

Song of Solomon (2:8-13, 8:6-7)

Today we finish the Old Testament Poetry and Wisdom series with the Song of Solomon. We began with Proverbs, followed by Ecclesiastes. The first question that comes to mind after reading the Song might be, “What in the world is this doing in the Bible?” It’s not an uncommon reaction to a first encounter with the Song of Solomon or as it’s known from the Hebrew title, the Song of Songs. A love song between a man and a woman full of lush and sometimes erotic imagery hardly seems appropriate for Holy Writ. But, here it is, in our bible and in our lectionary readings, “My lover is like a swift gazelle or a young stag ... My lover said to me, “Rise up, my darling! Come away with me, my fair one!” Modern readers are not the only ones to be startled by the content of the Song, especially the first time the complete song is read. Today we only have a short extract of what the Young Woman is saying to the Young Man.

Its inclusion in the canon of Scripture was a matter of great debate, as you can imagine, among rabbis in the first century CE. Some considered it little more than a drinking song. The matter was settled by the great teacher and mystic, Rabbi Akiba, who said, “The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies,” a rather strange statement.

The Song of Songs is a unique example of ancient Hebrew literature. It

is written in the style of ancient Middle Eastern love poems. It has long been associated with Solomon, which may be related to the tradition of Solomon's many wives.

The poetry in the Song is rather repetitive and lacks a clear structure, indicating that, over time, several secular love poems have been brought together. The speakers are a Young Woman and a Young Man who take turns expressing their love. A chorus of Young Women at times chimes in. Although there is no narrative linking the speeches, there is beautiful use of imagery, often very elaborate, and of a very sensual kind, even erotic, in some spots.

The erotic nature of the language in the Song, as well as its 'secular' nature, has given rise to a variety of interpretations being applied to the Song. Often It has been read as an allegory. In Jewish tradition, the bridegroom has been interpreted as Yahweh and the bride as the Jewish nation. The poem then becomes a retelling of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, from the Exodus, through the exilic experiences and the restoration of the people in the promised land.

Other Jewish mystics, such as Immanuel ben Solomon, 13th-14th centuries CE, saw the Song as representing the union of the active intellect with the passive intellect. It's probably because of its language that the Song has not been read publicly in synagogues from at least the 4th century. However, it was and is prescribed in Jewish tradition for

private reading during the Passover celebrations.

Christian interpretations included Origen's who lived 185 - 254 CE. He believed that although the Song might be based on the marriage of Solomon with Pharaoh's daughter, underneath this was the allegory of Christ as the groom and the bride as the church. This interpretation was adopted by Jerome, Augustine, John Wesley and the editors of the King James Version of the Bible. For many Roman Catholic scholars the bride became the Virgin Mary. Martin Luther saw the bride as a symbol of the state and according to this view, Solomon uses the poem to thank God for the loyalty of his people. Suffice to say that the many and varied attempts to interpret the Song have never satisfactorily explained all of the erotic discourses and love scenes.

Pre-modern interpreters saw in this poetry a description and celebration of the love between God and God's people. The metaphor of marriage for the relationship between God and God's people is attested in several biblical books. It is not a very big step to see the Song as an extension of that metaphor, describing in detail the extravagant love of God for God's people and (at last), the faithful love of the people for God.

Another way of reading the Song is to take the connection with Solomon and his love of wisdom as a guide and see the song as one full of love and praise for wisdom itself.

Throughout the Bible, Wisdom is portrayed as female. Alternatively, if one sees the Song as revealing something about God and not just a secular creation, then one might relate it to the love and sometimes erotic language use of God in the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah and even in more pornographic style in Ezekiel. (And some people think the Bible is rather boring.) Whereas, in those cases, the language of love is used in relation to matters of ethical and/or religious practice, in the Song, the very human language of love could be seen to reveal the depth of the passion within God for the people.

Early and medieval Christians shared this high opinion of the Song. Theologian Origen, wrote homilies and a ten-volume commentary on it, although it was a book of only eight chapters. In the Middle Ages, the Song was the subject of more commentaries than any other Old Testament book. Bernard of Clairvaux, in the twelfth century, wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song, and did not get past the second Chapter.

So, just what is it about this book that has inspired such enthusiasm through the centuries? Modern scholars are almost unanimous in viewing the Song as a celebration of sexual love between a man and a woman, unlike the Jewish and Christian interpreters of previous centuries, for whom the Song described the mutual love of God and Israel or Christ and the Church.

