

Extreme Makeover

In the name of him who fills our grim lives with the wine of gladness, dear friends in Christ: It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. I am certain that this is why the prophetic writings of the Old Testament are filled with a vast array of vivid word pictures that describe theological concepts about the way the Lord works in the world and how he relates to us, his people, with illustrations borrowed from everyday human life. You might think of these word pictures as extended parables – like the ones Jesus told – which help us understand spiritual truths that the Lord wants us to take to heart. In order to help them really sink in and stick with us he gives us graphic images to keep in our minds.

The prophet Isaiah is a master of this technique. We see an example of his work in this morning's first lesson, in which he presents the Lord God as a groom eagerly anticipating his wedding day and the City of Jerusalem as his radiant bride-to-be. And for this to make sense, we want to understand Jerusalem as scriptural shorthand for the entire collective of God's people. He intends to marry them – as a man marries a woman – not literally, of course; but the idea is that he's going to come live with his people in a very close, intimate, and personal way. It implies a change to their present relationship: from one that involves him loving his intended bride at a distance to bringing her into the home that he has prepared for her, and the two of them living together from that point on happily ever after in a harmonious, unbreakable union.

And as the passage begins, you can hear how the Lord is exuberant with joy and he looks forward to day that he brings her to himself. It's like he can't wait. "I won't be silent", he says, "and I won't rest until she appears in her glory and comes marching down that aisle to be my wife." They say that every bride is beautiful – and I think that's right – especially in the eyes of her groom. And certainly, it's on her wedding day more than any other that a young woman is going to do everything she can to look her absolute best. She's not going to scrimp on anything. That's why too the bride's dress and other appointments are designed to outshine all the others in the wedding party. It's her day. She's the center of attention. And that's the way she is described here. But note that it's not so much her outward physical beauty that so delights the Lord (although he does mention it); rather it's her *righteousness* that shines forth for all to see and admire. The idea is that as beautiful as she is in appearance, her true beauty lies in her inner being. It's her holy innocence and perfect character that make her glorious to behold. And what a crowd of guests we've got here. Whole nations and their kings have been assembled to witness this grand spectacle, and all are astonished and left breathless by the splendor of her appearance.

Ah, but she wasn't always this way. To really understand and appreciate this passage, which comes quite late in the book of Isaiah, it must be read in light of what's come earlier. There, beginning already in the first chapter, Jerusalem is repeatedly described as an unfaithful wife who has become a shameless prostitute. She's an embarrassment to the Lord and a constant source of frustration and disappointment to him. The prophet writes: "*See how the once faithful city has become harlot! She who was once filled with justice – righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is watered down and tasteless. Your rulers are rebels, they are the companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts given to buy their favor. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless or the cases of widows.*"

And as the storyline continues, there are two levels of accusations the Lord keeps bringing against his people. First, he speaks of their proud and haughty spirits, and the way those with power and wealth oppress the poor and take advantage of them. They are greedy, materialistic, reveling in their riches and luxuries; they cheat when they do business and they use a corrupt legal system to rob and destroy those who try to play fair. Then there's the second level of accusations, and that is that they do all these things even while going through the motions of worshipping the Lord. They come to the temple, offer their sacrifices, sing their psalms of praise – and they turn right around and continue doing all the rotten things they've been doing all along. The result is that their worship rings hollow. They don't mean it. Oh, and the icing on the cake is that they also worship other gods. Besides going to the Lord's temple, they find time to worship the false idols of their pagan neighbors – which involves engaging in all the sexual excesses that those fertility cults promoted.

In the language of Isaiah's picture, the Lord is like the hard-working husband who comes home after a long day at work, and what does he find? The house is in shambles. His children are naked, dirty, unfed, and uncared for. And where's the missus? She's been busy shopping for herself all day, blowing the family grocery budget on fancy clothes, sweet perfumes, expensive cosmetics, and gaudy baubles with which she intends to attract the attention of her other lovers – the ones she's going to meet when she's out on the town all night. And this doesn't happen just once; it's the daily routine. And when he finally corners her and presents his accusations against her, she pours on the charm. "What's wrong, dear? Don't you love me anymore? You said you always would; just like I always love you. Look, I know I've done a few things to upset you; but I'll try to do better. Really, I will. Okay?" And he relents. Again and again he relents because of his recklessly blind love for her. And she, who never has any intention of changing, only becomes increasingly more brazen in her offenses.

And please understand that the reason Isaiah tells the story this way is so that you, the hearer, can relate to it. It's meant to make you think, "That woman is a disgrace. She makes me sick. And I can't believe how foolish her husband is to put up with her." Isaiah wants you to think that so that, just like the prophet Nathan turned the tables on David, he can point at you and say, "*The story is about you*. It's about *your* two-faced relationship with the Lord. It's about the way *you* lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead. It's about the way you fail to help God's children who are needy and oppressed. It's about the way you worship the false idols of money, culture, and pleasure. And it's about how foolish the Lord must be to forgive you and take you back time and again after hearing your half-hearted confessions of sin that you don't really mean because you have no intention of changing. You just keep getting worse. You just keep taking advantage of the Lord's love and forgiveness."

