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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
Twenty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, August 30, 2015
Text: Song of Songs 2:8-13

A Love Song

Introduction to Scripture

Our first reading is from the creation account in Genesis: *Genesis 1:26-31*.

Our second reading is from the evocative poetry of The Song of Songs. Here the woman speaks of a visit from her beau: *Song of Songs 2:8-13*

Sermon

We stood by the baby grand piano in her living room. She wore a tasteful cream colored suit and clutched a bouquet. He wore a dark suit and a smile which crinkled the skin by his temples with their tinge of distinguished gray. Her teenaged daughter and a few friends of theirs were present. “Dearly beloved,” I began, trying not to let my voice quaver. It was my very first wedding. His first too, a former confirmed bachelor. Her second. At the time—I was a mere 25--this couple seemed old to me. Ha! She was probably not quite forty and he, a bit her senior. After years of lonely single parenting for her and a solitary life for him, they had met in the choir and fallen in love. Standing there they practically glowed. I read to them the scripture passage I just read to you. “For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.”

The next time I read this passage aloud was the week before my own wedding. I was scheduled to preach that Sunday, six days before my nuptials. I remember telling my Atlanta congregation that I chose to preach from The Song of Songs because at that point I couldn't concentrate on much else besides being wonderfully in love with my young stag who leapt over subdivisions, urban sprawl, and the Chattahoochee River to court me. That's as racy as it got. It was a pretty tame sermon on the gift of marriage. But I do recall telling the congregation about one wedding gift I had received. Jack and I publicized that we didn't want any wedding gifts. We each already had households furnished with toasters, towels, and teapots. Instead, we told church members that if they wanted to honor us, they could make a donation to the church's capital campaign. One member flagrantly disregarded this suggestion and as a wedding present gave me a gift certificate to Victoria's Secret.

So today is my third time around in worship with this passage from The Song of Songs. It's actually one of the lectionary passages for today. As I sat down and read it and the whole eight-page book, The Song of Songs, in preparation for this sermon, my not-so-young stag was *not* the first thing that came to mind, though, do know he is still my beloved even if his leaping and bounding isn't quite as impressive as it was 21 years ago. Rather, it was the dove who nests upstairs in our house and the gazelle who has gone off to college that came to mind. In our land (at 1141 Nona Drive) we are serenaded by the voice of the turtledove and see the figs ripening before our eyes. Fellow parents of teenagers and anyone who has ever been the parent of a teenager, you know what I'm talking about: the sap is rising; spring is springing; hormones

are dancing the tango. On my legal pad of notes and ideas for this sermon, I abbreviated Song of Songs at the top of the page as “SOS.” And that’s how it can feel to parents of teens. We cry out “Help!” because we older and wiser stags and does know that awakening sexuality is a powerful thing—intoxicatingly wonderful, on the one hand, and making us vulnerable to great harm, on the other. There’s a refrain that’s repeated three times in the book Song of Songs. I was tempted to write it in capital letters on all our bathroom mirrors, with lots of exclamation points: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready.”ⁱ Instead, the message gets conveyed at our house not as poetic graffiti but as parental lectures.

So, just what is The Song of Songs doing in the Bible? It’s love poetry after all—a love song, or bits of multiple love songs, stitched together. Its language is full of sensuality, longing, intimacy, playfulness, and human affection. Some of the similes and metaphors are quite striking. The young man is describing his darling’s tresses and perfect smile with no missing teeth. He croons, “Your hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins and not one among them is bereaved.”ⁱⁱ I doubt we’d hear lyrics like that in any Top Forty love songs nowadays, but, hey, a compliment is a compliment! This is poetry which celebrates romantic love. There’s nothing else like it in the other 65 books of the Bible. It almost didn’t make the cut. It’s surprising to find a provocative book like this in Holy Writ.

It’s also surprising because in all its eight chapters The Song of Songs never mentions God. There’s one other biblical book that also shares this distinction. That’s the book of Esther. But the book of Esther does tell the story of Jews living in exile and has an underlying theme of God’s providence. Esther does allude to the Jewish rituals of prayer and fasting and the feast of Purim. However, there’s no hint in The Song of Songs of Israel’s sacred religious traditions and rituals or of God’s saving acts in history. And, as I said, God’s name appears nowhere. It’s been called totally secular.

There’s yet one more surprising thing about The Song of Songs which makes it much different from the rest of the Bible. It’s the only book in scripture in which the female voice predominates. In the poetry, there is dialogue between a male and a female speaker. More than 56 verses are attributed to the woman, whereas only 36 are assigned to the man. And from her verses, we can tell that this is a strong young woman. She’s confident, assertive, and passionate. She will not be thwarted in her desire. There is mutuality and equality in her relationship with her young man. Both the female and male bodies are praised. This is certainly different from the parts of scripture which advocate constraining women and find their bodies problematic because they bleed and give birth. Some scholars speculate that the book’s pronounced and unrelenting female point of view points to a female author.

So, it was not without controversy that The Song of Songs barely (no pun intended) made it into the Bible. Nevertheless, it was accepted into the Jewish canon in the second century AD—probably because it is either attributed to or dedicated to King Solomon and mentions him several times. That’s the way a lot of books made it into the canon—riding on the coattails of more famous sources. But really, its inclusion in the Bible shouldn’t surprise anyone who has read Genesis 1 or the Christmas story, for that matter.

