

I Go To Prepare a Place for You
Sermon by Pastor Jean Duran
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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Anna had been surrounded by her sisters since first light. Giggling and joking had erupted throughout the morning as they have bathed and dressed her and prepared her for today's engagement ritual. They have teased her so much that her patience was wearing thin. She has refused to answer their questions as to whether she will say "yes or no" to Joshua's marriage proposal. Although her parents and Joshua's parents had arranged for this union when both she and Joshua were children, it was always known that, ultimately, Anna would have the final say.

And, today was the day. Anna was 13 and Joshua was 18. Joshua had been meeting with her father for 8 months now, since she had started her moon and become a woman. They had discussed and debated the details of the marriage contract, until both families had agreed on the terms to create a marriage bond. The families were now going to gather to see the contract publically legitimized.

Anna had butterflies in her stomach and she could imagine that Joshua did too. Although he stood in front of her quietly, she could see beads of sweat rolling down his forehead.

Her mother, nodded her head at Anna, as if to say, "girl! pay attention to what the Rabbi is saying!" When the Rabbi finished stating the terms of their

engagement, Anna held her breath as Joshua grabbed a cup of wine, held it up to her and offered it to her to drink. The room stood still as they awaited her response.

Would she drink from the cup, committing herself to marry Joshua, or, would she reject this cup offered with the promise of love and faithfulness? Anna reached out to take the cup of wine from Joshua, and drank deeply. She then returned it to his outstretched hand with a smile.

Joshua then spoke those wonderful **engagement words** that she eagerly wanted to hear, “Anna, my father’s house has plenty of room. I am going there to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me so that you can be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going!” That’s when the room broke out in celebration! Mozel Tov! L’Chaim! To Life!

In our Gospel lesson today, from John chapter 14, we hear Jesus say to his beloved disciples, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And, when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again to take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also? And, you know the way where I am going.”

I can imagine that the disciples’ ears perked up when they heard Jesus quote these words from the **familiar engagement ritual**. They had heard these words spoken by the bridegroom at every wedding that they had ever attended! But, why would Jesus say these words to them on this night when they celebrated the Passover together?!

It had been a strange night. It was supposed to be a night to celebrate God delivering their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They had the special foods items that helped them to remember the details of their deliverance and they had the liturgy which retold the story and led them in discussion. But, at every juncture, Jesus had either said or done something that threw them off. He had washed their feet, and, as they argued among themselves about which one of them would be the greatest, he told them that life was about serving. He told them that one of them would betray him. He told them he would be going away and that they couldn't come with him. And, as they shared the festive Passover liturgy, it had taken a dark turn as Jesus broke the bread and shared the wine and referred to it as his own body and blood and a new covenant.

The tension in the room lay heavy upon their hearts. What did Jesus know that they didn't? It is into this air of confusion and despair that Jesus speaks to his beloved friends, **“do not let your hearts be troubled.”**

And then, Jesus addressed them with the most tender of phrases, those words spoken by a bridegroom to his bride. These are words of love and commitment. Words which speak to a future together. Words that reassure the bride that the bridegroom has her best interest in mind. That everything he does, and will do, will be about building a life for them together. It is a word that promises his love to her “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.”

This wonderful, expansive, deep, committed and fruitful love that Jesus expresses to his disciples, on his last night with them, is even more amazing when you think about how he had a tug-of-war going on in his own heart. He knew where his path was heading. He knew that the wheels were already in motion to betray him and that he would suffer and die. And, he knew, that these, beloved men and women, would flounder in the aftermath of what was to come.

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled.” Not now, and not in the next few days. I’ve got you. My love will be with you and provide all that you need. We will abide together and nothing will be able to separate us from one another. I’m sure that these words were replayed in their minds over and over and over again in the next days, as all hell broke loose.

The imagery of Christ being the Bridegroom and the Church being his bride has spoken to God’s people throughout the generations. To his first disciples and even to you and me today. Jesus loves us and nothing will stop the flow or the power of his love. Not suffering. Not death. Not Betrayal. Not Confusion. Jesus secured his love for the world, once and for all, by his death and his resurrection.

We may experience heartbreak. Our house may burn down. We may lose our job. Our schools may close. Our prom or our graduation or or our mission trip may be cancelled. We may have to postpone a baptism or confirmation, or even a wedding. We may hunger to gather with our friends and family and hug them, never wanting to let go. And we may even experience a world-wide pandemic

that is claiming the lives of thousands. Yes, this may be a part of our story right now, but, it isn't the final word!

It is into this reality that Jesus pours out his love for all people. Red and yellow, black, brown and white. It is in the midst of this chaos that we hear the stories of God's love rising to the top. **Love** that replaces fear with hope. **Love** that translates into so many acts of kindness. **Love** that reaches out to a stranger and holds their hand as they take their last dying breath. **Love** that shares food. **Love** that listens and consoles. **Love** that parades around a neighborhood in honking cars to tell children that they aren't forgotten by their teachers. **Love** that wears a mask and stands 6 feet away and shelters at home because they don't want to make someone else sick. **Love** that brings joy, not giddiness, but joy that is indeed strength for the day. **Love is stronger** and there is **nothing** that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

The word for today is "**you are loved!**"// Jesus is the Bridegroom and he loves you deeply and fervently. He calls you "beloved." Sometimes, we are like the "runaway bride" and we run far away from God's love. But, even when we move away, Jesus never moves away from us. His grace and love pursue us all the days of our lives! Jesus has prepared a place for all of us so that he might "abide" with us and "shelter in."

My dear friends in Christ, this is the good news that God brings to our world today! We all need to hear it! **Love** jumps over the 6-feet that separates us from one another. **Love** embraces us all, no matter what our ethnic background is. No

matter our sexual orientation. No matter what political leanings we may have. No matter if we have a job or we are on unemployment. Jesus, our Bridegroom, looks at each one of us with tender love and compassion. He chooses to love you! He chooses to love me! He chooses to be with us today and every day. He chooses to be with us for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.

The Bridegroom says to you today, **Love is stronger than anything! You are loved!** So, my beloved friends, “let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid!”

Let God’s people say, **Amen.**