

Marriage of Christopher Rene Avila and Deborah Lynne Phelps-Davis  
December 17, 2023

Dearly beloved, the church is now assembled together in the presence of God, and we are compassed about with a great cloud of witnesses, including an innumerable company of angels, that see and hear what we do, as we witness the joining together of Christopher Rene Avila and Deborah Lynne Phelps-Davis in marriage. Those members of the body of Christ who are assembled here today, give our assent that this marriage is appropriate, and in accordance with scripture: neither of you is bound to another spouse, and you are equally yoked together in Christ (you have each made, and currently maintain, a good profession of Christ in your words and your deeds).

Remember that marriage was established by God in the Garden of Eden, as a foundational element of the human creation, and it is emblematic of Christ and His bride, the church. Therefore, as we rejoice with you two dear friends on this happy day, our hearts are enflamed with love for Christ – that bridegroom that we long to see – and with hopeful expectation of that time that will shortly come, when we will no longer be a bride preparing, but a wife joyfully dwelling with and serving our husband in Beulah land, forever. The Lord revealed that beautiful scene to the apostle John, which brought John immediately to his knees in joyful gratitude! Consider it:

***Revelation 19:7-9*** “7 Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. 8 And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. 9 And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, *These are the true sayings of God.*”

Who gives this woman to be married to this man?

Chris, please take the ring that you have brought and place it upon Deborah’s finger while I recite the vows that you are hereby entering into with her as your wife:

Do you, Christopher Rene Avila, take this woman, Deborah Lynne Phelps-Davis, to be your wedded wife; to love, nourish, and cherish her above every other creature, and to render unto her all due benevolence; to daily edify her in Scripture, dwelling with her according to knowledge, giving honor unto her as unto the weaker vessel; to have your heart wholly trust in her; to provide for her temporal good; to hold her in no bitterness, do her no cruelty, and deal not treacherously with her – but rather to conceal her faults, failings, and infirmities; and to keep yourself only to her as being heirs together of the grace of life, until the day comes that Christ returns in power and glory or that God Almighty sees fit to separate you from her in death?

Deborah, please take the ring that you have brought and place it upon Chris' finger while I recite the vows that you are hereby entering into with him as your husband:

Do you, Deborah Lynne Phelps-Davis, take this man, Christopher Rene Avila, to be your wedded husband; to love him above every other creature, and to render unto him all due benevolence; to reverence and obey him as your head, even as Christ is the head of the church; to adorn yourself with the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, being in subjection unto your husband, in the Lord, willingly and cheerfully, doing well, and not being afraid with any amazement; to hold him in no bitterness and to do him no cruelty; and to keep yourself only to him as being heirs together of the grace of life, until the day comes that Christ returns in power and glory or that God Almighty sees fit to separate you from him in death?

You are now husband and wife – no longer twain, but one flesh. The membership of this called out assembly of believers now bears witness to this covenant that you have both made before God. We bear witness that you both have done so willingly, with understanding, and in accordance with scripture, and that it is therefore lawful and binding in the eyes of God Almighty.

***Matthew 19:6*** “Wherefore [you] are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

**Sermon to the Saints which are at Topeka, Kansas -- Sunday, December 17, 2023**  
**The Wedding of Christopher Rene Avila and Deborah Lynne Phelps-Davis**

***“¶ O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.” (Song 2:14)***

Good morning to those who have come to this house on this glorious day of rejoicing in this blessed type we have been given related to our relationship with Jesus Christ. Every opportunity I get to speak to a couple of new souls entering into the office of marriage – with all of the glorious types and shadows that flow from that relationship and its nuances – I feel an acute and unique weight. We all here, members of the body of the Bride of Christ that is about the business of making herself ready (Revelation 19:7) – have a Scripture-based, relevant relationship to this new creature being formed.

***“He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.” (John 3:29)***

This here is John the Baptist talking with some of those who followed along with him while he was doing his work in baptizing. It was after he baptized Christ<sup>1</sup> but before he was cast into prison.<sup>2</sup> His disciples were seeking clarification because deceitful, legalistic Jews had slipped into the group raising doubts about whether John or Christ should be doing the baptizing. That’s the context. John declares that the bride (the Church) belongs to Christ. While we are present and rejoice in hearing the voice of Christ (the Word), we don’t have authority or interest in messing with the marriage. The husband sets the policy ... the bride follows the policy ... the friends of the bridegroom stand and hear and rejoice. Christ sets the policy ... the Church follows the policy ... individually as ***“Friend[s] of God” (James 2:23)*** we stand and hear and rejoice.

