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Sunday Morning Worship

Providence Baptist Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina

“Come Away With Me”

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Song of Solomon. Is there room for love poetry in our Bible?

“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 with me.”

(If my beloved called me a young stag, let me tell you, it wouldn't be joy I was feeling).

Actually the only time in the three year lectionary cycle to cover any of Song of Solomon is today. So I thought I would take the plunge. Funny enough, even though modern day preachers stay away from it with its more erotic language and no overt mention of God, the medieval thinkers and theologians were all over it. In fact more commentaries were written about it in the medieval time, than any other book of the Bible.

These eight chapters of love poetry are rich. Many interpreters now say it is more a celebration of human love. But there are those theologians today who still see its validity as also being more than literal, but describing the mutual love of God for us. We can say this because we're in good company in the Bible with the use of the marriage metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people.

But what do we have here? We have a charming young maiden and a playful, perhaps skittish shepherd. The main protagonist of these love lyrics is this female lover (which interestingly enough is the only book in the Bible where the main speaker of the book is female). We get to see inside her heart and know her inner thoughts, desires, and desperations. It's almost as if we've come across a high school girl's journal. It's written in first person, and it's definitely a change from the other books of the Old Testament which have looked at the public life of ancient Israel—kingships, struggles of power, prophetic voices. Now we have an insider's view of two people's *private* lives.

Here in chapter two, they are enraptured by “the feeling of love that spring brings”¹: sprinting animals, buds opening, birds are singing—you can hear the turtledoves—fig trees and vines bring forth their fruit. When springtime comes, you can almost believe in anything—new dreams, new possibilities. There is a sense of a new beginning.

The language as a whole is erotic. But our meaning of that word is impoverished. For the monastic writers, “eros” had a richer meaning than how we use it today—it meant yearning.² We will come back to this.

What we see with these lovers is a yearning for each other, a grand pursuit, one for the other—a thirsting after. There's this tug-of-war, a back and forth. And in the end they're not even

¹ Renita J. Weems, “The Song of Songs,” *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 393.

² “How Mystics Hear the Song,” W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., “Parables,” *Christian Reflection*, The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2006.

together; the “lover” as he is called is evasive, and yet we don’t know why. This human love relationship seems similar in some ways to the divine-human relationship.

Think first of how God pursues us. In Christian theology we have a fancy word for this. It is called prevenient grace, which briefly stated, means that before someone can seek God, God must first have sought them. In truth we only seek after God because God first seeks us.

With this lovers’ story, it’s hard to say who sought whom first. But isn’t this the intrigue of this love poetry? That someone desires the other so much that they leap over mountains, and wait up all night, and risk and endure punishment just to be with their lover. Everyone wants to be pursued or as we have commonly heard it: to love and to be loved.

I think what drives people the most is the desire to love and to be loved. I think it’s there for a reason—the God-shaped hole, and people try all kinds of things and people to fill it, but there is an intimacy and fulfillment and longing that only God can fill. David in many of his psalms expresses this longing, as we quoted last week, “My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the LORD.” Or “As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after you.” No one said it better than St. Augustine, “My heart is restless until it rests in thee.” But what kind of longing is it? A romantic one? But in what way is our relationship with God like a romantic relationship? Are there any similarities or is it just anathema to think this way? Does God woo us? Is God like a lover who seeks after us day and night?

Many Christians have had a hard time identifying what kind of love this is. In a recent book I read, *Mariette in Ecstasy*, the main character is a new postulant within a convent. It’s interesting how much her language about Christ and her descriptions of ecstatic unions with Christ are very sexual. Again, our language seems limited. It’s as if there’s no other language to describe the highest fulfillment of desire and longing.

Think about many Christian songs you hear. You could easily substitute the God language, or if there are only pronouns, sometimes you wouldn’t even know it’s a song about God but rather two lovers.

