

Revelation 19:4-10 (NRSV)

⁴And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying,

“Amen. Hallelujah!”

⁵And from the throne came a voice saying,

“Praise our God,
all you his servants,
and all who fear him,
small and great.”

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”

⁹And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” ¹⁰Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

We come today to the marriage supper of the Lamb and his bride. And we celebrate the Lamb's presence with us, even now, at the Lord's Supper.

After the four horsemen of the apocalypse, we return again to the Lamb. This time, we prepare ourselves to meet the bride of the Lamb and pray that we will be invited to their marriage supper. Of course, between the horsemen and the bride lay thirteen chapters of Revelation! So, let's take the briefest look at the story that leads us to the bride and groom.

From horsemen to a wedding

John's visions tell the story of a cosmic struggle between the Lamb and those who oppose the Lamb. In the visions of chapters 6-11, this story plays out as a struggle between the heavens and the earth. As devastation rains down on the earth's inhabitants, the question is whether any will repent and give glory to God. Some do. John sees martyred believers hiding under the altar of God. Later, John hears and sees a great multitude of faithful from every nation. Yet many (most?) resist, they do “not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood” (9:20). Finally, God sends two witnesses who testify to God. Though they are killed, their resurrection causes, at last, people to give glory to God.

After another scene of triumphant and joyous worship, John's visions take a turn. The cosmic conflict is now cast as a struggle between Satan and God – and, yes, you can guess how this will end.

Beginning in chapter 12, Satan is seen as a great red dragon. After failing to devour Christ, who is depicted as the child of a heavenly woman, Satan is defeated by the forces of Gabriel, the archangel, and is cast down to the earth, where Satan is penned in, much like a caged animal. Satan is able to roam back and forth across the planet doing great harm. He forms his own little demonic trinity: Satan, a beast from the sea, and a beast from the land. They wage war on the followers of the Lamb, getting drunk on the blood of the saints. As John's

visions proceed, it soon becomes clear that the Roman Empire, Babylon¹ as it is called in the visions, is the latest in a long line of Satan's minions. Chapter 18 describes the fall of Babylon, after which all the heavens sing "Hallelujah!"² to open chapter 19. After the worship scene which is today's Scripture passage, there is a climactic battle in which Satan, the beasts, and all those who follow them are defeated by "the King of kings and Lord of lords," hence, the triumphant Lamb of God in our rose window. But before racing on to the end of John's visions next week, we need to reflect on this staggering image of the Lamb and the bride.

The bride and groom

Marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people is one of the most enduring and profound of all biblical images. The power of the metaphor is grounded in the significance of covenant. The marriage of a man and a woman is a covenant, instituted by God, to which both are expected to remain faithful. The relationship between God and his people is lived out in a covenant – to which both are expected to remain faithful. Thus, just as adultery is forbidden in a marriage, even making the Top Ten list, the prophet Hosea³ uses adultery to describe Israel's relentless chasing after other gods (Hosea 2). But Hosea also describes God's determination to woo his bride anew so that "she shall respond as in the days of her youth" (Hosea 2:15).

Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the bridegroom. John the Baptist is a friend of the groom (John 3:22-30). When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why his disciples don't fast, he tells them that the disciples are wedding guests who won't fast while they are with the groom (Mark 2:18-22). Numerous parables liken Jesus' ministry and the coming kingdom of God to a wedding feast.

All this prepares us for the images in John's vision. We are nearing the end of the story. The Lamb, Christ, is almost ready for his marriage to his bride, the Church. Jesus' second coming will be the consummation of this marriage. An angel then arrives, bearing a message of salvation, the third of the book's seven beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," recalling Jesus' parable of a wedding feast that focuses on invitations rejected and accepted (Matthew 22:1-14). John is so overcome by all this, that he falls on the ground to worship the angel. He is, of course, scolded by the angel, for we are to worship only God.

The marriage supper

We often make the mistake of thinking of time as only linear. But we live post-Einstein. According to his theories, which have been borne out, time passes more slowly for an astronaut circling the earth at high speed than it does for us on the ground. The astronaut's "after" is my "before." If the astronaut's "before" and my "before" aren't the same, why should I assume that "before" and "after" have any fixed meaning with God?

We struggle to make sense of the New Testament's perspective that God's kingdom has come already, but not yet. We struggle to grasp that the people of God are not just waiting to be the bride, but are already the bride. In the glorious images of Revelation 21, God comes to dwell with his people. And yet God dwells already with his people. We are God's temple. The Holy Spirit is God dwelling amongst us.

All this takes a massive feat of imagination, and Revelation is written for the imagination. John's visions are meant to help us imagine the truth of a reality larger than we see and touch in our daily lives.