There is a natural, and a supernatural (in spirit), wonder for each of us to be participating in the proper celebration of this type. We are witnessing a thing that is relatively unheard of. Not just in our generation, but in every generation. A body of people called out who will solemnly consider the duties we have to one another – and to God – in this human institution called marriage. A man and a woman who consider entering into this relationship – not selfishly for the fulfillment of some earthly interest, but with the mantle of the truth of Holy Scripture resting upon the body that flows forth from this day. It is a wonder, and it is a privilege that we should both rejoice in and take on with great sobriety.

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<sup>1</sup> ***“¶ The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.” (John 1:29-33)***

<sup>2</sup> ***“For John was not yet cast into prison.” (John 3:24)***

As I was preparing myself for this happy bit of work, the question that needed to be framed up properly and then answered is what passage – from this love note we have prepared from eternity for us (the Bible) – will be most relevant to this event? We are living in a time of great upheaval in the world. We’re witnessing what appears to be the initial splinterings of the decreation of this world and her population. Every day is filled with new and ever-growing traumas on all sides. The noise presently might be most evident to those who are watching – who have either work-related interest or are just of a disposition where you are keen to know what the Lord is doing **“among the inhabitants of the earth” (Daniel 4:35)**. But my spirit glows with a certain anticipation that it will be soon that it breaks out upon even those who may now be relatively oblivious. Things are happening.

So, in such a world dynamic what do I say to my friends here. What do I say to these two little lambs who are being joined together. How do I make use of this day and event created by God to feed the sheep? Reading in the Song of Solomon is always a good place to go when you want to be saturated with knowledge about the relationship between Christ and His Bride the Church. When you want to know the antetype more fully – and consequently have a greater grasp of the type in all of the seemingly endless nuances. Truthfully, the lessons of how two of God’s elect souls should treat each other cover the Bible from Genesis to Revelation; so we have plenty to work with. But this beautiful book of Solomon’s Song is just so perfectly suited to the task ... and it does not disappoint. So today we will examine what this passage teaches us about the type and the antetype in this relationship – the bride and bridegroom ... the Church and our Lord Jesus Christ – to give us relevant learning and great comfort in four particulars:

1. The nature of the Bride
2. The condition of the Bride – as she navigates her duties in this life
3. The desires of the Bridegroom toward his Bride
4. The view of the Bridegroom related to his Bride

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**“O my dove”** may at first sound like simply a term of endearment, and there’s nothing wrong with such a use. So husbands if you see this disposition in your wife, you could do much worse for this purpose. But to grasp the beauty of the passage, we should look first at what this name means when describing the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the second time the word is used in the Song ... and it is used a total of 31 times in the Bible. Five in the usage by Noah to determine when it was safe to leave the ark. Other passages reference her eyes (3), her wings (3), her mourning cry (4), her nesting pattern (2), her haste in flight (1), her gentle descent (3), and her harmless nature (1). Each of these uses has much for us to parse out that informs the scriptural use of the type. And likely all would be useful in the discussion of the text. I want, rather, to focus on those attributes of this creature as is intended by the Preacher when he wrote this remarkable book of love.

When Noah was coming out of the whole destruction of the earth and her inhabitants, he sent forth a dove – *“a bird that being swift and simple, willingly ‘flies’ back ‘to his windows’ (Isaiah 60:8) through love and faithfulness to [her] mate and young.”* (Trapp). Nothing about the dove is unreliable in going forth; no feasting on the things of the earth or need of lofty playing about. *“the dove flies lower and longer than the raven”* (Poole). This bird is about the business appointed to her, and then returns faithfully to tend to the affairs of her nest. Gill says: *“The dove is a creature innocent and harmless, beautiful, clean,*

*and chaste; sociable and fruitful, weak and timorous, of a mournful voice, and swift in flying; all which is suitable to the church and people of God”.*

