

I was listening to a sermon once in which the pastor said, “There’s no such thing as an ugly bride.” And that was such a blunt comment, I had to laugh. But then I reflected on it, and it squares with my experience. Pastors have a very unique position from which to observe a wedding, and I can tell you that there is nothing like the moment when the bride first makes her appearance and then makes eye contact with the groom. I have yet to see a bride in that moment that is not absolutely stunning. Why is that? Of course, we could talk about the physical preparation she undergoes (makeup, hair, tanning bed, dress) and that is part of it to be sure, but I think that along with those external things there is the internal reality. It’s what that moment *means*. It means that someone has chosen me. Someone is pledging his love to me. Someone wants to share life with me. There is nothing he wouldn’t do to prove his love for me. When the reality of that hits home, it creates something beautiful to behold. Almost everyone I’ve ever met has wanted to know a love like this. And what I am here to tell you this morning is that the God of the Bible loves you that way. He even uses the language of a wedding to say it. It’s right there in the prophetic words of Isaiah, which served as our Old Testament Lesson today.

Now, we have to set the stage a bit. The story of the Old Testament is a love story; it’s the story of God’s love for the people of Israel. He had chosen them; pledged his love for them; there was nothing he wouldn’t do to prove his commitment, and what was the response? Well, over time, it was heartbreaking. God’s feelings were not reciprocated. Unfaithfulness to God became the norm. And finally, God had enough.

In the late eighth century BC, in the time of Isaiah, the northern half of Israel, well, it was like God took an eraser to it. The southern half survived, but just barely, reduced to a single city. National defeat and humiliation belonged to Israel in Isaiah’s time. And that is where the names come in. In Isaiah’s day Israel was called “The Deserted One” and “Desolate Wasteland.” This was not picture language or poetic license. They cheated on God one time too many, and it cost them everything. This is the message that the prophet Isaiah was sent to proclaim. His task was to spell it out for the people. “This turn of events was God’s judgment on you for your sin.” The names were reminders. “Deserted, Desolate.” That’s how things are, since you turned your back on God.

What does sin and the rejection of God deserve? I don’t know that we weigh this question very seriously, much as Israel did not. We get casual about sin. We excuse it in ourselves even as we condemn it in others. We do what we want, what seems right to us, and if God told us somewhere not to do what it is we want, we try to use his words to justify ourselves or just straight up ignore him. Yes, we’ve heard the stories, that way leads to a Desolate Wasteland, but come on, that’s just to keep weak-minded people in line. And then, when my life crashes and burns, I have the audacity to blame God for what’s happening.

However, there is a different way to be. Rather than deny or downplay sin, you own it. You recognize the description of sin as true to life, but rather than leaning into it to indulge in more—you lament the grip it has on you and you long for something better. Or think of it this

way: you come back to the One you deserted. It's humbling, but there's no other way. And when you return, this is what he says, "You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow." A new name. Israel received two new names that were chosen by God. And those new names were "Hephzibah" and "Beulah."

What's behind those names? A wedding day.

Listen to Isaiah's words for God's people. "No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate [Wasteland]. But you will be called Hephzibah [meaning "My delight is in her"] and your land [will be called] Beulah [meaning "Married"]... as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

God knows exactly who you are, what you've done, what you're capable of; yet if you will just come to him humbly, honestly admitting your mistakes, He will forgive you, he will commit to you and will delight in you with all the energy of a young groom.

We spend so much time in our lives working to try to prove that we deserve to be treasured this way. If we can't prove it to the world that we deserve love, then we'll settle for respect, or admiration, or attraction. Sometimes we will work and work just to prove to the person in the mirror that I am somewhat worthy of some good coming my way. What God is saying through Isaiah is that you can lay all of that "doing" down right now, because the love you've waited your whole life to feel is here, as the almighty, creative, universe-expanding, DNA-designing God pledges his faithfulness to you.

But how, how can God want me? How can he overlook who he knows me to be? Well, that's just it. He doesn't overlook your sin, your shame, your past. He forgives it. To overlook something is to pretend not to see it, but to forgive—that means it is paid for. It's costly. It hurts the forgiver. That's what is being offered to you.

In Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul says something extraordinary. In a very similar context he writes, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church, and gave himself up for her, to make her holy..." There is nothing that Jesus wouldn't do for his bride, the church, and that includes die. That includes take the weight of his bride's sin, and pay it off for her. Jesus willingly became the deserted one. The desolate wasteland of sin's full price was nailed to him on the cross. He gave himself up for you so that he could delight in you.

If you ever wonder if you can be truly and fully loved, return to the cross of Jesus. Remember what that moment means. It means that someone has chosen me. Someone is pledging his love to me. Someone wants to share life with me. There is nothing he wouldn't do to prove his love for me. This love has made you beautiful.