

“Beloved”

Song of Songs 2:8-13

The voice of my beloved!

*Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.*

*My 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.*

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.”*

Do you remember what it feels like to fall in love?

For some of you, this is a long-past experience from decades and decades ago. Some of you might be in the midst of it right now. But whether it feels far away or close at hand, I invite you to take a moment now to remember that feeling.

Do you remember the tremor of excitement that ran through your body when you saw the object of your affections across the room? Do you remember the warmth that spread through

your belly, the flush that came into your face, the buoyancy that lifted your heart almost out of your chest? Do you remember the giddiness that made you walk around with a big, goofy smile on your face, that made you stay up all night talking and laughing in spite of whatever you were supposed to be doing the next day?

Do you remember the way it felt the first time you held her hand? How much your body wanted to be close to his? How her touch made you catch your breath? Do you remember how, snuggling into his embrace, you felt like you had come home?

Do you remember the curiosity that made you want to know every little thing about what made that person tick? Do you remember how she seemed to see you for who you really are? How you discovered new things about yourself when you were with him? How being known so deeply gave you courage? How you found yourself becoming a better version of yourself because of your lover's presence?

Do you remember how eagerly you awaited hearing from her when you were apart? Do you remember the thrill of finding an envelope in the mailbox with your name written on it in his handwriting, of seeing her name pop up in your email inbox, of hearing his voice over the phone? Do you remember how you wanted to tell her about the most mundane little things because you know they would make her smile? Do you remember counting down the months, weeks, days, hours, minutes until you would see each other again?

Do you remember how much you missed him when he was away, how you felt incomplete somehow without her? Do you remember the longing that felt almost like physical hunger? Do you remember the joyful relief of reunion, of being together again at last?

Do you remember what it feels like to fall in love?

The Song of Songs, that juicy little book of the Bible from which today's assigned lectionary reading comes, tells us that the life of faith, our relationship with God, is meant to feel like that—like falling in love. It tells us that being the people of God is not all about following the commandments diligently, or exercising spiritual disciplines rigorously, or serving our neighbors dutifully. Those are good things, too, of course, but they are not the root of our relationship. The heart of what it means to be the people of God is, first and foremost, to be lovers. To love God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls, all our strength, and then to love our neighbors as ourselves. All our activities of discipleship flow from that root of love for God. The Song of Songs teaches us to pay attention to where we experience delight and where we experience longing, and to notice God there.

If you haven't read the Song of Songs recently, allow me to recommend it to you. It's a short book, only eight chapters long, tucked in between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. It is sometimes called the Song of Solomon or the Canticle of Canticles, depending on how you translate the Hebrew title. It is a love poem, or a series of love poems, full of playful frolicking and sensuous admiration between two lovers. Some of it is a bit on the racy side—a little spicier than you might have come to expect from your typical, run-of-the-mill scripture reading. The lovers seek

one another's company; they sing of the beauty of one another's bodies; they revel in the delights of nature; they take pleasure in their physical, incarnate desire for each other.

One way of reading this text—an accurate and faithful one at that—is to read it literally as what it is: a celebration of passionate, delighted, embodied love. The fact that this text made the cut when religious leaders were deciding what was in the Bible and what was out suggests that our forebears in faith gave importance and acknowledgement to the God-given holiness of this kind of love. This is a really important corrective to the way some interpretations of our faith pit spirit and flesh against each other, calling spirit strong and godly, flesh sinful and weak. The Song of Songs reminds us that our made-in-God's-image bodies are holy, that our flesh is also a good gift of God.

Another way of reading this text—also accurate and faithful—is to read it metaphorically as a celebration of the love affair between God and humanity. Jews might call it God's love for Israel; Christians might call it Christ's love for the Church. Either way, the delight and desire found in this text are unmistakable; either way, the song calls us to a passionate love for God.

Christian mystics have long cherished the Song of Songs as a foundational text for life with God. They were focused, they said, not so much on *informational* reading of scripture, but rather on *formational* reading of scripture—on listening for how God's Spirit is speaking to contemporary lives through ancient words. And in the Song of Songs, they found a model for human relationship with God—a relationship of love and devotion, delight and pleasure, longing and fulfillment.

Bernard of Clairvaux, a 12th-century Benedictine abbot, preached no fewer than 86 sermons on the Song of Songs over a period of 18 years! (By contrast, today is the only Sunday in our three-year lectionary cycle when a text from this book is assigned.) Bernard turned to this book over and over again as he sought to invite his fellow monks into a life of deep relationship with God. He wrote that the Song of Songs could “teach thirsting souls how to seek the one by whom they themselves are sought” (*Sermon* 84:7). By tapping into the deepest longings of our souls, by embracing the deepest delights of our hearts, we learn to live lives that are rooted and grounded in love.

For us Christians, this text might bring to mind another passage from scripture, one from the gospel of John. Maybe you remember this story. In the aftermath of the crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples had gone back to Galilee, back to their home turf, back to their old livelihood of fishing. One morning, just after daybreak, they were coming in to shore with an empty hold after a fruitless night on the water when they saw a man they did not recognize standing on the lakeshore. He told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and when they did, the nets came back so full that they could not haul them in because there were so many fish. Simon Peter, realizing who this man was, dove into the water and swam to Jesus. The others brought the boat in with its enormous catch, and Jesus cooked them breakfast there on the beach.

And then—do you remember this part?—then Jesus took Simon Peter aside, and he said this: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Not, “Why did you deny me when the going got tough?”

Not, “Which commandments have you kept, and which have you broken today?”

Not, “How many chapters of scripture have you read this week?”

Not, “What good works have you done lately?”

Just this: “Do you love me?” Three times he asked, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” so that neither Peter, nor the other disciples, nor congregations hearing this text two thousand years later would be able to miss it. This is the fundamental question for followers of Jesus. *Do you love me?*

What would it be like if you thought about your life of faith in this way? What might you do differently if you connected to your deep and passionate yearnings and noticed God there? Where might you end up if you sought God with the heart of a lover seeking her beloved? How would discipleship feel if you delighted in God the way young lovebirds delight in one another?

Sisters and brothers, here’s the thing: even before you have fallen in love with God, even if you’re not so sure about this whole idea, God is already head-over-heels in love with you. God gets a tremor of excitement in his belly when he sees you across the room. When you are apart, God yearns to be in your presence again. God’s heart beats fast when she sees your handwriting on an envelope in the mailbox. God is thrilled to bits to feel your hand in his. Snuggling into your embrace, God feels like she has come home. Yes, the Creator of Heaven and Earth just can’t get enough of you—and I think that’s very good news indeed.