By the mercies and graces of God, of course, the nature given to this bird fits how we as Christ’s Bride engage with our environment – and how the wife is seen by and engages with her husband. How do you engage with those without – including the enemies of Christ? You’re innocent in your doings, and harmless in your disposition. Your beauty is in your godly, chaste manner of living. Having a clear-eyed sense of your sinful nature and without any desire for the strength of man – **“for when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10)** – you have a spirit of mourning for your sins and would **“rather glory in [your] infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon [you]” (2 Corinthis 12:9)**. But the diligence of the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31<sup>i</sup> is your delight, so you fly to do the work the Lord has graciously put before you – in whatever context that work should come. There’s no contentiousness in this dove. No craving the squabbling conflict that defines the wives (and churches) of this generation, seeking their own glory and honor without the first sincere thought to their unity with their husband (or Christ) and affection for him (Him).

So Christ has made His bride in preparation of the marriage. So should every bride therefore be to her husband. So should every bride be seen by her husband, who doth **“safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil” (Proverbs 31:11)**. She is properly to be the antithesis of that **“great whore”** of Revelation 17:1 whose filthy, drunken, murderous ways are carried forth by the satanic governmental forces through every generation of mankind. If any conduct of the wife – in the marriage relationship – looks like that gaudy, tyrannical **“queen” (Revelation 18:7)**, she has left the disposition of this sweet dove and puts the new body into distress. So with the church, if **“fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness ... be once named among you, as becometh saints” (Ephesians 5:3)**, she has left the disposition of this sweet dove and put the relationship with our husband Christ into distress.

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***“[Thou] art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs”***

I was reading a few weeks ago with my house, and a single word jumped off the page at me with a solemnity that made the passage (and my spirit) sag with the weight of reality. It is relevant here because the next words in this passage from Solomon’s Song does the same thing – for the same reason. When John the beloved is writing about his vision – after he sees the pouring out of the seven last plagues of God’s wrath onto the earth in preparation for the battle at Armageddon – he opens it with these words: **“he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness” (Revelation 17:3)**.

In Solomon’s poem, he says His bride is **“in the clefts of the rock”**. He says His bride is **“in the secret places of the stairs”**. It is the same place. Hardship. Darkness. Unsafe. Under threats. In danger within and without. Uncomfortable. Frightening. Restrained. Cramped. Exposed to the elements. I am not excited to be the one who represents to you two who are married on this day the unpleasant reality of your future state. Just as Christ’s Church is in the wilderness – you are going to find yourself feeling as though you’re in the wilderness. Just as Christ’s Church is in the clefts of the rock – you are going to find yourself feeling as though you’re in the clefts of the rock. Just as Christ’s Church finds herself in the secret places of the stairs – that place so tucked up under there that bats and rodents and spiders are

comfortable to nest and hide – you will find yourself feeling as though you must be hidden off in the secret places of the stairs.

Here's an inconvenient truth. Just as the Church puts herself into that uncomfortable and terrifying place, you will put yourself into that condition by your decisions and your actions. All of your friends here may be screeching in your ears all of the warnings against making those decisions or taking those actions ... but that same disease of mind and heart that possesses us when we're young and when we imagine ourselves to be accomplished and wise, will lead you into the wilderness ... into the cleft of the rock ... into the secret places of the stairs. There's Bible for this proposition. I'll share a couple of stark examples, with the caution that we all consider ourselves well beyond the specific misconduct referenced within them:

***“It is better to dwell in the corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman and in a wide house.” (Proverbs 21:9, 25:24)***

***“Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked”. (Revelation 3:17)***

One passage related to the relationship between man and wife, the other related to the relationship between Christ and the Church. Same threat. The context of this passage we're examining is the greatest example of how the Church's conduct is frequently the cause of our own distresses. Consider the words from Christ in the next verse:

***“Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.” (Song 2:15)***

This is a direction to remove the schismatic influences from the church ... the vine-destroying, mischievous and malicious foxes from the vineyard. They have no business being allowed in, but some carelessness or neglect brought the conflict in and now it threatens the health of the Church and – much more importantly – the relationship between the Church and Christ. There is always the threat of conflict in the relationship. Once it gets let in, there is a tendency to go into a miasmatic indifference to the threat and rather hide off in distress and self-pity. This leads to greater conflict which leads to greater darkness and fear. Division forms. Conflict forms. Your failure to honestly consider yourself as well as your spouse – in everything you do – creates the risk of conflict. Our failure to consider our Lord Jesus Christ – in everything we do – creates the risk of conflict.