At its most basic level, the Song of Songs is simply a celebration of human love, all human love, in its various forms. It consists primarily of dialogue between a pair of lovers. There is no explicit narrative plot in the book. Instead, the scenes are connected by similar motifs and themes: descriptions of physical beauty, memories of past encounters, and longing for the lover's presence.

The sometimes erotic language of the Song may seem shocking to some, but we are dealing with a God whose love for us is shocking to our sensibilities, in terms of the depth of that love in Christ.

So the Song is a celebration of erotic love, not allegory. A literal reading requires coming to terms with the raw sexual desire and gratification called for by the Young woman to the Young Man, which many readers found - and find - incompatible with their notion of scripture in spite of the fact that these verses are enshrined and canonized.

The Song is unique for its passionate lyrics extolling the physical love between a woman and a man, and especially for the dominance of the woman - in voice and agency. Today's excerpt, like all eight chapters of the book, celebrates human sexuality as part of God's good creation; the garden setting calls to mind the Garden of Eden. The lovers share a mutual ardour for each other.

The woman is neither shy nor submissive; in fact she speaks more than

the man. In a reversal of the punishment of Eve in Genesis, which says, “And though your desire will be for your husband, he will be your master,” the woman in the Song declares, “I am my lover’s, the one he desires.” The Hebrew word translated “desire” occurs in the Old Testament only three times. The author of the Song, by using this rare word, is referring back to the Garden of Eden, where the relationship between man and woman was first damaged. In the Song, the lovers are in harmony with one another and with the natural world; the brokenness of relationships between humans, and between humans and the earth, is healed.

The Song reverses the curses of the Garden of Eden, including the rupturing of the relationship between man and woman. There is a mutuality about this love that repairs that rupture and places the lovers back into the Garden. The Song is overflowing with images of lush gardens and abundant fruit; no thorns or thistles here. The garden is a sustaining oasis nourishing its human, plant, and animal occupants, creating an egalitarian, non-hierarchical relationship.

The lovers articulate their love for each other’s physical person. This is a lovely reminder that our physical bodies are beautiful and beloved, and that loving relationships occur within and not in spite of human bodies.

The man asks his love to run away with him; it does not appear that they are running away from anything or towards anything. They just want to

be together. The natural beauty of the world around them reflects their love, blossoming flowers, fruit-laden trees, singing birds. It is for the moment, a paradise for them.

The natural world evokes all of the senses as does the love between the couple. The very physicality of this text as scripture is its gift. The woman, man, their love and their world are all God's very good creation. There is no division between body and soul.

The Greek philosophical tradition became very important to the Church Fathers many of whom, unlike the Song, rejected and restricted sensuality, sexual love, and bodiliness. The Song does not share the later dualism separating flesh and spirit inspired by Greek philosophy in which the body and its desires are regarded as being lower or lesser than spiritual things. In the Song body and soul are one, inseparable, united in love.

The Song describes a love marked by fidelity and mutuality. The lovers are faithful to each other. They have eyes for no one else: "My lover is mine and I am his." And "But as for my own vineyard, O Solomon, you can take my thousand pieces of silver."

The Song celebrates faithful human love. For this reason alone, it could be argued that the Song deserves a place in Scripture. In a culture saturated with sexual images but sorely lacking in prominent examples

of lifelong, faithful love, the Song celebrates a love between two people that is marked by mutuality and fidelity.

But such an interpretation of the Song does not exhaust the possibilities inherent in the text. In what is perhaps the most famous passage of the Song, the woman says, “For love is as strong as death, and its jealousy is as enduring as the grave. Love flashes like fire, the brightest kind of flame.” The phrase, “the brightest kind of flame,” is more literally translated from the Hebrew as, “a flame of the Lord.”

“Jealousy” is used often, though not exclusively, for talking about God’s passion for Israel and Israel’s or the individual Israelite’s devotion to God. In Deuteronomy it says, “The Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.”

Divine love and human love are not mutually exclusive. Human love, at its best, can be a glimpse, a reflection of God’s love. The Song of Songs, with its distinctive biblical voice, gives the opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the joy of both kinds of love. But, how often do we think about the deep meaning of love, beyond clichés: “love one another”; “for God so loved the world”; or beyond poetry such as Shakespeare’s sonnet, “How do I love thee, let me count the ways”; or beyond what music tells us in lyrics, such as, “What the world needs now is love sweet love.”

Our concept of love in recent years has been clouded and altered by

Hollywood, rock music, and pop culture in general and we may have lost sight of God's pattern of love for us. Maybe past generations didn't have the foggy view of love that we suffer from today.

