

WHAT'S YOUR PASSION?

Song of Solomon 3. 1-5, 8. 5-7; Matthew 4: 1-11

It happened while she was talking... Stuart was invited to a party, along with some friends. A group of them had gotten into some meaningful conversation. Stuart didn't remember the content of the conversation, only the feelings that began to race through him. He had never experienced something like that before. It happened when Beth started talking. He had never met Beth, but he had heard friends talking about her. They had said all kinds of things about her, but nothing could have prepared him for this. Stuart was captivated. He was smitten. The adrenaline was pumping through him. Something powerful was happening...

Years later, as Stuart was reflecting on that initial experience and what followed, he could still access the passion he felt for Beth that evening. Thankfully, it was a passion that was mutual. Over the years this passion developed into a grounded long-term relationship and a solid friendship. But that early passion was the spark. What a gift...

Now, even though love can be described in all kinds of ways and experienced in all kinds of ways, it is passion above all else that makes a good love story and inspires novels, music, poetry and art of all kinds. Passion is attraction, intensity and transcendence. Passion is all-consuming. You get lost in it and it takes you places you never imagined. Stuart's and Beth's kind of passion is a very specific kind. The ancient Greeks called it 'Eros' from which the word erotic comes from. Many people think the bible would have nothing positive to say about erotic love. They're wrong. Our Old Testament reading comes from the Song of Solomon. All eight chapters of this book are pure erotic poetry. Our reading offers only the tip of the iceberg. Read all eight chapters and you will be treated to some gorgeous poetry expressing the intensity of passion two people share for one another – body and spirit.

But why is this book in the bible? God is never mentioned once. What was the committee that decided to include this book in the bible thinking? Maybe this kind of erotic poetry describing such intense passion love between two people, was also a description of how intensely God feels about God's creation? Did they believe God must feel such passion to have made it possible for human beings to experience such passion? We're made in God's image the bible tells us after all.

Unfortunately, though, once the church became an institution, the language of this poetry taken literally became threatening. Especially in a time when celibacy among priests, monks

and nuns began to develop, there had to be another way to read this poetry. It had to be an allegory about Christ and his church. But alongside the official reading of the bible by a celibate priesthood, there also developed a whole mystical movement within Christianity. Mysticism found ways of reading the song of Solomon as a love poem between God and the human soul. Some mystics, in fact, and especially female mystics like Hadewijch of Brabant in the 13th century and Teresa of Avila in the 16th century, used some highly sensual language to describe their relationship with Christ inspired as they were by the language of the biblical book. This would never have been acceptable to the males who dominated the church leadership, so it was only shared privately among other women and those male mystics who also felt such intense body/spirit connections with Christ and expressed it in sensual language in the spirit of the Song of Solomon.

In the end, though, such passion and the intensity of where it could lead, was stifled in the church. Even though it was in the bible, it was silenced, unless you got a hold of mystical journals describing vivid experiences of the divine. Why did this happen? One word: fear. People fear what they cannot control – emotions, feelings, passion. People fear what can happen if passion has its way with us in all its intensity. Rules will be broken, and boundaries will be crossed. We may question things we never questioned before. We may try things and commit to things that will change existing institutions, break down existing structures, challenge existing relationships and inspire radical revolutions. Passion love is about relationships and it is about causes that drive us. Passion is about the kind of faith and hope that changes the world as much as it changes us. Passion is what the church needs more of if it is to have a future in this increasingly secular age.

But passion can also be destructive. Think about what are called crimes of passion. Think about what people do who have been hurt or wounded or betrayed in their love. The worst crimes and greatest atrocities flow out of passion too. And this understanding about passion is as important in our world today as it was in the ancient world. Passion is a gift and an energy that can be as destructive as it can be life transforming. Think about the ‘me-too’ movement, for example. Passion that is not controlled or channelled properly and passion that is not reciprocated freely is destructive. And think about all the perverse and destructive ways sexuality is portrayed and practiced in our world. Social media not only makes us aware of how destructive passion can get. It also provides ways people can be destroyed through public shaming and bullying. Little is private or hidden anymore. Sometimes that good, but often it’s bad too.