In this passage, neglect has occurred on the part of the bride. That neglect has created a serious rift between her and her husband. The neglect has allowed a schismatic element into the relationship. There is darkness now. There is confusion now. There is distrust and suspicion now. There is a deep need for clear and swift action, which is why we see a few verses later the bride calling out:

***“Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether.” (Song 2:17)***

*“While I remain yet in this painful and terrifying darkness”, she proclaims, “please hasten to the healing of my hurt and repairing of my breach”. While the Church is mourning and wrestling with the carnage that her error has brought to the relationship with our Christ, we must seek His swift action to repair the damage. I offered these additional passages from the Song to help you to see why she sits mournfully in **“the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs.”***

This passage, then, helps those who are married to see how desperately certain it is that you will wrestle with this threat. It also helps to see how to prevent it, and the remedy once infected. Let us look now to that.

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***“let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice”.***

There’s a duty defined in these rather romantic-looking words. A duty that is the subject of a number of sermons from this pulpit -- and rather far more conversations among this body. A duty that should be automatic and natural among all of us in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, but so much more so among a husband and wife. Communication. Open-faced, honest, sincere, importunate (when necessary), charity-driven communication.

***“Then the heathen that are left round about you shall know that I the LORD build the ruined places, and plant that that was desolate: I the LORD have spoken it, and I will do it. Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them;” (Ezekiel 36:36-37)***

This passage has layers of lessons for us in the precious context of this marriage. The passage immediately precedes the vision of the valley of dry bones. The prophet Ezekiel is on a tear<sup>3</sup> – or more precisely, the God of eternity has him in a bit of intense energy through these advanced chapters of his prophecies. The context of these words I’ve quoted is the description of the renewed land of the promise to Abraham after the slaughter of Antichrist and his armies at Armageddon. The thrust of the quoted language is that there will be a time when the remaining heathen of the earth will be in great wonder about how the land they had so utterly destroyed is so suddenly and comprehensively renewed and refreshed. The promise from God here is that they will know it was Him who did it. For His glory, not for His peoples (v. 32). It is as certain to be accomplished as though it has already happened.

Yet. Nevertheless. Even still. Despite the actual reality that the promise of God that His Bride the Church will be delivered by His own ***“outstretched hand and with a strong arm” (Jeremiah 21:5)***, He still declares plainly ***“I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel”***. Colorfully, the expositor Trapp explains these words: *“Though I have promised my people all these boons, yet I look they should put my promises in suite, by praying them over.”* There is an abiding duty of prayer to God for the fulfillment of the promises of deliverance from the things we face in this wilderness and for the grace sufficient to withstand the conditions of this life until deliverance comes. Prayer to God. Turning with our

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<sup>3</sup> The term “on a tear” is idiomatic and means “engaged in a continuous, fast-paced procession of actions or events, especially with favorable results. In or into a protracted state of agitation, fury, or zeal.”

countenance open to His unflinching examination to see that we are, as Nathanael, ***“an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile”*** (John 1:47).

Similarly, there is a duty that we who fear the LORD speak often one to another (Malachi 3:16), showing our countenance to one another so that our discerning spirits can operate at the spiritual level with one another, and we have the sweet communion of the saints in this body. Most importantly though – particularly for this passage from the Song and for this event we are here about today – you two need to be in constant and open-faced communication. The husband has an affirmative duty to set a policy in the relationship that plain, non-ego-driven, kind, compassionate, helpful, charitable, affectionate, open-faced, guile-less, regular, and Christ-centered communication is going to be the rule. The wife has an affirmative duty to own that rule as the first obligation, and make it the garment she wears and that keeps her safe from the horrors in ***“the clefts of the rocks [and] the secret places of the stairs”***. You’re not safe from going into those dark places – whether by your own stupidity or (as the patriarch Job learned) by God’s providential determination that you be tried. You’re only going to be kept safe from being overtaken by it. You will have wisdom about what has brought you there and you will have wisdom about how you will escape the snares of Satan lurking there.

