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By Belton Joyner, Jr.

January 3, 2016
Text: Genesis 29:15-30
“A Bride Worth Waiting For”

This is a strange text with which to begin a new year. It is all about being sneaky and cheating and taking advantage of people. Are any of those traits among your New Year’s resolutions?

The background story is how Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, tricked his father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the birthright blessing that belonged to Jacob’s younger brother, Esau. (Those sordid details are in Genesis 27.) Now, in this week’s study, Jacob seems to get his comeuppance; he thinks he has worked seven years to earn the right to marry the girl of his dreams (Rachel), but his father-in-law, Laban, fools him by getting the less desirable Leah into the bridal bed. Thus, the trickster gets tricked. Daytime soap operas can’t top this stuff!

I think one of the saddest verses in the biblical story is Genesis 29:30:

bible+study

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

“... (Jacob) loved Rachel more than Leah.” Leah was his wife. She was really a pawn in this mish-mosh. Sadly, after she has given birth to six sons for Jacob (Genesis 30:20), she says—perhaps with more hope than reality---“Now my husband will honor me.” Just when it appears that Leah finally has an edge in gaining Jacob’s favor, Rachel becomes pregnant for the first time. The son who is born to Rachel is Joseph.

The shenanigans are not over. When Jacob bargains with Laban about what price it would take for Jacob to move on with his own household, Laban gives Jacob only messed-up sheep but Jacob finds a way to compromise the value of the flock of Laban’s sheep (Genesis 30:35-42). Cheating begets cheating.

What is going on here? The key figures make all kinds of moral and ethical mistakes. It is hard to find a trustworthy person in the crowd. Surely, God does not intend for God’s children to behave in this way! But, take note! God still uses the frail, broken, self-serving nature of these people to move forward God’s purposes. To use a badly worn cliché, God has made deli-

cious lemonade out of this crop of lemons.

This is no invitation to behave badly, but it is a reminder that God’s grace is sufficient to use even our shabby efforts. After all, the tomb is empty because God has conquered our worst. Thanks be to God.

What Someone Else Has Said:
In *Religion in the Oval Office* (Oxford) Gary Scott Smith quotes President James Madison: “Nothing is more subject to delusion than piety. All manner of errors creep and hide themselves under that veil.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Use even my weakness, Lord...”

January 10, 2016
Text: Song of Solomon 6:4-12
“The Most Beautiful Bride”

Toni and I were married for almost fifty-two years and I never once told her that her hair was “like a flock of goats” (Song of Solomon 6:5). Nor did I ever suggest that her teeth were like sheep who had just

been washed (Song of Solomon 6:6). Maybe I was not romantic enough.

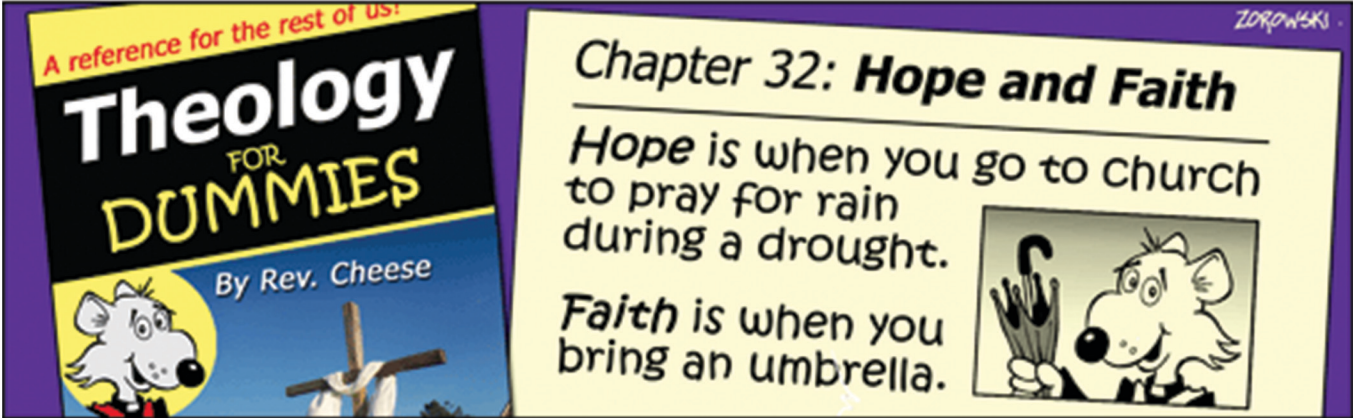
This book is one that students of the Bible argue about. Is it filled with symbols of the relationship between God and Israel? Is it an allegory about Christ and His bride, the Church? Is it a wedding ritual? Is it simply a matter of hormones raging out of control? Erotic lines and the dialogue of love make this book unlike any other biblical material.

However you choose to interpret these verses, it is clear that the Church’s tradition is not afraid of sexuality and physical attraction. Whether these verses are images of God’s love or two love birds tweeting one another, they are filled with passion and energy. Anne Crumpler has written: “Love poetry is included in Scripture because it is part of human life and essential to God’s purposes.”

