

“L-O-V-E”
September 27, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Song of Songs 2:10-13

My beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; 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 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.

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion 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.”

Oh, church, how I love the old romantic songs, those sweet, sticky, gushy, romantic songs like *“Dream, dream, dream, dream, dream...”* or *“Wise men say only fools rush in, but I can’t help falling in love with you.”* I love these songs and I love *singing* these songs – crooning my heart out, letting all those sweet, gushy feelings out into the world.

Two people in love: it’s been the subject of music, the source of poetry, the stuff of art, for as long as we have been human. Two people in love: it’s an old, old story that we find endlessly fascinating, full of delight and mystery. Two people in love: something about it is almost...holy.

Well, we’ve made it, church! Welcome to our third and final Sunday of our preaching series on the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. Two weeks ago, we began with the book of Proverbs; last week was Ecclesiastes, and today we are spending time with the Song of Songs (also sometimes called the Song of Solomon).

This isn’t my first rodeo with our Bible’s Wisdom Literature, you know. Several years ago, very early in my ministry, I taught a Wisdom Literature Bible Study class to young adults at the church I served in Des Moines. I thought it would be funny to begin one of our classes by reading excerpts from the Song of Songs, but to not tell anyone that that was what I was doing.

I opened with prayer, and then I said something like, “Okay, I’d like to start this class by sharing a little bit of this great romance novel that I’ve been reading lately.” I began: “*How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead.... Your lips are like a crimson thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck is like the tower of David, built in courses....*”¹ I’m going to stop there because it gets even steamier, and I don’t know, it’s Sunday morning. We’d better keep this PG for now.

So, anyway, after I read this passage to my young adult Bible Study, they were like, “That is really beautiful. Which Harlequin Romance Novel are you reading these days, Pastor Mary Beth?”

“None of them!” I said with delight. “I’m reading from the Bible! – from the Song of Songs, chapter 4.”

“What?!” They couldn’t believe it.

Their reaction was pretty typical, though. It’s not at all uncommon to hear a passage from the Song of Songs, and assume it’s from something *other* than the Bible. The imagery is so lush, and yes, even erotic at times, that it hardly seems appropriate for Holy Writ.

But, if we lived, say, seven hundred years ago, during the Middle Ages, we wouldn’t be so shocked by the content of the Song of Songs. Early and medieval Christians absolutely *adored* this book. In the Middle Ages, the Song of Songs was the subject of more commentaries than any other Old Testament book. As I shared with y’all a few weeks ago, Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth century theologian and monk, wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song (and didn’t even make it past chapter 3!)²

So, what is it about this book that has inspired such enthusiasm? Let’s look at a portion of the Song again, from chapter 8: “*Love is strong as death, / passion fierce as the grave. / Its flashes are flashes of fire, / a raging flame.*”³ The phrase, “a raging flame,” is more literally translated from the Hebrew as “a flame of the LORD.” Hmmm. In other words, God – God!! – is linked with passionate human love. Somehow, God and romance are intertwined, interconnected, maybe even dependent on one another.

It’s also worth noting that the Hebrew word for “passion” can be translated a few other ways, for example, “jealousy” or “zeal.” And these words, “jealousy” and “zeal” – the word we translate as “passion” in the Song of Songs – these words occur all throughout the Old Testament. They are descriptions of God’s passion for Israel, and Israel’s devotion to God.⁴ (Just to give you one example, Deuteronomy 4:24 reads, “For the

¹Excerpted from Song of Songs, 4:1-4 (NRSV).

² See: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2477.

³ Song of Songs 8:6 (NRSV).

⁴ See, for example, Exodus 20:5; Numbers 25:11; 2 Kings 10:16; Psalm 69:9; Isaiah 9:6; Isaiah 37:32; Zechariah 8:2.

LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."⁵) God is jealous. God is zealous. God is... passionate.

So, *why* did those Medieval Christians love the Song of Songs so much? Well, for them, the Song describes the great, passionate love – not necessarily between two people – but between God and Israel, or, later, God and the church. It's poetry that celebrates the extravagant love God has for God's people.

And that's pretty cool. If you read the Song of Songs that way, you start to get a glimpse of how much God really loves you, how God would do anything for you. God's love is not some abstraction. God loves you passionately, particularly and deeply. God gets jealous, like a lover, when you stray. God lies awake at night, wondering how you are doing. God has been known to spend an entire evening just gazing at pictures of you.

God is smitten with you. With apologies to Elvis, *'Cause God can't help falling in love with you. (sung)*

I love that interpretation of the Song of Songs. I love glimpsing a God who loves us so much, so *zealously*, that God would do anything for us, anything to keep us, anything to make us God's own.

But I don't want to dismiss the other interpretation of this book, an interpretation that has become more popular in our post-Enlightenment world: viewing the Song of Songs as less allegorical and more literal. Which is to say: the Song of Songs is simply about two people in love.

On one hand, compared to the older interpretation that this book is about *God's* love for us, this second way of understanding the Song can seem superficial, not as sacred, maybe not even as interesting. But I would argue that this second interpretation – that this is "simply" a long romantic poem about two human beings in love – is just as compelling as the first.

Remember what Jesus says when he's asked what the Greatest Commandment is? He says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." But Jesus doesn't end there. He goes on, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."⁵

Love God; love neighbor. According to Jesus, these two parts of the Greatest Commandment are inextricably linked. The love we have for each other is dependent on our love for God, and on God's love for us. Love God; love neighbor. *You can't have one without the other. (sung)*

This is why I like to interpret the Song of Songs, not only as God's beautiful, passionate and holy love for us, but also as two human beings' beautiful, passionate and

⁵ Excerpted from Mark 12 (NRSV).

holy love for each another. If we love God, that means we love God's people. Truly, you *can't* have one without the other.

I so enjoy singing those sweet, gushy songs about two people in love. But I wonder if I would enjoy them so much if I didn't know how much God loves us.

Sometimes, when we know in our bones that we are loved by God, our response is to love someone else in passionate, faithful, romantic love, as the Song of Songs demonstrates. Sometimes, though, our response to God's love for us is to show a slightly different kind of love for God's people. It's not a romantic love, but a brotherly, sisterly love for *all* of God's people – and most especially, the ones who are downtrodden, marginalized, lost and least, bruised and broken. The ones whom God might love most of all.

When I love God, and when I know that I am loved *by* God, I can't help but to be moved to love God's people. When I love God, I can't help falling in love with you... and that means *all* of you.

Our three-week series on Wisdom Literature ends today with the Song of Songs. And this seems appropriate. To live life in God is to delight in the God who made us, *and* to delight in everyone else whom God has made.

We love. We love God, and we love each other, *'cause God can't help falling in love...with us.*

Thanks be to God!