

**Why is THIS in the Bible?**  
**Song of Solomon 2:8-13, 8:6-7**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**May 9, 2021**

**Song of Solomon 2:8-13**

The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. 9My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. 10My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; 11for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. 12The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. 13The 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.

**8:6-8**

6Set 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. 7Many 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.

Sermon

"What in the world is THIS doing in the Bible?" That's not an uncommon reaction to a first encounter with the Song of Solomon. A love song between a young man and young woman... at times, a bit steamy, other times downright erotic... well, that hardly seems appropriate for Holy Scripture, does it?

And yet, here it is... in our Bible appearing one time in the three-year cycle of lectionary readings: "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag... "My beloved speaks and says to me, 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'"<sup>1</sup> And that's the PG-rated part!

The truth is folks have debated the inclusion of this book since the first century... some early rabbis considered it no more than a drinking song. But 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."<sup>2</sup>

My challenge this morning... with SIGNIFICANT help from the Holy Spirit, of course... is to show you WHY Rabbi Akiba would say that the Song of Solomon is the Holy of Holies – why... the great scholar Origen would write a ten-volume commentary on this one, short book... why... Bernard of Clairvaux, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, wrote 86 sermons on the Song and never got past chapter 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Song of Solomon 2:2-10

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Yadayim 3:5

What is it about this book – so neglected in our modern church – that inspired so much enthusiasm in the past? And what does it say to us today... how might it help us in our walk with the Lord?

In short, there are two primary interpretations of the Song of Songs. First, modern scholars are almost unanimous that in its original form (as it was originally written), the Song was a lyrical celebration of sexual love between a young man and a young woman... in other words, it was a passionate, erotic love poem.

However, for Jewish and Christian interpreters, the Song is believed to describe the love between God and Israel and Jesus and the church... which, according to them, was not unlike the experience of young lovers: it is an intense, exclusive, and mutual love. So, the first interpretation is more literal... the second is an allegorical or spiritual reading of the text.

Well, let me suggest that it is both - it is clearly a celebration of the love of a man and a woman for one another, a love that is “strong as death.” AND... as it takes its place in the Hebrew and Christian Bible, the Song is also a celebration of the love between God and Israel... and Christ and the Church. And when it comes to this role the Song plays in the Bible as a whole, in recent years, scholars have offered an interesting, and I think very helpful, insight into how we might read this book. Both Phyllis Trible and Ellen Davis have pondered whether the Song – with its lush images of a renewed creation... and its images of mutual love and affection between men and women – they have pondered whether this is actually a vision of what this world was once like in the Garden of Eden before the Fall... and what it might still look like when the brokenness brought on by the Fall is healed... when the curses of Garden of Eden are reversed... and creation is again as God intended it to be.

This vision of restoration can be seen in the healing of three primary relationships. The relationship between man and woman... the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation... and the relationship between us and God. First, let’s take the relationship between man and woman. As you know, Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden... and one of the consequences of their sin was the rupture of their relationship as it had been. That rupture can be heard in God’s words to Eve about her relationship with Adam: “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, there will be an imbalance of power that denies the equality and mutuality that God intended when he created them male and female. But here in this Song, that curse is reversed, and the woman declares, “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.” Equality and mutuality are restored. And in fact, the woman’s is the dominant voice in the Song.

It is also worth noting that these lovers in the Song are completely faithful to each other. They have eyes for no one else: “My beloved is mine and I am his” the woman says... “My vineyard, my very own, is for myself...” says the man. The Song celebrates exclusive and faithful human love... and for that reason alone, many believe the Song deserves a place in Scripture.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:16

Ellen Davis writes:

“Our world is groaning under the burdens of instantaneous contacts and temporary relationships, high mobility, commitments lightly undertaken and readily set aside. Too many souls are stunted, arrested in permanent adolescence.”<sup>4</sup>

In a culture that is saturated with sexual images but sorely lacking in prominent examples of lifelong faithful love, this text celebrates love that is passionate and erotic and all-consuming, yet marked by the faithfulness that God intended in the Garden.

In the Song of Solomon, we also glimpse a beautifully restored creation in which the rupture between humanity and the earth has been healed. You remember, in the beginning, how the Garden symbolized the verdancy and abundant provision of God... there God was as close to his creation and his creatures as you and I are this morning... God walked and talked with them in the Garden... and there was harmony and abundance and beauty. But then came the Fall – and this time it was Adam who disobeyed – and the result of Adam’s disobedience was a rupture between humanity and the natural world. God said to him: Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; by the sweat of your face, you will eat bread...” But, here, in the Song of Solomon, we are shown this vision of early spring in a lush garden with abundant fruit (no thorns or thistles here) ... and we glimpse the healing of the rupture between humans and creation as the earth itself rejoices with the lovers.

Finally, if one understands the Song allegorically, we see that the final rupture is also restored... this is the rift that is at the root of all others... it is the chasm between humanity and God... between us and our Creator. In the Song of Songs this chasm is crossed... and we glimpse the kind of passionate, faithful, intimate love that can exist between you and God.

You may know that the Bible speaks often about the relationship between God and Israel (and later, between Christ and the Church) as a marriage. One thing that image conveys, of course, is that just as a marriage is built on promises – with both parties making and keeping their promises... so is our relationship with God built on our mutual promise-keeping with each other.

And yet, there is more than that to this image of the church as the Bride of Christ. And though it may make us blush to talk this way in church, marriage is also marked by passion, intimacy, beauty, eagerness, anticipation, longing, pleasure, jealousy, and mystery. I think about opening words I speak at nearly every wedding ceremony I officiate – and I realized this week how much these words are drawn from themes and images of this Song. Soon after the couple arrives at the front of the church, I offer what is called the Statement on the Gift of Marriage... and what I say is: God gave us marriage so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other... God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and woman... in marriage a woman and a man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to the other... God gave us marriage for the well-being of human society...

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Davis, p. 80-81

and then finally, God gave us marriage as a holy mystery in which a man and a woman are joined together, and become one, just as Christ is one with the church.<sup>5</sup> Though this metaphor of the marriage of Christ and his Church clearly has its limitations... in the Song, the relationship between human beings and God is healed and renewed and rooted in love – love that is fierce as the grave... and as intimate passionate as that of young lovers.

Do I think that the author of this Song was thinking about Christ when he wrote it? No. Do I think that everything in the Song “stands for” something in the Christian Gospel? No. But do I think that this poem about passionate human love can be seen as a parable for our relationship with Christ? Yes! Do I think we would do well to read it as an invitation to love Jesus... who is in the words of the old hymn “the Lover of our soul.”<sup>6</sup> Yes, absolutely! Discipleship is not only a promise kept... it is not only about believing certain things... it is not only a long obedience in the same direction. Discipleship is also a passionate love relationship in which we can draw intimately nearer to the One who passionately loves us. Remember the risen Jesus’ question to Peter on the beach that morning? “Peter, do you love me more than these?” The risen Lord asks us the same thing.

This short series of sermons from the Bible’s Wisdom Literature 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 most clearly what makes for a good life. A good life is found in right relationships — between man and woman and including all people, between humanity and the earth and all its creatures, 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... love that continues to sustain it season by season... and love that will ultimately bring it to new life beyond death itself. THIS is why Rabbi Akiba said the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”<sup>7</sup> And THIS is why it’s in the Bible.

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<sup>5</sup> Book of Common Worship, Christian Marriage: Rite I (W/JKP, 1993), p.842.

<sup>6</sup> # 440 in Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal.

<sup>7</sup> Mishnah Yadayim 3:5