You may have heard people sing songs such as “Jesus, Lover of my Soul.” Or I remember one popular Christian song entitled “Love Song for a Savior” by Jars of Clay with lyrics like this:

“Someday she’ll trust him and learn how to see him,
Someday He’ll call her and she will come running and fall in His arms and
The tears will fall down and she’ll pray,
‘I want to fall in love with you.’”

Okay, so we struggle to know how to speak or identify what kind of love this is. But, I think our greatest part with this struggle is that we don’t know that we are being pursued. And even deeper, that we’re even worthy of being pursued. That’s why people eat up love poetry—it’s the excitement, the chase, the hope beyond all hopes—that maybe just maybe this person will find what they’ve always wanted—to be loved.

Why don't some of us relate to "thirsting after God?" Because we haven't bought into the idea that we are deeply loved. When we do, we will be springing into action as well. This is why I think it's no mistake that the writer named the woman protagonist, "The Beloved." She knew that she was loved deeply and that she was his.

"Lovers are notoriously possessive. They demand to know their lovers whereabouts."³ So it was, that she was *his*—*my* beloved. And as we know from Deuteronomy our God is a jealous God, too.

This is what I want you to get out of this—that you are God's—God's beloved. God is springing over mountains pursuing you. I want you to know the word *beloved* deep in your bones.

There are only a few places where the word "beloved" is used in the New Testament. One of my favorite "uses" of this word is at Jesus' baptism. Remember the words the Father told the son after he was baptized, "You are my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." The Creator of all chooses a word so intimate and affectionate to name his Son. There is no word more tender than hearing that you are beloved. Henri Nouwen was asked by a friend to write a book where he speaks about the spiritual life to those outside of the church. Taking on the challenge, he pinpoints the one word and theme he wants all of his friends to hear—it is the same word Jesus heard that day, that you are Beloved. In fact, his conviction to this point is so strong that he says the words "Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence."⁴

How much of our lives are spent in toil wanting to feel loved, to find approval, to be noticed. We hope desperately that in the end, all of our hard work is not in vain, but that it meant something to someone. How many sons and daughters are waiting for their father's or mother's approval, at least a word of recognition?

But most of us are still stuck in the cycle of earning approval. We are still stuck partly in this because we aren't satisfied with who we are. Or, perhaps we are still trying to discover who we are or to whom we belong. We have forgotten the word that we are the Beloved. What we hear louder is as Nouwen puts it the voice of self-rejection that says, "Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular, or powerful and then you will earn the love you so desire."⁵

The purpose for knowing that we are loved is not to boost our self-esteem. This is not its end. Rather, it is out of a clear knowledge of who and whose we are—the Beloved of God, that like Christ we are able to move on to the calling God has placed on our life. Otherwise, we spend years trying to figure out who we are and what we're not, instead of living out the dream God has already placed before us.

Thomas Merton believed that each person was shadowed by a false self. He says, "My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love." No wonder the chase, cat-and-mouse game still exists. "I want God's love, I don't. I don't deserve

³ Weems, 393.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992) 30.

⁵ *Ibid*, 34.

it, no. But I want it...”

This is why the story of these two lovers in Song of Solomon is so powerful.

“Intimacy can be as frightening as it is fulfilling.”⁶

There are all kinds of hide and seek stories in the Bible when God is calling prophets. Elijah goes into a cave, Jeremiah refuses to preach, Jonah flees God to a different land, and Paul heads down the Damascus road. Perhaps you have your own hide and seek story with God. Maybe there was a chase, then a fatigue, then a slow divorce. Maybe you are still trying to get your mind wrapped around that like these lovers, God is enamored with you.

The fourteenth century mystic Julian of Norwich said, “Some of us believe that God is almighty and can do everything; and that he is all-wise and may do everything; but that he is all-love and will do everything—there we draw back. As I see it, this ignorance is the greatest of all hindrances to God’s lovers.”

So may you hear the words of God calling you the beloved today. Let your imagination run wild. It’s springtime where anything is possible. Do you hear the turtledoves? Do you hear it? It’s God’s voice saying, “Come. Come. Come away with me.”

⁶ Weems, 394.