

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

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Proper 17; Song of Songs 2:8-13

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 2:10-13)ⁱ

Ah, what beautiful love poetry! My heart swells every time I hear those verses. Our first reading today comes from the book of the Song of Songs, often referred to as the Song of Solomon. It is unique in the Hebrew Scriptures in that it is not concerned with the Law or Covenant or Yahweh the God of Israel, nor does it explore wisdom like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. Instead, it is a poetic celebration of human romantic and physical love, giving voice to the passion of two lovers, praising each other and expressing deep yearning for union with each other.

While tradition attributes this book’s authorship to King Solomon, this position is no longer held by most academics. In fact, in the introductory verse of the poem, it refers to itself as “the song of songs”, a construction commonly used in scriptural Hebrew to show something as the greatest and most beautiful of its class. Language, vocabulary, and style suggest the Song was written much later than Solomon’s time. This most beautiful and perfect of songs is currently thought to have been composed sometime in the 3rd century BCE.

I find it fascinating that this poem even made it into the canon of scripture. Many bible readers who stumble upon the Song of Songs for the first time are quite shocked – “What in the world is this doing in the Bible?” they wonder. The subject matter hardly seems appropriate for inclusion in the Holy Word of God, and yet, there it is. Of course, any serious students of the Bible can easily point to many other parts of scripture that hardly seem “holy”!

A fairly late addition, the Song was accepted into the Jewish canon in the 2nd Century CE after a long period of controversy. Some rabbis considered it little more than a drinking song. But teacher and mystic Rabbi Akiba argued, “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.” (*Mishnah Yadayim* 3.5).ⁱⁱ

Interpreters of the Song have struggled with whether it is an allegory about God's love for us, or if it should be read as a love song between two people. Understanding it either way can teach us about love. However, the Song of Songs is best seen as both, for the Song is, above all, a call to love – a love marked by fidelity and mutuality.

In the Song, we hear alternately from both lovers, as they express their love for and mutual and unabashed ardor for each other. The Song celebrates faithful human love and human sexuality as part of God’s good creation. Set in the springtime lushness and heady fruited-ness of the garden, one is reminded of blessedness of that first garden, Eden. In the Song, as in Eden, the lovers are in harmony with one another and with the natural world; the brokenness of relationships between humans, and between humans and the earth, is healed.ⁱⁱⁱ

While we may be tempted to downplay the explicit erotic love depicted in the Song out of discomfort from using such language to refer to God's holy love, I think it would be a mistake to do so. Erotic love, or *Eros*, as it is known in Greek, is a powerful force in our nature. As best we know, it appears to be an expression of love that is unique to the human experience. *Eros* brings us together, unleashes powerful generative energy, and fuels our creative desire.

Father Andrew Greeley, Roman Catholic priest, sociologist, and prolific writer, thought human erotic love could serve as a powerful metaphor for God's desire for spiritual union with us. His fiction works (which are wonderful by the way) often included explicit treatment of sexuality and were frequently a source of controversy. For Greeley, however, human physical love taught us something about God, and this love can be a sacrament of God's love. Greeley argued that the experience of human passionate love can be a metaphor for and reveal to us something of God's deep desire for spiritual union with his human creatures, his very beloved. For me, there is no more powerful image of God's desire for relationship with us than the construct of the Lover and the Beloved, each beholding each other with the eyes of love, and being bound by the eternal flow of love. This speaks to me in the dream language of the heart. In it, I can hear God's eternal love song calling to me, to us all, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

The narrative thread that runs throughout our canon of scriptures is that of humans turning away from God and God calling us to return. Over and over again, we read versions of the same story: humans enjoying intimacy and communion with God; humans turning away from God because of fear and the temptations of sin; humans experiencing suffering because of this sense of separation; and God calling his beloved back. The cycle repeats and repeats, but what is constant is God's call to love.

In the Episcopal Church, we believe that a sacrament is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is the action that we can see and easily point our finger to that is a mark or signifier of something much deeper and more powerful at work beneath the surface. The catechism in our prayer book defines grace as "God's favor toward us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our will".^{iv}

But grace is often hard to directly identify – I think this is one of the reasons we struggle with the notion so much. The presence of grace isn't so easily recognized. The effective presence of grace at work within us is usually something seen only in the rear-view mirror – it is something that is recognized by the presence of other signposts or discerned after-the-fact from the evidence of transformation. This is why we need sacraments – both the formal sacraments of the Church, as well as the many lesser sacraments found in everyday life and within God's creation – for they are the signposts that indicate the subtle yet transformative forces of God's grace at work within us and within the world.

This is a special day in the life of Good Shepherd because this morning we are celebrating the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Today we bring our beloved Mark before God and this community to be blessed and to enter into the New Covenant by membership in the Body of Christ and his Church.

Baptism is the sacramental act through which we obtain our new and God-given identity. We are made children of God, members of Christ's body the Church, and heirs of the kingdom of God. It is said that Martin Luther, when struggling with challenges and doubts, would shout out, "I am baptized!" Luther believed that baptism bestows an identity and affirms our unity with

Christ, and that it was important to remember who we are. Baptism is the beginning of a new way of life - to be washed in the waters of baptism is a radical and passionate act.

In our baptismal liturgy when the priest is blessing the water, we are reminded of the great waters of creation and destruction in Genesis, the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan that were crossed when God led his chosen people out of Egypt and into the promised land, and the waters in which the prophet John baptized the repentant to prepare the way for Christ. It is in these baptismal waters that we share in Christ's death and burial, as well as in his glorious resurrection. By the Holy Spirit we are sealed and marked as Christ's own forever. And as participants in the liturgy of Holy Baptism, we all renew our Baptismal Covenant, and we are reminded of who we are and to whom we belong. ***We are the baptized***; the people of the new covenant, and members of Christ's body. We are the people who can begin to live into God's kingdom now, and taste a share of the resurrection today. And that is good news, indeed.

So to baby Mark, the Cowherd family, and to all of you here this morning, I invite you to listen to God's call to love. Train the ears of your hearts to listen for God's eternal love song, calling out to you and to each one of us across all time and space:

“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.

Arise, my love my fair one, and come away.”

Amen.

ⁱ NRSV

ⁱⁱ Schifferdecker, Kathryn M.; http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=385

ⁱⁱⁱ Gafney, Will; https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1402

^{iv} BCP, p.858