

62 *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
till her righteousness shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.*

² *The nations will see your righteousness,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.*

³ *You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

⁴ *No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah,
and your land Beulah;
for the LORD will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.*

⁵ *As a young man marries a maiden,
so will your sons marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:1-5)*

Did This Happen on Your Wedding Day?

Almost twenty years ago, in the year 2000, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod – our church body, the WELS – celebrated its 150th anniversary. There was anniversary committee that encouraged all the congregations of the synod to engage in special activities to celebrate that event. One of the activities that the congregation I was serving then chose to do was a Wedding Reaffirmation Service. It was kind of a neat event – and we could do one here next summer, if you like. We used the wedding liturgy and we invited all the married couples in our congregation to reaffirm their wedding vows during the service. After church, we had a dinner and special activities. The ladies group set up a table with the wedding picture of every couple in our congregation – and they put them up in chronological order! Because this was almost twenty years ago, the picture of me and my wife was way down on the more recently married end. I imagine today it would be much closer to the middle. It was a wonderful celebration of God's gift of marriage. And not just because weddings make us feel good. God uses marriages over and over again to picture the greatest gifts that he gives us through Christ. That's true in our Old Testament lesson for today. So as we contemplate Isaiah's words today, I want to ask all of you who are married to think back to your wedding day and connect what happened then to what God did for us in Christ. To help you do that, twice, I'm going to ask you a simple question: **Did this happen on your wedding day?**

I.

I want to ask that question first in regard to changing your name. That happens in one of my least favorite parts of a wedding service. After the ceremony is over, I take the bride and groom and two witnesses to a room somewhere and close the door and, for the next twenty minutes, I become a functionary of the state government. Here in Michigan, I have to fill out three copies of the wedding license. They have to be identical. They can't have any cross outs or corrections on them. And on those documents, I write down what the bride's last name is going to be from that day forward. **Did this happen on your wedding day? Did you change your name?**

Obviously, in our society, that usually only happens to the bride. Grooms don't usually change their names and today, brides don't always either. You know what? It didn't happen at all in Bible times. The bride didn't change her name because people didn't have last names back then. But even so, there was a kind of change. A young woman who was known before she got married as, "Rachel the daughter of Laban," became

“Rachel the wife of Jacob” afterwards. So in that sense, she did change her name. And it might have happened sometimes that a woman changed her first name. In the Bible, people sometimes changed their names if some big event happened that really changed their identity. For instance, in the Old Testament, God changed Jacob’s name to Israel. Even in the New Testament, Jesus told Simon that he would be known as Peter. Why did people do that? They knew what their names meant. We don’t usually, unless you happen to have one of those books that tell you where names come from. But in the past, most cultures picked names that meant something in the language they spoke and that fit the person they were naming. So if your identity changed, if the thing that people knew you for and that best described you changed, your name often changed, too.

So the Bible makes a big deal out of name changes because your name says who and what you are. That’s what Isaiah does in our reading for today. He’s talking to Jerusalem, which represents the people of God. He says their name will change. No longer will Jerusalem be called Deserted. No longer will Israel be called Desolate. When were they called those things? Isaiah foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, which took place about a hundred years after he died. So he was talking about the way the people in exile would speak of their homes. But he promised that the day would come when Jerusalem would be known as Hephzibah and Israel as Beulah. Hephzibah means “my delight is in her.” God was promising that the day would come when he would rejoice over Jerusalem instead of weeping over her ruins. Beulah means “married.” Israel would be known as the married land instead of the desolate land. In other words, she would be fertile and productive again. She would be a living, joyful land, instead of a burned over, abandoned one.

What was Isaiah talking about? The coming of Christ. He ties all this into the light of Christ coming to Jerusalem. He speaks of kings and nations coming to that light. He’s talking about today, about the Christian church. He’s talking about how God took gentiles, people who didn’t know him, people who lived in rebellion against him and he made us his. God gives us a new name to reflect that new identity we have. He gives us a new name to show that the defining characteristic of our lives, the thing that people know us for, the thing that stands out most in our lives, is different now. We are his.

That concept of God giving us a new name runs throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, God gave Moses the blessing that we use at the end of our church services. He said that when Moses blessed the people, he was putting God’s name on them. And in the New Testament, as the Christian Church grows and reaches out to us gentiles, the message comes to the city of Antioch where it takes hold. The church in Antioch becomes the great mother missionary church. St. Paul is sent out from Antioch. And when the gospel takes hold there, Luke writes in the book of Acts, “**The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.**” Why Christians? Because Christ has put his name on us. We are his followers. It is our new identity, the thing that we are known by, even in the world.

So God gives us a new name. Instead of calling us sinners, he calls us saints. Instead of calling us damned and condemned, he calls us holy and beloved. Instead of calling us rebels and traitors and the spawn of Satan, he calls us his own children. He shows that by setting the name of Christian on us as well. Isaiah said that God would call us Hephzibah – his delight is in us and Beulah – we are married to Jesus. He did all that just because he loved us. He did all that just because Jesus took our place in life and in death.