In the handful of verses that are this week’s study focus, the writer praises “my dearest” both for her inner strength and her outer beauty. First, Tirzah (Song of Solomon 6:4) was once capital of the Northern

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Church Mice



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kingdom of Israel; Jerusalem (6:4) was the capital of the southern kingdom. The woman is being honored for her power—as would be those capital cities. Second, the remaining verses (6:5-9) lavish compliment after compliment on the beloved because of her perfect attractiveness. Neither inner qualities nor outer appearance is sufficient to describe this woman. Her beauty is both what can be seen and what cannot be seen.

Maybe it is because I myself am old that I long for a few more chapters in this book. After living together for multiple years, how did this couple see one another? Which qualities were the lasting qualities? Isaiah 52:14 describes God’s suffering servant as “disfigured, inhuman, his appearance unlike those of mortals.” Contrast that with the portrayals we have in Song of Solomon. What is clear is that no one image is sufficient to depict all human relationships and no one description will tell the full story of God and God’s people.

What Someone Else Has Said: In *Gratitude* (Compendium), a collection of sayings compiled by Dan Zadra, James Gunn is quoted as saying: “Treasure the one who thinks of you when all others are thinking of themselves.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of all, help me see the beauty in those around me. Teach me to look with my heart as well as my eyes...”

January 17, 2016
Texts: Hosea 1
“An Unfaithful Bride”

This is the third week in a row when our lessons have had “bride” as a theme, but this week’s study does not seem to have the context of love, such as Jacob had for Rachel or such as the two romancers in Song of Solomon. Instead, God directs Hosea to marry

what we sometimes call “a woman of ill repute.” (Hosea 1:2)

Hosea follows these instructions and marries Gomer and they have three children (Hosea 1:3, 4, 6, 8) and each child was given a dreadful name: one name describing how Israel will be defeated, one name asserting that God will not pity Israel, and one name claiming that God no longer saw Israel as God’s people. To say the least, these were not good signs.

Students of the Bible often disagree on the meaning of the directive for Hosea to marry a prostitute, but however one’s view is shaped, the text says that Israel has behaved like a prostitute (Hosea 1:2). No wonder Hosea’s marriage (if it represents Israel) has produced such unfortunate descriptions/names for the children.

What is going on here?

Whatever else one makes of these verses, one thing is clear: God loves God’s people enough to give them fair warning when they are about to go off the tracks. That warning system is a role that is often given to the prophets.

How would we today recognize a signal from God that we are falling into spiritual prostitution, that we are living out unjustly, that we are far afield from God’s will? What would God say to us today about ways in which we are unfaithful?

There is a joke—sort of a joke!—about a pastor who said, “I must be a prophet; I have been run out of four churches!” Maybe. Maybe not. But we do need to listen to those whose voices sounds a different note than all those around them. “Different” does not mean “right,” but it might

alert us to the good news that God loves us enough to chastise us and to correct us.

What Someone Else Has Said: In his book on the parables of Jesus (*Reading the Parables*, Westminster John Knox), Richard Lischer writes, “...if we focus exclusively on the theological dimension of the good news, how do we guard against the easy spiritualization that overlooks the suffering of the poor?”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my ears, Lord...”

January 24, 2016
Texts: John 2:1-12
“A Wedding in Cana”

This week’s study text is often referred to as “Jesus’ first miracle.” Although the King James Version describes this event as a miracle (John 2:11), more recent translations call it a sign. The word being translated here is *semeiōn*. That word literally means putting a mark on something to show that it is significant.

What I notice is that even though this “water into wine” moment seems significant, no one makes much of it at the time. The servants and the headwaiter (or steward) are about the only ones (other than Jesus and Mary) who are aware of what has happened. It helped the disciples “believe in him” (John 2:11), but what about all the other guests at the wedding? They are strangely quiet about the whole thing. Only in looking back—as John does—does this grow in significance.

It dawns on me that I might well be oblivious to the miracles and signs around me. How often has our Lord changed a life and I didn’t notice until later?

How often has our Lord moved the Church to a new hospitality and I didn’t catch it? How often has our Lord put a miracle/sign in my life and it was only in looking back that I realized that the Lord had been at work?

Another thing that encourages me is that this miracle/sign occurred in the regular, ongoing flow of life. There is no flashing light. There is no clap of thunder. There is just a crowd of thirsty folks at a party, something of everyday life. Jesus moves in the midst of everyday life to bring His gifts. Praise the Lord! 8809 Millers Bend...2809 Guess Road...Raleigh-Durham Airport...Silver Spoon Restaurant...2133 South Henry Street...these all are ordinary places of my daily life and they are places where Jesus can do miracle work!

This miracle/sign story shows Jesus right in the mix of life where people lived. He had a rhythm of time apart (Matthew 6:6, 26:36, for example) and time “in the midst” (John 1:14, Luke 17:11-14, for example). It is the rhythm of the incarnation.