I say all this to help us grasp the significance of Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper (see the page three textbox also). When we partake in this communal meal, not only do we pull the Passover and its sacrificial lamb forward to this day, we also pull the marriage supper of the Lamb and the bride back to this time. (There I go thinking linearly again, but it really can't be helped, it's how we are wired.) In Holy Communion, we step out of our time and into God's time, for, blessedly, we have all been invited to this meal.

¹600 years before Jesus, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and burned down the temple.

²Revelation 19 is the only place in the NT where "Hallelujah" appears. It is an Old Testament phrase meaning "praise the Lord!" Handel's Hallelujah Chorus in *Messiah* is taken from Revelation 19:6 and 11:15.

³The book of Hosea has some of the most remarkable biblical imagery weaving together the marriage covenant with the covenant between God and his people.

The Supper We Call Holy Communion

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant. But ask “What is really happening?” and you’ll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn’t help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said “This is my body . . . this is my blood” or “Do this in remembrance of me”? The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to “primitive” Christianity (the Puritans, for example). In our striving to find the middle way, United Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not present otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ’s presence. We hold that “in remembrance” is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus’ death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from the UMC paper, “This Holy Mystery”:

“United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ’s presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord’s Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God’s saving gift for the whole world.”
[Underlining added]

When we come to the Lord’s table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God’s time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven’s clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying “This is the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . .” Of course, it wasn’t *the* night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was *the* night in God’s time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God’s future, his victory of sin and death, the marriage supper of the Lamb and the bride, all come rushing to meet us over the Lord’s table.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, SEPT 30 – OCT 6

Sunday, Revelation 19 Notice that there is not a description of the climactic battle. Why do you think it is missing? Might it be because the battle isn’t really climactic, but anti-climactic?

Monday, Revelation 20 The chapter has received a lot of attention over the millennia! Why do you think that Satan, the dragon, is paroled? Might God yet be hoping that Satan repents? In the judgment scene, who are judged? How do you square this image of people being “judged according to their works” with the NT claim that we are saved by grace and grace alone?

Tuesday, Revelation 21 Here, we arrive at the grand vision of the “end.” What stands out in your reading of these passages? Do these images differ from your preconceptions of “the end.” Notice that the earth doesn’t blow up and the people don’t go anywhere – God comes here. What does this say about our beliefs surrounding heaven and our life after death?

Wednesday, Revelation 22 You might go back and read Genesis 2 first. What is God trying to communicate to us with these images. Note that the book ends as it began: God, Christ – the Alpha and Omega. Might God be wanting us to understand that the “end” is not an event, but a person, not a what but a who?

Thursday, Hosea 2 How would you summarize the messages that God is trying to send regarding his marriage covenant with his people? Why send it in this way?

Friday, Psalm 45 This psalm is one of two wedding songs in the Bible. Who do you think is the groom here? Who is the bride? What are the parallels to Revelation 19?

Saturday, Matthew 22:1-14 When you come to a parable, it is always helpful to remember that parables have one main point. What do you think Jesus’ main point was in telling this parable in the days leading up to his crucifixion?

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is now meeting in Festival Hall at 11am. We hope that you'll join us!

Because Scott is now preaching in the 9:30 service each week, his Sunday class is moving to 11am in Festival Hall. It is open to adults of all ages and focuses on a deeper understanding of Scripture. We'll have more time to deal with the Scripture passage and topic for the week. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@thebibleacademy.com.

Hold the date!! Kim Edwards on October 25 at 7pm

Kim Edwards, author of the huge international bestseller, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, will be at St. Andrew as part of our new St. Andrew Author Series. Her most recent book has been on the NY Times bestseller list for 63 weeks!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about the marriage covenant and why it is so often used in the Bible to describe the relationship between God and his people? What does the word "covenant" describe? How would you summarize our covenant with God? What are our responsibilities? What are God's? How has God been faithful to the covenant? How have you?
2. The marriage supper of John's vision draws on the imagery surrounding Holy Communion. You might share and reflect upon your own perspectives on and experiences with Holy Communion. What were you taught about Holy Communion? Where did you learn this? How has your understanding of Communion changed over time? Perhaps you were once Roman Catholic or Southern Baptist. How does this affect your understanding of Communion at St. Andrew? Do you find Communion to be a rewarding experience or just another ritual we practice? Why do you think that Communion Sunday is often a poorly-attended service at some churches?
 - How might Communion be more meaningful for you at St. Andrew? Would you like to see us take Communion more often? Less often? Have you ever taken Communion in the chapel on Sunday mornings? (It is offered every Sunday and after each Saturday evening service). Why or why not?
 - How would you try to summarize the UMC understanding of Holy Communion for someone else? Which pieces make the most sense to you? Are there parts you find troubling or perplexing?