So did you change your name at your wedding? Most of us guys didn’t. But most of you married women did. Why do we do that, if it’s not actually a biblical custom? The bride changes her name to show that she belongs to a new family. While she will always be the child of her parents, her primary identity going forward is with her husband. Without debating all the patriarchal assumptions that go with that, that custom does remind us Christians of our new place in life. The Church is the bride of Christ. The bride changes her name to identify with the husband. Our new identity is with Christ. We belong to him.

II.

The Church as the bride of Christ is one of the most common pictures in the Bible. It occurs again and again and its roots go back to the Old Testament. The prophets often pictured Israel as God’s bride. She was a virgin that God married when she came of age. He loved her and showered her with gifts and blessings. But she was unfaithful to him. She became a prostitute who slept around and sold herself – that’s a picture of Israel’s idolatry. So finally God divorced her. He sold her into slavery and allowed her to be taken away. But he still loved her, so he bought her back. He brought her home and washed the filth and the wounds of slavery away. And he married her again. That’s the Old Testament picture.

The New Testament changes the picture just a little bit. It focuses on Jesus specifically as the groom. And it changes the bride from the nation of Israel to the church. Instead of being a physical, ethnic people, the bride of Christ is all those who trust in Jesus. Because that's true, the New Testament never pictures the bride as unfaithful, even though many Christians have fallen away and whole denominations have forgotten the Lord. Those who remain faithful are still the bride of Christ. God pictures heaven as the wedding reception of Jesus and the Church. In both the Old and New Testaments, the bride wears a beautiful dress. That seems to be a constant in weddings in most cultures. On her wedding day, the bride dresses up. For most women, the dress she wears that day will be the most expensive dress she'll ever wear. It in most cultures, it's a unique garment – something that you would only wear on your wedding day. That beautiful, unique dress represents the righteousness of Christ, given to cover her sin.

Today, Isaiah in the Old Testament looks forward to that New Testament way of speaking of bride of Christ. And he focuses on one particular aspect of her marriage to Christ: the joy of the bridegroom. I hope all of us husbands can identify with that. Guys, do you remember when you saw your bride standing at the entrance to the church wearing that dress? Do you remember her walking down the aisle, probably with her dad, to you? What did you feel? Ladies, **did this happen on your wedding day? Did your husband rejoice to see you?** I hope so. But God uses that joy of the bridegroom to make a point that applies to all of us, male or female, married or single or widowed or divorced. Jesus is the groom and the whole church is the bride. We guys may have some difficulty picturing ourselves that way. But God uses this picture because of the joy the groom has over his new bride. Christ rejoices to see us.

It's a joy for Jesus to have us in his kingdom. That all by itself is amazing because we sinners should cause him anything but joy. How do you feel when you see someone you have a conflict with? Someone who mocks everything that matters to you? How do you feel when someone who's always rude to you comes into the room and you realize you're going to have to interact with that person again? How do you talk about that person when you go home to your husband or wife or when you're with our friends? Don't you dread the time you have to spend with that person? And why? Because they're unpleasant. Because they've hurt you in the past. Because they deserve your dislike.

Well, what do we deserve from God? His scorn. His hatred. His punishment with death and hell forever. And why? Because we're sinners. With our lives, we've mocked everything that matters to God. We married people have not loved and honored our husbands and wives the way God commands us to. Those of us who are single have not lived in love and service to each other the way God commands us to. We sinners are selfish and egotistical and we want the whole world to revolve around us. That sin makes us repellant to God. It deserves his hatred and scorn and punishment in hell.

But Jesus has taken all that sin away. He lived a life of perfect love, a life neither the single nor the married people among us can ever live. God gives us credit for his perfect love. He died and he paid for our sins. He suffered scorn on the cross because we sinners should endure God's scorn forever. He suffered hatred from God's enemies because God's hatred is what we have coming. God abandoned him on the cross and made him endure hell itself because that's the only place we sinners could possibly land when we die. God sent his Son to die on that cross because death itself is the punishment for our sin. Jesus did all those things in our place. He rose to set us free. He rose to tell us that he loves us. He rose to accept all of us, male and female, single and married, as his Church, his bride. He rejoices to see us always.

That matters when this life hurts. It matters when we feel alone and unloved. It matters when guilt stalks our hearts. It matters when life is ending and we know we have to stand before the judgment seat of God. We will appear in the garments that Jesus won for us – a garment as unique and special as a bride's wedding dress. We will appear in Jesus' righteousness. And God will call us beloved and welcome us to eternal life with him. That promise is always there for us, no matter how much this life hurts. That promise and that love will never leave us. They will bring us home. And again and again, God pictures heaven as the wedding reception, the greatest and most joyful party we will ever attend. We will celebrate the love and joy of our Savior forever. Amen.