What Someone Else Has Said: In *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection* (Baylor University Press), Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric has written: “...Christ’s manner of life was not for his sake but for ours. His association with other people does not satisfy the needs of his life but the ends of the incarnation. By making friends of fishermen and eating with sinners, Jesus opened the way to salvation...In the incarnation of the Word, the primordial exemplar becomes a human exemplar, but the latter only follows on the former.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of this and every place, turn my daily moments into times when I know Your presence...”

January 31, 2016
Texts: John 11:38-44
“The Death of a Friend”

Even though we know that death has a hundred percent guarantee, we find all sorts of ways to avoid using the word. Check on the obituary section of your local paper. In the paper I read this week, one person “departed his life;” another “passed away peacefully;” another “left this earthly life;” another “took her last breath on earth;” one “made a peaceful transition to be with her creator.” According to John 11:14, Jesus said simply, “Lazarus has died.”

I don’t mean to make light of these euphemisms; they help us deal with death, but the truth is that behind each of these expressions is a reality: someone is dead. That is the context of today’s study text. Lazarus has, uh, slipped away. The King James Version is more to the point: “Lazarus is dead” (John 11:14).

Philip William Otterbein (one of the founders of the United Brethren with whom The Methodist Church merged in 1968) preached a sermon entitled “The Salvation-bringing Incarnation and Glorious Victory of Jesus Christ Over the Devil and Death.” He spoke about the text (Hebrews 2:14) that asserts that Christ *destroyed* the one who has power over death, the devil. Otterbein notes that the word translated “destroyed” is one of two New Testament words that can be translated “destroyed.” One of the words means “to obliterate so as to no longer exist.” The other word—and the one used in the text in Hebrews—is *katargeō*, a word that means “destroy” as in the sense of rendering useless and putting into submission.

Do you see the power of what Otterbein is saying? Death is not obliterated so as not to exist; we still die, but death has lost its

power; we still die but death does not have the final word (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Jesus has a wonderful way of giving us a glimpse of the kingdom of God. He does not heal every sick person in Judea; he does not feed every hungry person in Jerusalem; he does not give sight to every blind person or cure all lepers in Palestine. But he does give us a glimpse of that kingdom in which there is no sickness, mourning, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:4). And in this study text, we get a glimpse of Jesus’ power over death. Lazarus will, of course, die again and, as one writer has said, will need his grave clothes again. Jesus, on the other hand, dies, but can leave his grave clothes folded in the empty tomb; He won’t need them again (Luke 24:12). His resurrection points to a resurrection promised to us.

What Someone Else Has Said: Oscar Cullman (*Immortality of the Soul or Resurrections of the Body*, MacMillan) wrote: “The Christian hope relates not only to my individual fate, but to the entire creation.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Giver of new life...”

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vip report

marriages:
Congratulations to Keith Sexton (First: Elon) and Tracy Clayton (Phillips Chapel) who were married on Nov. 7 at Mt. Tirzah UMC.

births:
Congratulations to Cameron Merrill (Fairway-St. Francis) and family upon the birth Nov. 4 of twins Ellie Louise and Max Everette.

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Starting a new church can feel like starting a business. As we began **Crossroads: North Campus** just two months ago, I felt a strong conviction that if we began this church as a business and not a compassionate community of Christ followers, Jesus might just come in and flip over our tables. We needed a starting point for serving the least and the lost in our community - we chose sandwiches and water.

On a Wednesday night our missional community made PB&J's. The next day in the August heat, a small gaggle of us took those sandwiches and a cooler of cold water to downtown Fayetteville, handing them out with an invitation to pray for any needs. Some passed. Some loved the food and water, but didn't want prayer. Most

were not only grateful for the provisions, but were happy to pray with us.

We knew we were not saving the world. We knew we looked silly. We hoped we were helping. But this was something... and something is better than nothing. It's a starting point to encounter people at a crossroads in life.

We've decided to get out and show up, somewhere... anywhere... because God is everywhere. And I think he is waiting for us to show up.

This story made real by **Impact10**. Become a ministry partner today!



Rev. Kyle Burrows is Crossroads: North Campus Pastor



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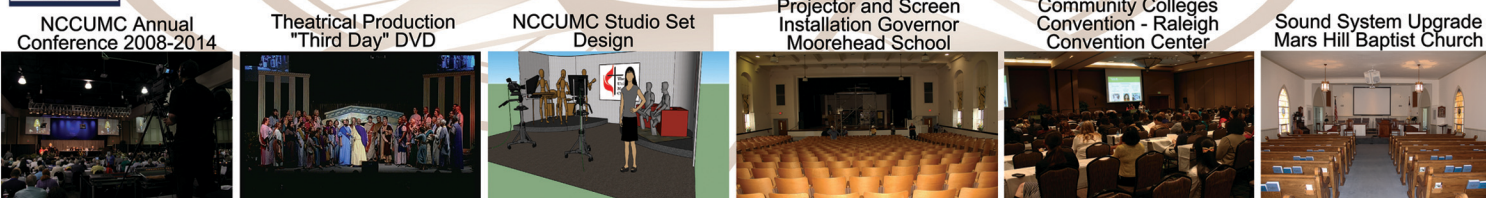
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