In Genesis 1 we get the beautiful creation account of God creating everything—oceans

teeming with life, fruit trees bearing fruit, and ultimately male and female human beings. God stepped back from this wonderful and fertile world and declared, “That’s good. That’s very good!” God’s first command to the humans was not “obey me” but “be fruitful and multiply.” Genesis 1 is a joyful celebration of the physical world and human beings as part of it. Our physical bodies are good.

There’s long been a heresy lurking around the church that says that physical matter is not good. And, in particular, our bodies are, if not evil, at least somehow lesser, and that we must subdue them until we can escape our fleshly prisons into the pure realm of the spirit. Nothing could contradict this heresy of Gnosticism more clearly than the incarnation. Nothing says “no way” to Gnosticism better than what we sing at Christmas: “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.” God in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, a drooling baby born to a woman, is certainly an affirmation of the goodness and sanctity of the body. Judaism and Christianity are both emphatic that the physical, material world—with its mountain leaping gazelles and cooing turtledoves, with its male and female human beings equally made in God’s image—is a marvelous thing.

Of course, then there’s Genesis 3 and the Fall. Everything was affected by the first couple’s disobedience, including human sexuality. I don’t need to list for you all the sordid and distorted ways people can abuse another. Look no further than the morning paper or what flees across cyberspace. But I don’t want to focus on the dark side this morning. I want to reflect on the light and delightful side. I want to proclaim that *The Song of Songs* is a positive and affirming celebration of an exclusive, loving human relationship between two people who have chosen each other and are equals. Their relationship is complex, as are all courtships, both ancient and modern. Their dialogue is packed with all sorts of emotions ranging from longing to impatience, from defiance to teasing, from joy to frustration. He chases her. She chases him. They are together. They are apart. Others don’t approve. But love is strong. “For love is strong as death,” the woman declares, “passion as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Maybe all this talk of fiery passion proved to be too much for the rabbis and church fathers. Rabbi Akiba sternly warned against the popular practice of singing *The Song of Songs* in first century Palestinian pubs: “Anyone who trills his voicing in singing *The Song of Songs* in the banquet house or treats it as some kind of tune has no part in the world to come.” He insisted that the book was sacred: “For all the writings [of scripture] are holy, but *The Song of Songs* is the Holy of Holies.” His view not only carried the day but the millennium. For well over a thousand years in both Jewish and Christian circles the book has been read allegorically. The two lovers have been interpreted as the Lord and Israel, or Christ and the Church, or God and an individual. It’s tempting to dismiss this as a prudish reaction. However, I’ve decided it might have some credence. After all, you can read scripture on more than one level. It’s not a case of either/or but both/and. Plus, we are not biblical literalists. So I think there is some merit to reading this love poem in a metaphorical or spiritual way. As much as *The Song of Songs* is obviously a love song between two people, it can also be read as a love song between God and us.

This isn’t so farfetched when you read the text carefully. A close reading finds allusions

to other parts of scripture.^{iv} For example, in one section the woman is searching for “the one whom my *soul loves*.”^v She repeats this phrase four times in short order, asking the sentinels if they have seen “the one whom my *soul loves*.” It’s not a phrase you’d expect to hear in a missing person’s report. But if you stop and remember the first and great commandment, the weightiest verse in the Torah, “You shall *love* the Lord your God with all your heart, *soul*, and might,”^{vi} it rings a bell.

But it also makes sense to read The Song of Songs metaphorically because there’s something fundamentally alike between being intimate with God and being intimate with another human being. In both relationships we transcend ourselves. Love, whether between humans or between us and God, is powerful. It’s transformative. To speak personally, it is Jack’s acceptance, affirmation, and sheer delight in me that have, perhaps more than anything else, set me free from my failings, healed me from my brokenness, and taught me something about God’s love. The Song of Songs, then, is poetry we can read as a window into our yearning for God and God’s yearning for us.

We are familiar with metaphors for God like Father and Shepherd, but I invite you to try on for size “My beloved” the next time you pray. Have you ever thought of God as wooing you, as calling for you to arise and come away? Have you ever supposed that God delights in you? Or comes gazing in the window of your soul to admire its beauty? Do you think your relationship with God has to be serious all the time? Do you find room for playful interchange with God? Do you allow God into your dreams and imagination?

The medieval abbot Bernard of Clairvaux was very taken with The Song of Songs. Incidentally, John Calvin was a great admirer of Bernard. Over eighteen years Bernard composed eighty six sermons on Song of Songs and he never got beyond chapter 3, verse 1. In them he reflected upon the fact that God is deeply in love with us and longs for our love in return. Now I know that we are not monks who live a contemplative life aimed solely at a mystical union with Christ. We are uncloistered Christians living in the modern world. But I daresay we have the same longing for intimacy and connection with our creator that every person experiences. I urge you to be attentive to that desire and to listen for the call of the one who calls you beloved. God’s love for each of us is stronger than death.

And if you are a teenager here this morning say your prayers but check your bathroom mirror for parental warnings not to stir up love before it is ready even as you admire your beautiful God-given body and soul. Amen.

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- i Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5, 8:4
 - ii Song of Songs 4:1b-2
 - iii Song of Songs 8:6b-7
 - iv Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, (Cowley Publications: Cambridge, MA: 2001), p. 68 ff.
 - v Song of Songs 3:1-4
 - vi Deuteronomy 6:5