Perhaps there is another way at looking at this Song of Songs, which was described as the "Holy of Holies" by the Old Testament rabbis and became part of the Sacred Writings. Perhaps the talk about physical love is more than that. Perhaps it is a way to explain passion, the highest degree of love. Maybe we are to use the same kind of physical passion that two people have for one another, to love God, to love our fellow humans, to love God's creation. This is the same passionate kind of love that God has for us. Physical love, as the root of passion, describes this kind of love; a passion in all our loving relationships, including our relationship with God.

Should there be an essential difference between God's passionate love for humanity and people's passionate love for one another? In the Song of Songs we have a pattern of what love should be. The book is a metaphor or an illustration of God's love expressed through the passionate love of a human couple.

Our Old Testament Wisdom and Poetry series ends with the Song of Songs. And it is appropriate that it does so because it is here, finally, in the Song, that we see what makes a good life – which was addressed in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. That is, we see that the good life consists

of right relationships - between people, between humanity and the earth, and between humanity and God.

In the love described in the Song, we see a reflection of the love that first called the world into being as we read in Proverbs, that according to Ecclesiastes continues to sustain it season by season, and that will bring it to new life beyond death itself. Such love and passion are worth reflection, and the Song of Songs gives us evocative and lush language to do so.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR PENTECOST 5 - JULY 2, 2023

Holy God, in calling forth creation from the void, revealing yourself in human flesh, and pouring forth your wisdom to guide us, you manifest your concern for your whole universe. You invite us, as your people, to gather the world's needs into our hearts and bring them before you.

We pray for your church, that we may be a beacon of hope, grace, love and light in this world. May our open doors reflect your open arms to all. May our arms and hands reaching out to those in need reflect your love for all. May our forgiveness of one another reflect your forgiveness for all.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

We pray for our national Bishop Susan, our five regional bishops, and Bishop Linda of the Anglican Church in Canada, along with the delegates of our respective churches gathered at the joint National Assembly ending in Calgary today. Guide them in their decisions, goals, and dreams for the future of your church. Give them, and us, bold visions in imagining opportunities for collaborating more closely together as co-creators of your kin-dom. We pray for all pastors, deacons, and lay leaders that you would energise them and support them in their work. May vacation time over the summer provide us all with life giving rest and recreation.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

God of all, we give thanks for the many blessings we receive from you daily. We give thanks for those who have recently become Canadian citizens who now call this country their home. We give thanks that there is a growing awareness by us as settlers in valuing the stewardship of the land and natural resources that have been cared for by Indigenous peoples long before we arrived. Help us together commit to the ongoing hard work of reconciliation and building mutually respectful right relations for the sake of the future of this land we call Turtle Island and Canada.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

We pray for our land which is beset by wildfires from coast to coast, destroying communities, causing immense deaths of wildlife,

destroying natural habitats, threatening fresh water sources, severely impacting livelihoods, and requiring ongoing alerts and evacuations. Keep your people, and all living creatures safe as they flee the fires. Provide them with the resources and support they need now and in the future. Watch over and keep safe the firefighters as they work in dry and hot conditions. We are grateful for the 1500 firefighters from around the world who are here helping.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

We pray for those around the world who, because of their beliefs, face imprisonment and martyrdom; for those whose countries are torn by internal conflict, war, and violence; for those living in poverty; for those who live in starvation. We pray for those who are being used in slave labour, child labour and sex labour.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

We grieve for the millions of refugees who have lost their homes, their families, their livelihoods, and some, their lives, in search of a new life, for peace. Unite humanity in supporting them in their suffering and in their quest for a safe place to call home. Help us as a country to commit to opening our doors to welcome refugees, and migrants and support them in establishing a new life here.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

Help us to never lose sight of the reality that each person we encounter is a child of your own making, regardless of race, ethnicity, creed, economic situation, sexual orientation or age. May we in the faces of those around us and across this globe see your own face, filled with love and hope, mercy and peace.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

We pray for those who are in hospitals today; for those at home with illnesses; facing surgeries or recovering from treatments and/or surgeries; for those in long term care facilities and those who are home bound; for their families during these times; for those who are facing death; for those who have died and for those who are grieving. We pray for doctors, nurses, health care workers and all care givers.

Loving God ... **listen to our prayers.**

We call upon you in our most vulnerable moments. We call for you to bear witness to our lives, to help us take the steps needed to serve you with love, compassion, and faith. Continue to remind us that it is our greatest privilege and duty to serve you and all God's people all over this beautiful and hurting world...to serve with hearts of grace and souls stitched with the love that you teach us and show us every day.

Amen.

God in Community, Holy in One, make us one Body from many as we pray as Jesus teaches us, saying:

Our Father ...