

Matthew 11:2-15

The history of the best man in a wedding is interesting. Long ago the Goths had to raid neighboring villages in order to secure a bride. To accomplish this, the groom would bring with him a trusted companion. This man became known as the best man. But even during the wedding itself the best man was an important figure. His job was to protect the bride in case her family came to take her back. He stood, during the wedding service, at the right of the groom with his hand on his sword at all times ready to defend the bride at all cost.

In our text for today, Jesus says of John the Baptist that no one born of women is greater than he. What Jesus is saying is that John the Baptist is the best man. All the prophets who had gone before John are the groomsmen in the wedding. But John is in a unique position. He stands next to Christ. He is the forerunner. The groomsmen came and went, but when John comes, Jesus follows right on his heels. When the best man makes his appearance at the wedding, the groom is ready to enter in.

Yet, John's close proximity to Jesus is not the only thing that makes him the best man. It is his charge, his calling, his relationship to the bride. You are the bride. Your Groom needed to go out in search of you and secure you for Himself. You were not born, nor did you dwell, in the Groom's kingdom. You were in a distant land, a far-away village, one ruled by the devil himself. Although created by God, you were not of the family of God at birth. Your place was in Satan's kingdom.

But Jesus sought you for His bride and He claimed you. All this He did, not apart from the best man, but with him and through him. For the one who baptized you, who preached the Word to you, who taught you the Faith, who distributed to you the Lord's body and blood, who absolved your sins--this one is God's John the Baptist, Jesus' best man, who serves his Lord by doing all these things for the bride.

The bride does not belong to the best man. You belong to Christ, your Groom. But Jesus charges the best man to defend His bride at all cost. John did this so faithfully that he was thrown into prison. The devil wanted the bride back for himself, but first he needed to attack and remove the best man. John wielded his sword well. He defended the bride by baptizing and preaching the Word of God. He pointed the bride not to himself, for he was only the best man; he pointed the bride to her Groom, to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. But John was overcome by Satan. He was thrown into a prison cell, away from the bride of Christ so he could not defend her. But as all the groomsmen came and went--God always sending more prophets to replace the prophets who were put to death--so the best man also comes and goes. From the days of John until now, many different men have stood in the place next to Christ, not to receive honor for themselves, but to defend the bride. They are charged, called by God to baptize, catechize, preach, absolve, and distribute Jesus' body and blood in the Sacrament.

You, dear bride, have taken your place at the wedding next to the Groom because Jesus has given this place to you. When Jesus told John's disciples what He was doing...*"the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them,"* Jesus was speaking of His bride. All of these blessings are in the passive tense. The bride does nothing for herself. Jesus does everything for His bride.

The greatest gift, and chief sign which points to Jesus as the Groom, is the preaching of the Gospel. The Gospel makes the bride who she is. Without the Gospel, you are still in Satan's kingdom. But through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and through the preaching of the cross of

Jesus, you are given a place here next to Christ to stand beside Him, now and always, as His beloved bride.

And thus, you must know that Satan tries without ever giving up, to take you away from your Groom. He wants you back. And because the Gospel makes you Christ's bride, the devil tries, with all his might, to pull you away from the preaching of Christ, and to distort, to water down, and to devalue the Gospel in your midst. You may not think much of missing a Sunday service to get other things done, but the devil knows that this is necessary to his success--to keep the Gospel away from your ears, to keep the Savior's Sacrament away from your mouth.

And so Jesus charges the best man to defend His bride by preaching His Word to you, even when you may not want to listen. Jesus charges the best man to distribute His Holy Supper to you often, even though you may not feel the need for it. And Jesus knows that His best man will suffer persecution today just as John was persecuted in his day. Satan sees to it. If he can weaken the best man and bring him down; if he can remove from his side the sword of God's Word and take his hand off that sword, then the bride can easily be attacked.

But you do not belong to the best man; you belong to Christ. He, not the best man, purchased you with His blood. He suffered your punishment on the cross. He overcame Satan to win you for Himself. And He will not do anything less for you now. Dear bride of Christ, the good news is for you. Your Groom has entered the wedding hall. He is here for you. You are loved by Him. You are the "apple of His eye." He has dressed you in garments made radiantly white by His blood. He has removed your sins from you as far as the east is from the west. He forgives you, His beloved. Not because you do anything for Him...He forgives you because you are His bride.

As Jesus' bride, you are able to, and should, rejoice on this Sunday in Advent. You rejoice even though Satan is against you, even though your sins are many and great. You rejoice because your Groom is at your side. He will let no harm come to you. He gives His sword to your best man to wield against Satan in your defense. And He who claimed you as His bride, forgives you all of your sins. Dear bride of Christ, rejoice! The wedding is now, and your Groom, your Jesus is here for you. Amen.