

***Revelation 19:1-9. After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, <sup>2</sup> for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants." <sup>3</sup> And again they shouted: "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." <sup>4</sup> The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: "Amen, Hallelujah!" <sup>5</sup> Then a voice came from the throne, saying: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!" <sup>6</sup> Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. <sup>7</sup> Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. <sup>8</sup> Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) <sup>9</sup> Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God."***

Over four decades ago I began my ministry in a relatively small village in northern Wisconsin. The village had a distinctively rural flavor; and the congregation included a significant number of working farmers. It was admittedly a simpler time, and my wife and I were young. But today we would tell you, without much hesitation, that the years we spent in that village and with the members of that congregation were some of the happiest years of our lives. Because the village was small and many of the congregation's members were related, people knew each other, and they cared about each other. A funeral marked a community loss. And joyous events were cause for community celebration. Perhaps the most memorable of the joyous events were wedding celebrations. Our church was often filled to capacity for a wedding service. And the bride's parents, as was customary back then, spared no expense to make the day memorable and happy for the bridal couple and the invited guests. A large hall was rented for the wedding dinner. The guest list included relatives, neighbors, friends, and often even casual acquaintances, sometimes numbering several hundred or more. A sumptuous meal was served. After all these years I can still almost taste the broasted chicken, the ham and the beef tips; the mashed potatoes, the vegetables, and the salads. And then there were the desserts, some of them specialty items indigenous to that part of the country; topped off by a generous slice of what had to be a huge wedding cake. And though I never became a real fan of the polka, it was fun to watch people we knew and loved enjoying themselves and, for a few hours at least, forgetting the troubles and the burdens they would all have to deal with again the next day and the days that followed.

Wedding customs, of course, have changed down through the ages. In today's culture economic considerations often dictate how simple or how elaborate a wedding celebration

will be. But the fact remains that, from ancient times to our own, weddings have been and continue to be among the most joyous events that people of every culture celebrate together. That is no doubt the reason why Jesus himself and the inspired writers of the Bible used the picture of a wedding celebration to describe both the church's relationship to Jesus and the eternal joy that awaits believers in the glory of heaven. Our text for today employs that picture. May it encourage us and help us eagerly look forward to our personal participation as

**Triumphant Saints at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.** The text portrays:

**1. The bride and the wedding dress**

**2. The invitation and the guests**

Our text brings us a number of glimpses into heaven that the ascended Jesus gave the Apostle John to record in the Book of Revelation. The purpose of those visions was to comfort and encourage believers – First Century believers who were suffering severe persecution at the hand of the hostile Roman government; but also believers of every age who must deal with the difficulties and uncertainties of life in a sinful, often anti-Christian world. This particular vision takes us to the end of time and shows us the glory of eternity. In the verses just before our text the saints and angels in glory praise the Lord for his final victory over his and his believers' enemies and the complete annihilation of Satan and his wicked hosts. The vision continues in our text with a celebration of what that victory means for triumphant saints.

As he stares in awe at this amazing vision, John hears a voice coming from the throne on which the Lord himself is seated. The voice calls on the servants of the Lord, "all who fear him both great and small," to praise the Lord. Then, in response to that call, John hears the sound of a magnificent choir so huge that it cannot be numbered – a sound that John, almost struggling for words, compares to the roar of rushing water or to loud peals of thunder. With the words of the song of all believers of every age combine with the choir of angels to give thanks for the fact that "The Lord almighty reigns." For countless generations throughout human history, persecuted believers had cried out for deliverance. At times to their human eyes struggling believers had seen only scant evidence of the Lord's power and rule. But now, with all of their enemies defeated forever; and with believers of every age and place standing with resurrected and glorified bodies in the presence of the Lord himself, saints and angels in glory break forth in a thunderous "Hallelujah Chorus" of thanks and praise to the King of Kings and Lord of lords.

The joy of the triumphant saints is above all a joy that celebrates what God's grace and power has accomplished for them. From their perspective in eternity they see that God has destroyed his enemies and brought salvation to his people. In this vision the ultimate deliverance that God grants believers is described as a wedding celebration. "The wedding of the Lamb has come," the saints in glory sing, "And the bride has made herself ready." The Lamb in the picture, of course, is the Lord Jesus. His bride is the church, the sum total of all believers who have ever lived. The relationship of the Lord to his believers is described as that of a bridegroom to his bride in numerous places in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. In today's Gospel Jesus compares his second coming at the end of time to take his believers to be with him forever to the coming of a bridegroom to receive his bride and

to take her to the wedding feast he has prepared for her. It is for that coming and the joy they know awaits them in heaven that believers continually wait.