When you understand that, the next part of the story makes sense: because the husband isn't making any headway in moving toward the relationship he wants to have with his wife doing what he has been doing, he finally realizes that he must try something else. He comes to the sad conclusion that it's time for some tough love. So, he takes away her line of credit, strips her of her fancy clothes and gems, and he throws her out into the street where she belongs. He deprives her of access to the children she has so long neglected and abused. She's left naked, shamed, forsaken, and desolate. She becomes the butt of coarse jokes. Passersby turn their head in disgust when they see her. She has lived like human trash, so it's out with the trash she goes. And without his patronage and support with which to buy her cosmetics and clothes, she's revealed for what she is: an ugly, wretched, wrinkled, old croon.

Now, historically, this actually happened. The Lord became so frustrated with his people Israel after centuries of their abuse of his love, that he had no choice but to throw them out. He

didn't want to do it. He tried over and over again to call his people back through the prophets; but they wouldn't listen. So, at length he raised up a powerful enemy nation: Babylon. Their armies came and laid waste to Jerusalem and took away its people in chains. The once proud city that was blessed by God and that prospered during the reigns of David and Solomon was reduced to a heap of ashes. Jerusalem that was once the Lord's faithful and cherished bride, had become a brash, skanky whore. So, she was forsaken by him; and the Land of Israel was left desolate.

Fortunately, as this morning's text indicates, that isn't the end of the story. It is the Lord's plan to restore his beloved bride to himself – and to make her something even better and more righteous than she ever was before. The question is: how is that possible? How does a habitually unfaithful old hag go from being what she is to become the radiant and righteous young bride that we heard described by Isaiah?

The answer is an *extreme makeover*. Perhaps you've seen some of these shows on television. My girls like to watch them when they're home. It's one sure way to get me to leave the TV room. Anyway, what they'll do is take a team of experts and converge on a woman whose family and friends have submitted as a good example of someone who ... (how shall I say this?) isn't presenting her best appearance to the world. I trust you understand. And they'll do up her hair, teach her how to make better use of cosmetics, get her a new wardrobe that compliments her figure rather than that accentuates her ... uh, *problem areas* – for which they might also recommend a new diet and exercise program. They may even spend some time teaching her social graces, like how to walk elegantly as opposed to strutting around like a street walker, and how to stand with good posture instead of slouching toward sluttiness. And when they're all done, the results can be truly remarkable. A woman can go from “ugh” to “wow”.

That's what the Lord needs to do for his bride: give her an extreme makeover. The difference is that he needs to work from the inside out. Remember his bride's true beauty is going to be revealed in her righteousness, innocence, and holiness. It's her heart that needs to change. And so the Lord sets out to do just that. How? By means of his appointed Servant. This is another recurrent theme in the book of Isaiah, how the Lord is sending his people a Servant who will save them, set them free from their captivity, and bring them back to the Promised Land. We know him best as the Suffering Servant from Isaiah chapter 53, the one who “*was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*” Obviously, the prophet is speaking of Jesus Christ who bore the penalty of our sins on the cross. He was forsaken and left desolate in our place. He's the one who does our extreme makeover by bringing us into his death for sin and raising us up with him in his perfect life. In this way he destroys in us our sinful, cold hearts of stone and gives us warm, living hearts filled with his love.

This is the righteousness that shines forth from God's radiant bride then: not the things we do; but the things Christ has done for us and that he continues to do to and through us. That's what moves us from “ugh” to “wow” in the eyes of the Lord. So, what we have in Isaiah is sort of the ultimate Cinderella story; except it's one of the ugly, undeserving, wicked step-sisters that gets to marry the prince. We also see echoes of the story of the prodigal son; but there are important differences here too. In that story, the wayward son runs away from his father to enjoy the pleasures of the sin. In Isaiah's telling, the unfaithful wife wants to live in sin even while she's enjoying the comforts and security of her husband's home. She has to be forcibly removed in order for there to be a change. And unlike the prodigal, who eventually figures out that his life in sin is miserable and that he'd be better off retuning home, in today's story it's the

Lord who goes looking for his unfaithful wife and who changes her by his love and fills her with his righteousness so that she can be the glorious and honorable woman he yearns to embrace and share his life with forever.

What's the application to us? It's quite simple. All we have to do is substitute the Church for the City of Jerusalem in Isaiah's illustration. After all, the Scriptures describe the Church as the bride of Christ today. It's us collectively and individually that the Lord wants to bring to himself into a perfect, holy, unbreakable union. And he has given himself as our Suffering Servant to bear our sins and to give us the ultimate extreme makeover – for by his death and resurrection he gives us a new birth in Baptism, he clothes us in the bright glory of his righteousness, and he leads us by his Spirit as if taking our hands in marriage.

And the thing to see is that this is a work in progress. Looking ahead, the Lord sees the day when we, his bride, will be everything he longs for us to be. We're not there yet; not by a long shot. But seeing how he longs for us to appear through his eyes, we should capture the vision and make it our goal. Not that we can do the makeover ourselves; but that we can open our hearts to let him do his work on us. And with that in mind, one of the things we can do is to look at ourselves honestly. When we do we'll see that unfaithful wife who takes advantage of her husband's love that I described earlier. And seeing her, we should be repulsed. And we should realize that the only way to deal with her properly is to throw her out and leave no place for her in our hearts. Then, turning to Christ our Suffering Servant and Savior, we can receive again his Word of forgiveness, put on his white robe of righteousness, and take a step farther down the aisle that leads to the altar and the final wedding feast of the Lamb in his kingdom.

The Lord longs for that day, and he says he won't be silent, nor will he rest until he brings it to fulfillment. May we long for it just as eagerly so that our extreme makeover by his power and love may begin even now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!