**September 2, 2018**

**Mark 7:14-23; Song of Solomon 2:8-13, 8:6-7**

Song of Songs (also known as the Song of Solomon) is one of the ancient world’s greatest poems. The language is decadent in its descriptions of Israel’s wealth. One section of chapter 3 (which we did not read) describes a royal procession of King Solomon “like a column of smoke” coming up from the wilderness, “perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant… with 60 mighty men all equipped with swords at their thighs… King Solomon himself on a palanquin of wood from Lebanon, posts of silver, back of gold, seat of purple, and its interior of love…”[[1]](#footnote-1) Even today, sitting in this room thousands of years after the poem was written, we can clearly see Solomon’s procession in our mind’s eye.

Primarily, this book is a poem about a couple who are in the throes of new love’s passion. The woman’s beauty is described in juicy detail: she is “black and beautiful” with cheeks “comely with ornaments,” and eyes like “doves”. The man is described as “a young stag,” “radiant and ruddy,” whose “whose hair is wavy, black as a raven,” whose “body is ivory work,” “legs are alabaster columns,” “speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable.” They are the world’s most beautiful couple, just as each couple newly in love feel themselves to be.

The man and woman are enamored with each other, taking great delight in pleasing one another. For this reason, the book is often avoided in polite conversation. If you read this poem from start to finish, you wonder about the many innuendos and joyful celebrations of this couple’s physical union. Surely *this* kind of material wouldn’t be included in the Bible?! Oh, but it was! Song of Songs should carry warning labels. It is not for the faint of heart. It only makes one appearance in the 3-year lectionary cycle. (Today.) Since we spent a number of weeks reading women’s stories in worship this summer, I thought we would continue to be daring and include this poem in worship today.

The last time I read this book in a public setting, I was serving a congregation in middle Tennessee. We did a summer study wherein an entire book of the Bible was read out loud each week in one sitting. For this book’s performance, Kat and Mike, a newly married couple read the parts of the man and woman. As they read, they looked at one another hungrily and with joy and hope and delight, so that the air around them was charged with hot loving electricity. By the end of the book reading, everyone in the room was fanning themselves and practically swooning from the emotional heat of the poetry. In their reading these ancient words, we were given a window into their marriage. It was a truly special, sacred, and memorable evening. And a reminder of how the Bible can spice up your life in all sorts of ways.

The Song of Songs is certainly a stand out in the Bible. Along with the book of Esther, God’s name is never mentioned in the book. The verses are neither prayers nor praise. This book is pure celebration of the wonder of love and romance and sex. It shows God’s good intention for people to be in relationship free of exploitation and abuse, and full of delight and joy. While it could be used for great date nights, inspiration for weddings and rekindling of covenantal relationships, many people avoid it all costs. For some reason, the goodness therein makes people uncomfortable.

Song of Songs is testimony to the good gifts God gives us. If God is love (as the Gospels tout) and God is our Creator, and if we are made in the image of God, then loving is one of the ways we can be more like God. Loving is also the best way we can relate to God. So when this book is read in worship services, it usually serves as a metaphor for the way God loves creation: passionately, deeply, adoringly, and with utter devotion.

Early 20th century Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Mark Van Doren, wrote of God’s love in 1968[[2]](#footnote-2):

 That God should love me is more wonderful

 Than that I so imperfectly love him.

 My reason is mortality, and dim

 Senses; his – oh insupportable –

 Is that he sees me. Even when I pull

 Dark thoughts about my head, each vein and limb

 Delights him, though remembrance in him, grim

 With my worst crimes, should prove me horrible.

 And he has terrors that he can release.

 But when he looks he loves me; which is why

 I wonder; and my wonder must increase

 Till more of it shall slay me. Yet I live,

 I live; and he has never ceased to give

 This glance at me that sweetens the whole sky.

“When he looks he loves me… God has never ceased to give this glance at me that sweetens the whole sky.” This is the love reflected in Song of Song’s couple. While they look at one another with adoration and wonder, they do so, as Mark Van Doren supposes, because God first glances at us in such a way that “sweetens the sky.” Cue the Broadway scene where lovers catch one another’s eyes, then dance off the stage singing of how blue the sky is today, how bright the stars are tonight, how clear is the language of love. God is whirling and dancing us around with great big mushy love. God is profoundly in love with us. God’s love is almighty and everlasting – stronger than death. It cannot be quenched by water or drowned in floods. It is costlier than anything we could buy. God’s love is stamp of ownership that a maker puts on his creation. God’s love is the seal on our heart. The seal on our body. God’s love is the first thing we know in life, and the first thing that greets us after death. God’s love is our beginning and ending.

But we forget. We forget that God loves us and delights in us. We discover reminders of how much God loves us as we read scripture, worship and pray, and occasionally stumble upon God’s gracious and loving presence in our everyday lives.

One of my favorite contemporary poems by Kaylin Haught [[3]](#footnote-3) describes the process wherein she discovers God’s love and delight for her. She wrote this conversation with God:

 I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic

and she said yes

I asked her if it was okay to be short

and she said it sure is

I asked her if I could wear nail polish

or not wear nail polish

and she said honey

she calls me that sometimes

she said you can do just exactly

what you want to

Thanks God I said

And is it even okay if I don't paragraph

my letters

Sweetcakes God said

who knows where she picked that up

what I'm telling you is

Yes Yes Yes.

 When God looks at us, God loves us. And God says, “yes” to us. With every breath, each new day, each provision supplied, each opportunity given. God says, “yes” to us. Because God loves us.

 But we forget. To remind himself of God’s real love, the Persian poet, Hafiz, wrote in the 14th century: “When no one is looking and I want to kiss God I just lift my own hand to my mouth.” God’s love is around us. God’s love is the one constant we have in life. God’s love is even within us. Some people are blessed to see that love within themselves. They look in the mirror and see God’s loving eyes looking back at themselves. They wash their hands and see God’s loving hands serving themselves. Then they treat themselves with better honor and respect, because they know that they are filled with God’s love. Each day they are carrying God’s love to each person they see and to whom they speak. They are leaving a trail of God’s love from each place they go and to each thing they do.

 But we usually forget. The best reminder of God’s love is the sacrament of Communion. This is a celebration of God’s sacrificial love. This is where we remember how Christ lovingly gave us his body and blood – not because he wanted to, but because we needed it. At this table we cannot help but see how God is utterly devoted to us. God’s devotion and passion for us changes us, so that we leave this table ourselves wanting to be utterly devoted to God. For a time, we will be all googly-eyed in loved with God. All the world will seem aglow. We will freely and gladly share God’s love with others until we forget again.

 Grace abounds. Even though we’ve forgotten how much God loves us, even though we’ve forgotten how much we love God, we are invited once more to gather around this Table today. Thanks be to God for the opportunity to love and be loved. Amen.

1. SoS 3:6-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “He Loves Me” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “God Says Yes” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)