Post about your home the reminders of plain passages in Scripture about the duty and the mercy and the beauty and the happiness that is this regular communication when done in service to the Lord. It may serve to bring the sweet peace of close communion between husband and wife to your new body. Sweet Deborah, let Chris see your countenance and hear your voice with grace and charity. Chris, my friend, make it easy for her to do so and chase away every deceitful human inclination to close that access to her spirit off.

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***“[F]or sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.”***

I *think* it is clear that the way in which the communication of the Church is made to her Bridegroom is through the public and private prayers that body and her members make. But to solidify that in the hearts and minds here today, I think it helpful to provide a little reminder of just how critically important it is. It might even be good to emphasize here that the sweetness of the voice of the Bride ... and the comeliness of her countenance is specifically referencing the condition of the Bride when the whole of the earth is preparing for that Bride and her Christ to be married. If there was ever a time for the relevance of her voice and her countenance to be considered by human beings, it would be – or should I more appropriately say *will be* – when this amazing scene is on display:

***“Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.”*** (Revelation 19:7)

It is that Bride’s voice being addressed in Solomon’s Song. It is that Bride’s readied countenance that is being considered there. So if we want to get a comprehensive understanding of how sweet that voice is – and how comely her countenance, I suggest we can do no better than to see what words have been written about those things in that context.



**“And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand. And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth:”** (Revelation 8:3-5)

This scene expresses the energy that launches the woes upon the earth under the seven trumpets. These words express the earthly and heavenly energy that unleashes the most severe and deadly and destructive powers of God that have been displayed since the Flood of Noah and before the return of Jesus Christ (at the seventh trumpet). In the thick of it all – and in fact a triggering component in it all – is this *“sweet”* voice of the Bride. Her prayers for deliverance from the conditions that she has been pressed into – both by the assaults from without and by her carelessness and inherent sinfulness.

Her afflictions from without are because she is the Bride of Christ. Her afflictions from within are because of that wicked deceiver Satan successfully peddling the lie *“ye shall not surely die”* (Genesis 3:4), and her only hope is that she is the Bride of Christ. Because she is Christ’s and because her only hope is in His redeeming blood, there is something that goes with her prayers or her *“sweet”* voice in this scene. The incense that is offered and goes up with her prayers to the throne of God. That incense is Christ’s obedience to His Father. That incense is the way by which this Bride has a change in her countenance before the throne. It is the identical thing that is expressed with a different metaphor when it comes time for the wedding of the Lamb, to wit:

**“And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.”** (Revelation 19:8)

Do you want to know why a bride being married in this church will wear white at her wedding and supper? It’s not because of the worldly notion that it expresses her virginity – that’s human-based hokum. It’s about this passage. It’s because it expresses the type to the antetype of this Bride of the Lamb who is arrayed with the righteousness from Jesus Christ her Husband!

The fine white linen ... the incense ... both represent the same thing. It is the covering of the Bride and her words. It is comeliness of her countenance. She is a reflection of her husband, and his God-centered care of the body that is created in this marriage. He sets the proper tone in service to the King. He speaks of it, and he sets a policy of obedience to that King. She is the reflection of those words and deeds – and therefore of him.

**“He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:”** (Ephesians 5:28-29)

When this blessed Bride is turned back to her Christ with her open countenance and her prayers, then she is again renewed to Him in the sweetness of her voice and the comeliness of her countenance. When the communication is flowing in accordance with the proper and God-centered policy of the body ... the home ... the relationship, the voice of the bride is altogether sweet, and the bride’s countenance is altogether lovely.

In every conflict that arises – small and great – between you two sweet friends of this collection of saints, you must set your minds, hearts, and spirits to communication. That communication has to have its roots in an understanding that you are living the type of the relationship between Christ and His Bride the Church. There is nothing ordinary about it. There is nothing pedestrian about it. The communication grounded there will bring you back to the loving and communion that is started here, as I will share from Trapp:

*“Sweet is thy voice. Because uttered by ‘the Spirit of grace and supplication,’ whose very breath prayer is, and without whom prayer is no better than a ‘sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.’*

*And thy countenance is comely, By reason of the image of God repaired in thee, clearly shining in thy heart and life. This renders thee comely indeed, so that I am the better to see thy face, and to hear thy voice. To lovers nothing can be more pleasing than mutual converse and conference.”*

I love you all. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Here is the text of Proverbs 31 regarding the virtuous woman: *“¶ Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.” (Proverbs 31:10-29)*