soft, everything to be just right.

Which, in a world skewed toward imperfection and the occasional disaster, is a recipe for considerable stress.

Nevertheless, it is a hope commonly shared by everyone in their boat.

Even, I am sure, the youngsters tying the knot in Cana today.

Except, unlike our couple today, who need stress out only about a one-day event, the youngsters in Cana are in the middle of a seven-day bash.

That's seven days of food, seven days of lodging, and of course, seven days of wine for a townful of thirsty guests.

Weddings now are big; but weddings then were even bigger.

So when the young couple at Cana find out they are about to go down as the faux-paus of the season, what with the lubricant of the party about to go dry, you can imagine their panic.

But more about them later.

While we often get locked in on the wedding when talking about marriage, we all of us know that the wedding, even with all of its stresses and strains, is actually the easy part.

When I was in law school, we had a particular professor who loved piling on the homework.

She gave lots of it and she wanted it back in very short order.

When we complained, she told us to cheer up; "when you get out of here and actually practice law," she said, "you'll have twice as much work to do in only half the time, AND someone's freedom or finances will be in the dock, not just a grade on your report card."

For some reason, that come back of hers always spoke to me about marriage.

While a wedding requires give and take on such things as invitation designs and the right table treats, in the journey that is marriage, the give and take of surrendering one's self reaches deep into heart and soul; often at the most unexpected times.

As you live with someone, and this fits not only for married folks but for anyone in any kind of relationship: children and parents, siblings and friends; there is an on-going surrendering of self that, in relationships that thrive, becomes a mutual surrendering that occurs day in, day out.

We see that kind of surrendering today, as we eavesdrop on Mary's request that Jesus save the day, somehow, for the soon to be shamed bride and groom in Cana.

Mary has no idea what he'll do or how he'll do it; she leaves that to him: just like she had no idea how God was going to arrange a birth through a virgin: she left that to God.

Mary surrenders control over the situation.

Jesus is planning to announce the start of his ministry, probably in the way Luke tells us: going to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, picking up the scroll, and reading from Isaiah that the day of the Lord, the day that brings sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf and dancing to the lame; that day is here, that day is now!

It's quite clear that Jesus isn't planning on introducing his ministry on the third day of this wedding!

That's why we hear him say to his mother: "This isn't my time. Don't push me."

But the messiness of life, as the messiness of life will do, steps in, and Jesus also surrenders to the needs of the moment.

Which gets us back to God.

Which gets us back to God's relationship with us as a marriage.

In marriage, two become one: and two will argue and fight; and two will make up; and two will suffer, together and alone, and two will find joy and hope.

When Isa died, she was ready to go directly into the arms of God.

The year before she died was a harrowing spiritual journey for her: from the rage and disgust at the unfairness of it all, to the rage at my inability to take it all away, to the sorrow of knowing she would never see her children graduate high school or college, never hug a grandchild, never live to see white hair.

But as the year came to its inevitable end, she was at peace; having come to experience God in a way deep and true, and she was ready for a new life in God's nearer presence.

I, on the other hand, was on a different train, which took me as far away from God as I could get; since, I kept asking, how could a loving God, a God of miracle and power, let this disease take her when so much life lay ahead for us.

It took a long time for me to be on speaking terms again with God.

But when I came back to the place where I had walked away from God, I found God standing there, patiently waiting for me: and I discovered that while God hadn't changed, I had.

No longer was my sense of God as some impersonal thing somewhere out there.

I began to feel that there is no separation between heaven and earth, with some things above and other things below.

Instead, I began to experience that all that is lives within God; that the air we breath and the colors that astound and the laughter that brings so much delight exists not only because God wanted it to be so 14 billion years ago in a big bang, but because God wants the company of creation now, this moment, this instant: that we really do live and move and have our being in God; so that God truly is all in all; that we, and each of us, truly are a part of each other; always and forever.

That in the mess that so often is our lives, God is here, right in the middle of it, laughing and crying and suffering and smiling -- as one of us.

Just like marriage.

NPR ran this week a series of interviews with people of faith and people with no faith.

What particularly struck me was how so many of those without faith got there with considerable help by people doing my job.

Too many of them reported some kind of tragedy in their lives, often a violent or sudden death of one far too young, only to be told by a man in black that it was all God's will – God needed or wanted your 15 year old boy, your 4 year old daughter, now.

In the face of such horrible theology it's no mystery why the many people interviewed didn't walk -- but ran -- from God.

But that's not Christianity.

There is nothing in our faith that holds God out as some kind of sadistic know-it-all who somehow delights in taking from us that which is most precious, most dear.

Rather, in this free world in which all things exist, tragedy happens because tragedy, just like joy; death, just like life; sickness, just like health, is all part of the colliding, exhilarating, mind-numbing and mind-expanding kaleidoscope of the miracle of creation.

And in this mix, God is embracing and dancing and consoling and weeping, with us all and through it all, until at last we shall come to see in this marriage to God, the Weight and Glory of it all – and on that day, sing out with the angels: Thanks be to God!

I'll leave you with this:

"Perhaps the gaze of God is like the gaze of the artist on the completed painting.

Each and every pigment is discrete, and no mark is laid down carelessly; yet this green would not be present in its particular greenness were it not for this blue laid down next to it.

Each brush stroke has been laid down one by one, yet when the painting is complete, we see it in a single vision.

We gaze on it as on a complete and consummated whole, yet it bears all the marks of its making.

Perhaps people are like this within the attentive gaze of God's love.

Perhaps all of creation is too.”

Soskice, The Kindness of God, 33-4. (modified).

With all of the challenges and distractions of our daily lives, it's easy to forget the Weight and Glory that is and always has been our destiny.

Today, God reminds us that we are joined to the divine in marriage.

This is our Weight.

This is our Glory!

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