Knowing a bit about Jewish marriage customs at the time of Jesus will help us to better understand the picture of our text. After the agreement to marry, which often involved the parents as well as the couple, a private or semi-private betrothal ceremony was held and this ceremony included the giving of vows as well as the legal arrangements resulting in the couple now being regarded as husband and wife. The couple did not come together or consummate the marriage, however, until some time later. During this interval the groom and the bride's family would agree on the dowry and the groom would prepare a home for the bride. The coming together of the bride and the groom was a time of joyful celebration. On the appointed day, the bride and her attendants would prepare themselves and await the arrival of the groom and his party. When the groom arrived at the bride's home, both parties would proceed in a parade-like procession to the home of the groom or to a rented hall, where friends, neighbors and relatives would join them for a festive celebration which often lasted for days. The Bible uses these wedding customs as a picture of the loving relationship between the Lord and his people. In Old Testament times God betrothed himself to his people by giving the promise of a Savior and calling the descendants of Abraham to be the bearers of that promise, a promise intended not only for one people, but for the whole world. Jesus, the divine bridegroom, took on human flesh and became the sinners' substitute; his "dowry" was the shedding of his blood on Calvary to redeem the sinful world. The time between Jesus' Ascension and the sending of the Spirit and Jesus' return in glory, the time in which we are now living, is the time of waiting for the heavenly bridegroom to come and take his people to himself. And on the last day of this world's history, Jesus will return in glory and take his believers to be with him forever in the eternal wedding celebration in heaven.

In ancient times as in our own day, the bride's wedding gown was elaborate and beautiful. The bride of the Lamb in the picture of our text is dressed in such wedding finery. She has made herself ready to welcome her groom by wearing a dress of "fine linen, bring and clean." But note the wording when the wedding dress is described. This gorgeous dress "was given her to wear." It wasn't something the bride made or purchased herself. It was a gift given her by the Lamb, the bridegroom. Our text tells us that the fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints. Human beings cannot come into the presence of the Holy God clothed in the filthy rags of their sins. Only the Savior can provide a proper wedding dress for his bride, the Church. Jesus provided a bright and clean wedding dress for his believers when by his perfect life and innocent suffering and death he earned for them a righteousness that they could not earn for themselves, a righteousness that alone enables them to stand before the judgment seat of the Holy God. The picture of the church in glory clothed with the righteousness of Christ is the same picture as that in Revelation 7, where believers are described as those who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." In heavenly glory the Church of believers stands with her heavenly bridegroom, "clothed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne." Here on earth those who by the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ bring forth righteous acts. Their faith bears fruit in

lives of love and service to the Lord and to those around them in the world. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus declares that in the judgment the heavenly bridegroom will point to the righteous acts in believers' lives as evidence of their saving relationship with him.

What comfort and encouragement it must have brought to those struggling 1<sup>st</sup> Century believers to have heaven opened for them in this vision and to be reminded of the heavenly glory that awaited them. What an encouragement it must have been for them to wrap themselves ever more tightly in the robe of righteousness, the heavenly wedding garment that Jesus has provided for sinners through his redemptive work. What an encouragement to be reassured that, even when it seems as if the devil and his hosts are winning the battle here on earth, the Lord still reigns and in the end will completely defeat all of his enemies and usher in the eternal peace and perfect joy he has prepared for his believers in heaven. What comfort and encouragement those reassurances bring us, too. The triumphant saints who have gone before us are even now enjoying the wedding celebration of heaven. And one day we, too, will be privileged to join them. Already here on earth we can, even in the midst of trouble and suffering, "Rejoice and be glad and give God glory." And in heaven those praises will resound perfectly and without end.

Changing the picture a bit the Lord through his apostle declares in the last verse of our text, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb". The emphasis in this picture changes from the relationship between believers and their Lord to the joy that triumphant saints will experience in eternal life. To be blessed is to be spiritually happy and joyful. Believers are blessed already here on earth as through the gospel they are assured each day of the forgiveness of their sins and their restored relationship with God in Jesus the Savior. In heaven that state of blessedness will become sinless perfection. Believers will see the Savior face to face. They will be with him and be like him. They will enjoy perfect fellowship with him like Adam and Eve enjoyed in paradise before sin entered the world. Already in the Old Testament the Lord through the prophet Isaiah described the blessedness of heaven as a lavish banquet at which the finest of food and drink are served and enjoyed. In glory, all believers' needs will be perfectly satisfied. And unlike even the most joyous wedding celebrations here on earth, the wedding supper of the Lamb will never end. Again, note that the guests do not decide, on their own, to attend this banquet. They are invited by the gracious call of the Holy Spirit through the gospel. God's love provides the feast. His love calls sinners like us to the feast. And, because these words are the Lord's words, believers can be sure that the promises God makes are true. And clinging to those promises they can live and die and finally enter glory as triumphant saints. May the Holy Spirit continue to feed and nourish our souls through his Word and the Sacrament until we too, sit down with our Savior at the never-ending marriage supper of the Lamb. Amen.