

Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2020, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 3:22-30

"Best Man or Bridegroom"

The days before a wedding can be hectic. It is ironic that this morning I has a phone call and a visit from someone who I was blessed to officiate at her and her husband's wedding in January. How ironic that today we are talking about some of the people – or players at a wedding. It is amazing how I can remember all the way back to 1977 as Marilyn and I prepared to be married in April of that year. There were the traditional "wedding jitters." And now, for the past 15 years I have been on the other side of the aisle – helping God's children to prepare to make vows and promises before Him in Holy Matrimony. Not only are there the bride and groom – or bridegroom as Jesus refers to it, and the parents on both sides, but there are also two especially important witnesses – the Maid or Matron of Honor, but also the Best Man. They have quite a bit to do in preparation for the wedding, besides showers or bachelor party, but they are the other two signatures that go on the form filed with the county. The Best Man also has the responsibility for the rings – and giving them to the priest when he asks for them.

Incredibly, some of these players can be overcome by nerves or jitters. Have you ever seen the old TV show – America's Funniest Home Videos? You might see either the bride or the groom keel over like a falling tree, or even the best man. Kind of cute and you might say to yourself 'at least I didn't do that!' Sometimes things happen and they might forget their roles as they stand at the altar. It is my responsibility as the Presbyter or Presider to try and relax them and keep their minds on the important role that they have to play – to each other. Amazingly, some people fear the question that I get to ask those present: "If any of you can show just cause why they may not be married in accordance with God's Word, speak now; or else for ever hold your peace." A deep breath is taken – and we move on with the ceremony. People have seen too many movies of things happening after those words are asked!

Picture John the Baptist as the Best Man to Jesus, the Bridegroom, with Israel as the bride (and now it is the church). He joyfully speaks to his followers about the success that Jesus and His disciples seem to be having in baptizing people as he stands up for Jesus. John's followers seem to be assuming that he would be jealous. Nobody knew at this time, that John would shortly be arrested, and put in prison by Herod, and then beheaded at the request of Herod's stepdaughter, Salome. His followers must have expected his ministry to go on and on, and they were pretty disturbed that someone who had just been part of it at the Jordan River, was now setting up His own ministry and baptizing people on His own. John's response is not only that it does not matter, but that it has to be this way. Jesus is the one that he spoke about – the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, who is carrying forward God's purposes for the whole world.

John has done the job that he was sent to do. He is like the bridegroom's friend, the best man. He has no intention of trying to steal the bride at the last minute. The picture of the bridegroom with his bride is not just a nice illustration, showing that John's followers are jealous of Jesus and John is refusing to see things at all like that. In the Old Testament and

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some Jewish traditions, the coming Messiah was seen as the bridegroom ‘par excellence,’ the one who would come and make Israel his bride. Behind this again, of course, is the equally important tradition that Yahweh, Israel’s God, would betroth Israel to himself as His bride. Whether or not John the Baptist thought of this at the time—his mind seems to be focused on the fact that Jesus is truly Israel’s Messiah, the Coming King, and that he himself is not. In Israel’s tradition – the father of the bridegroom is the one calling the shots. When the bridegroom is betrothed to his bride – he starts preparing a place in his father’s house so that when they finally become man and wife officially, he comes and gets her and they move into his father’s house. And so it makes it a little clearer when you understand Jesus’ words when He said, *“I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am – you may be also.”* We are bride and He is the Bridegroom.

The Apostle John, the evangelist and writer of this Gospel, also intends for us to see, the way in which different characters in the account of the life of Jesus have to learn, as C. S. Lewis once put it, *“to play great parts without pride - and small parts without shame.”* At the very end of the Gospel of John in chapter 21:20–22, Peter is reminded that what counts is not comparing yourself with other people and seeing whether your status is higher or lower than theirs, but what is most important is simply following Jesus. Please listen to these words: *“Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them... When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.”* John the Baptist adds to the evidence he has given about Jesus’ messiahship, by insisting that if Jesus is prospering, and people are going to Him, then that means that he, who had pointed to Him, should celebrate rather than be miserable or jealous. In John 1:36 *“When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!””*

It must not have been easy for John the Baptist. From the very beginning, he understood that his ministry was only temporary and that his sole purpose was to direct people to Jesus, the Messiah. He was truly clear about his role, as he said in today’s Holy Gospel, John 3:30, *“He must become greater; I must become less.”* John the Baptist was the last in a long line of prophets that God sent to His people, and his ministry began a transition between the Old Covenant and the New. He willingly stepped aside when the time was right – the appointed time, for Jesus to take center stage.

I really need to share with you the words that immediately follow today’s Holy Gospel from John 3:31-36. By reading these words we can better put today’s Gospel into perspective with God’s big picture as He had the Apostle John write it.

31 “The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony.

33 The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.

34 For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

35 The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.

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36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

So, where are you in this picture? He is contrasting *'the one from above'* – Jesus, with *'the one from the earth'*. This is not talking about John the Baptist; he, after all, was *'sent from God'* as we can read in John 1:6; 1:33; 3:27. There are plenty of people whose life and teaching are *'from the earth'*, and a good many of them were competing with Jesus and John, and with the early church, for the ears, minds and hearts of both Jews and Gentiles. So too, today: who do people trust? Who do they listen to and follow? All too often, they trust those whose message has absolutely not even a breath of heaven about it, no sign of life from God's Word.

Meanwhile, the beginning of John's Gospel speaks very clearly about Jesus in John 1:10-11. *"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."* Incredibly, most of those to whom Jesus was sent did not, and do not, even today, receive what He says. Sadly, the end of that road is wrath, not because God is a tyrant or a bully but because the earth, and all that is earthbound, is only temporary, and therefore will corrupt and decay. But anyone who does receive God's word, who accepts that God speaks the Truth in Him, is giving the Spirit through Him, is pouring out His love through Him to the world. If that person is you, then you already have within yourself the life that, like the Son, comes from heaven.

Remember the words that end this 3rd chapter of John: *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."* (John 3:36)