Passion is about people, but it is also about things like ambition. Passion is about competitiveness and the hunger to succeed and to win. People are passionate about making money, climbing the social or corporate ladder, getting promoted and recognized, gaining power, influence and fame... The question is, what does our passion serve? Is it a good

passion or a bad passion? Is something worth the intensity of focus we give it, or are we misdirecting our passion?

This brings us to our gospel lesson for this first Sunday of Lent. Jesus begins his public ministry. He is launching his career. He is trying to figure out the next steps in his vocation. What is he passionate about? Where will his passion take him? What will his passion serve? There are dangers. The dangers are temptations. Temptations are ways passion may serve something destructive rather than life-giving. Satan or the devil represents those dark currents in all of us that push us and pull us in our passion in ways bad for us and for others. What are Jesus' temptations? There are three.

The first temptation is not about Jesus' baking skills or magical ability to produce bread. No. Bread represents abundance. Bread represents wealth and all that wealth can bring. Jesus can use his abilities and his talent to make money, to become rich. Of course, that means he must make choices. He must direct his passion in certain ways. He must compromise certain values and make the right friends. He has what it takes. But Jesus chooses to reject this direction decisively: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" he says.

The second temptation is not about diving off the high pinnacle of the temple, relying on angel parachutes. No. The temptation is about security, being in control, playing it safe. Jesus can choose to take the safe road and make friends rather than enemies of those in power. He can choose not to rock the boat or challenge the systems in place. Divine protection can mean getting the security he needs around him. It's the passion or obsession with feeling safe, secure and protected, the obsessive need to be in control. Fear makes us passionate in all kinds of directions where our focus becomes about eliminating risks at all costs. Jesus rejects this direction decisively too. He doesn't need to put God to the test to see whether he will be safe and secure. His life will not be about playing it safe. His path will not be about being in control. His passion will take him in a different direction. It will involve risk. He needs courage not safety.

And then comes the final temptation. Jesus is shown "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour." This temptation is not about being wowed by all the glamour, glitz and glitter of the world. No. This temptation is about power, the kind of power kings and messiahs want. What would Jesus have to do to gain that kind of power? How many people would he have to step over, neglect or use to make his way to the top? He's got the ability and the talent. Is he prepared to use it to get power for himself? No. Jesus rejects this temptation and direction for his passion too. 'Away with you, Satan!' he says, 'for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

Jesus is not suppressing or shutting down the passion in him. By facing his temptations and struggling through them in communion with God, he is also discerning other directions his passion can come alive, directions that will involve risk, opposition, precariousness, vulnerability and sacrifice. The passion to serve the different goals of God's kingdom, the goals of genuine love, often come at great cost. The question for Jesus as it is the question for all of us is this: Are the choices we have made and are making when it comes to our passion, choices that serve the good or the bad? Are we really living our passion for life as God intended us to live it?

As we have begun the season of Lent, the spiritual opportunity before us is to examine our passions? What are we passionate about? Is our passion good passion, life-giving passion, not just for us but for others and our world? Have we engaged our passion critically by talking it out with people we trust, praying about it and reflecting deeply how it affects us as much as others? Are we choosing one direction at the cost of another and is this a worthy price to pay? Are we selling our soul and our integrity somehow?

Passion is a gift of God. It takes passion to change the world and change our lives for good. It takes passion to experience joy and happiness. Imagine how dull and meaningless life would be without passion. But passion can take us into confusing and damaging directions too, leading to profound despair. We need help in examining and discerning a path for ourselves. We need encouragement and support in our passion. We need critical judgement within an environment of caring and concern.

May we, like Jesus, use these 40 days of Lent toward fresh clarity, insight and the courage for change necessary to make our passion a greater gift for the glory of God.

Let us pray: Your love for us is incredibly passionate, O God... We need to feel it, O God, so that we find fresh inspiration, courage and direction on our own journey and with our own passion... Amen.