

September 1, 2024

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 (NRSV)

pg. 623, OT Pew Bible

⁸ The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

⁹ My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.

Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.

¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me:

'Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;

¹¹ for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.

¹² The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.

¹³ The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

Heard It in a Love Song

The Song of Solomon represents a radical departure from the other books of the Old Testament. Whereas most of the other books focus on external issues:

political intrigue, international conflict, prophetic oracles, heroic deeds, and divine judgment, the Song of Solomon paints a very different picture. The poetry of this book is filled with intimate details of a relationship between two lovers who seem to be lost in another world—far removed from the affairs of state or temple politics. Its poetry expresses an intimacy that might seem to belong more in an edition of *Cosmo* than in the Bible. In fact, Song of Solomon stands out in sharp contrast to the rest of the biblical books in two primary ways. First, nowhere in its eight chapters is God mentioned. The book of Esther is the only work that shares this distinction. Second, it is the only biblical book in which a female voice predominates. Elsewhere, women's perspectives are shared through the voice of a narrator and their actions and contributions to their respective stories are mostly overshadowed by male heroism.

Most likely, Solomon had little hand in the production of this book. Its attribution to Solomon probably represents an attempt by the scribes to associate the book with the wisest king in Israel's history and who stood at the pinnacle of Israelite power and prestige. So, what are we to do with this book? Why in the world did those who brought the Old Testament into a cohesive unit decide to include it? Even some of the early rabbis had a hard time trying to figure out what to do with this erotic love poetry. The early Christian church had similar problems, preferring to use allegory as a way of understanding it—primarily drawing on the image found in the Book of Revelation of Christ as the bridegroom and his church the bride—a love song expressing the love between God and God's people.

But perhaps we're trying too hard. Maybe we shouldn't be so put off or intimidated by the titillating details of the Song's poetry. Perhaps we should pause and consider its beautiful honesty. The verses we encounter this morning remind us that relationships, with both God and others, must be nurtured, cultivated, and cherished. Special moments don't just happen; they require in us a willingness to be present in each moment and to not take for granted the opportunities we have to more fully enjoy life. The sound of children's laughter, the thoughtful gesture from someone we love, the gentle breeze across the face after a stressful day at work, an unexpected call from a friend, a helping hand from a stranger, the smell of fresh-baked bread—these are just a few of the gifts

God's places daily across our path. Perhaps the Song of Solomon was included to be kind of a foil to all the noise and commotion of the rest of the Old Testament. Perhaps this book was included to remind us that God works not only through kings and prophets, judges and generals, but through the everyday moments that we all experience. Maybe it is placed as a friendly reminder of our need to appreciate beauty and to hear the sacred in our routines—that we must take care to lean in a bit closer and see God's face and hear God's voice in our lives.

United Methodist Bishop William Willimon remarks: "With all the other serious—sometimes so deadly serious—concerns of Scripture, is it not a delight to encounter a book of the Bible that takes time to marvel at the wonder of the human body and the joy of human love?"

In our text the woman is the first to speak. She praises the glory of her beloved and follows with a remembrance of his words to her. Reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet, the beloved then takes his place beneath outside her window, calling her to arise and come away with him. It's springtime, not only in the world, but in their hearts. He sings, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The language is luxuriant with flowers, singing, the song of the turtledove, lush fig trees and the sweet smell of spring blossoms. For those in love it is as if a desert has burst into blossom. The lovers simply can't believe that the whole universe doesn't rejoice in their love. Everything seems so perfect, so right. The flowers that bloom have burst into bloom just for them and the birds that sing, sing only for their delight.

Perhaps we owe those who compiled the Bible in its present form thanks for retaining this unusual yet beautiful book. This world, our bodies, the blossoms and the birds, the gazelles and the leaping stags—they are all spectacular creations of an abundantly creative God. The greatest sin would be not to celebrate their beauty too much, but not to notice at all. As these two ancient lovers recount every detail of the arms, legs, lips, and voice of their beloved, they encourage us to notice ourselves and others and the world. When someone is in love with someone else, the lover tends to love every inch of the beloved, tends to marvel at the way sunlight falls upon the hair or the funny way a lip upturns. To love is to notice God in the details; to notice is to love. The lovers of the Song

of Solomon help us to remember, to notice, to rejoice. “For lack of attention,” writes the English mystic Evelyn Underhill, “a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day.”

I have always loved thunderstorms. There’s nothing like hearing the thunder rolling off into the distance and catching the fresh fragrance of ozone as the rain begins to fall. In his book, *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner shares his love for the rain. “I loved the rain as a child. I loved the sound of it on the leaves of trees and roofs and windowpanes and umbrellas and the feel of it on my face and bare legs. I loved the hiss of rubber tires on rainy streets and the flip-flop of windshield wipers. I loved the smell of wet grass and raincoats and the shaggy coats of dogs. A rainy day was a special day for me in a sense that no other kind of day was— when the ordinariness of things was suspended with ragged skies drifting to the color of pearl and dark streets turning to dark rivers of reflected light and even people transformed somehow as the rain drew them closer by giving them something to think about together, to take common shelter from, to complain of and joke about in ways that made them more like friends than it seemed to me they were on ordinary sunny days. But more than anything, I think, I loved rain for the power it had to make indoors seem more snuggly and safer and a place to find refuge in from everything outdoors that was un-home, unsafe. I loved rain for making home seem home more deeply.”

A clergy friend on Facebook this week posted an incredible picture of Jupiter as seen from its own south pole. The picture was stunning—swirling gasses and storms in colorful striations. But when I first saw the picture and hadn’t yet read the caption, I thought that it was a picture of a geode—you know, one of the rocks that, when cracked open, reveal vibrantly colored mineral deposits. It made me wonder about patterns in nature, swirling galaxies that look an awful lot like the swirling storms we often see over the Atlantic Ocean, or the clouds of Jupiter, mimicked in the colorful striations of minerals in the rocks beneath our feet. Nicaraguan poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal once observed: “Everything in nature has a trademark, God’s trademark: the stripes on a shell and the stripes on a zebra; the grain of the wood and the veins of the dry leaf; the panther’s coat

and the epidermal cells of the lily petal; the structure of atoms and galaxies. All bear God's fingerprints."

While so many of the scriptural texts that we encounter Sunday in and Sunday out encourage us to do something, something for God, something that extends the love of Christ in the world, the Song of Solomon, with sensual, intimate language is trying to tell us that, sometimes, it's important to just be. The Song of Solomon gives us permission to stop and smell the proverbial roses, reminding us that everything that God created was made for our benefit, crafted out of love from the divine heart. We are reminded that we serve a God who delights in our delight, who from Genesis 1 forward makes it clear that when we as God's image-bearers revel in the splendors of God's good creation, divine hands clap together the way a grandmother beams to see her grandkids dive into those thickly iced chocolate cupcakes with a reckless abandon that only children seem to have. Sometimes there's no sight more beautiful to behold than a child's face rimmed with frosting. "Eat up!" grandma says, "That's why I made 'em!!"

"Enjoy it, my children," God says, "That's why I made it!"

Closing Thought/Blessing

The Late Spanish Cellist Pablo Casals:

"Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that never was before and never will be again."

Beloved, may you go into the world hearing the voice of God wooing you with words of hope and devotion.

Beloved, may the Christ, who is God's love personified in flesh and bone, lead you to love those whom the world has deemed as unlovable.

Beloved, may the Holy Spirit anoint your heart, your mind, and your eyes that you might see God's fingerprints in the ordinary stuff of life.

"For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come..." Amen.