

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

August 30, 2015; the 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45: 1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-27;

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

Arise, My Love

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

The Song of Solomon, or perhaps better known to some as the Song of Songs, comes to us from the Hebrew scriptures, created so long ago but even across the centuries its message of the transformational power of love and intimacy speaks to us.

This book of the Bible is often called the Song of Songs to proclaim that this is the best of all love poems.

One may wonder how this poem was deemed to be Holy Scripture when, at first glance, it is a love poem between a man and woman;

God is not mentioned explicitly, there are no prayers in this book of the Bible, there are no references to Israel's religious practice or tradition.

Ellen Davis, in her excellent commentary on the Song of Songs, asks the question, "Is it the least 'biblical' book in the Bible, or the most?"¹

Many view the Song of Songs as secular love poetry, and we can see why. We hear the longing of one lover for the other, in today's reading that love calls one to "arise and come away."

We get the sense that everything could be left because the pull of love, the love of another person can be so strong.

Another reason that some did not see this as biblical material is that there is a physicality about this love, it is not just an emotional feeling, but rather the poem is sensual.

We hear that her rounded thighs are like jewels, her navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine...most parts of her body are described in such detail with such admiration and desire.²

We also hear about his body, his eyes, his cheeks, his lips.³
And they are not just looking at each other.

It is sad to me that some see this as secular rather than sacred and holy. As we know, throughout the centuries, the Church has struggled awkwardly to deal with sexuality...and sometimes more than others.

What the Song of Songs gives us is a huge gift in this matter, by reminding us that human love and human expression of this love, in true intimacy with a partner, is holy and is one way to connect with God and can be a blessing to other people.

The Song of Songs, is like a dream sequence put to poetry, which conveys how love can take us outside of ourselves in a similar way that some mystics describe God's love taking them into a

¹ Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, Epub., Loc 4829 of 6431.

² Song of Songs 7:1-9.

³ *ibid.*, 5:10-16.

state of ecstasy.

God created us to love, and many of us are called to love one other person in a committed relationship, which for all of us now can be marriage in this country and in this Church, and such love is a primary way that many connect with God.

As Ellen Davis states she does not see the sexual and religious understanding of the Song of Songs as mutually exclusive, but rather mutually informative.

She writes, “Fundamental to both is a desire to transcend the confines of self for the sake of intimacy with the other....[and that such love of another person can be] an arena for the formation of the soul. Like the love of God, profound love of another person entails devotion of the whole self and steady practice of repentance and forgiveness; it inevitably requires of us suffering and sacrifice.”⁴

It is interesting to note this poem presents a very different way of relating to each other than was the generally accepted way that men and women related to each other at that time...there is a true mutuality presented here.

The language and imagery used also suggest to some that there is a strong possibility that a woman composed this poem.

If you have heard me give a funeral sermon, you know that I like to, I feel called to, describe how the person we are honoring and remembering, having been created in God’s image, helped us know something about God, reflected God to us in a certain way.

Well the same is true for us right now.

We have all been created in the image of God, and at the core of our being, we show each other and the world aspects of God.

The same can be said for our committed relationships, and the committed relationship found in the Song of Songs.

⁴ Davis, Loc 4875 of 6431.

This is what God is like, this is what God's love is like, so excited, so into you, wanting intimacy with you, wanting to, through love, bring about transformation in life, your life, my life, the life of the world.

We don't want our faith to be a head trip, an intellectual or philosophical experience only...and it can be so easy for that to happen...this is why the Letter of James is so directive, "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers...."⁵

which also is to say that our faith is enfleshed...

when we are helping those in need

and when we are in a loving relationship of mutuality and commitment.

Such a relationship is holy, of God, and helps to us know God.

The Song of Songs is about two young people in love; we can imagine that if the poem had followed them throughout their life together, in the later years, there might have been more of a focus on faithfulness and steadfast love that endures through the changes life brings.

All this is to say, that if we take the Song of Songs literally, as a love poem about two people, we find God there in the midst of them.

But there are other ways to read this book of the Bible.

As Davis states, for the ancients and medieval interpreters, they erred in the other direction..."the poem was allegory, a coded account, of religious experience...'the two breasts that are more delightful than wine' (1:2) were the Law and the Prophets, the Old and the New Testaments, Christ's mercy and truth."⁶

What Ellen Davis and I are advocating for is a more blended approach. Without taking it to the extreme of seeing it all as code there are some important theological points to drawn out of the poem.

⁵ James 1:22

⁶ Davis, Loc 4875 of 6431.

It was written, not by Solomon, but centuries later after Solomon and after the Temple had been destroyed.

Davis suggests that attributing it to Solomon, who built the Temple, the people's access to God, was to say that now, without the Temple, the Song of Songs is the people's access to God, that "...the Song is to orient us toward the place of ultimate intimacy with God."⁷

Another feature of the Song is a focus on nature, on the creation.

The Song advocates by example the importance of intimacy with another, with God, and with creation.

The Song can remind us..."that loving attachment to the land, both our particular homes and the fragile planet that we share with all other living creatures, is a religious obligation."⁸

It is interesting that a change is being proposed to our Baptismal Covenant for the next prayer book revision, to add an additional promise.

As the Covenant is now, we promise to respect both people and God, to acknowledge our relationship with all people and God, and now is being proposed a baptismal vow that will also name our responsibility to the creation.

The Anglican Church of Canada has such a vow,

"Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth?"⁹

To which we would answer, "I will, with God's help."

As you can see, there is so much to be taken from the Song of Songs, which applies to our lives today...the life that each of us lives, which is both a physical and a spiritual experience, simultaneously.

I will conclude with a reflection on those beautiful words, "Arise, my love,

⁷ *Ibid.*, Loc 5005 of 6431.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Loc 4946 of 6431.

⁹ <http://thecommunity.anglican.ca/everyday/11493/praying-our-baptismal-vows-part-6/>

my fair one, and come away.”

We are invited by human love and by God’s love to come away from our daily activities---perhaps to experience our daily activities transformed by love.

Don’t we wish that the winter would pass ---the winter of our grief, the winter of our pain, the winter of our misfortune, our confusion, our loneliness?

As we wait or sit in the winter, we hear a strong voice call to us, “Arise!” Arise from your winter, and enter into the Spring of love, of new growth, of knowing you are cherished...and in that be transformed.

And it is not that there will not be another winter or moments when a cold wind blows through, but we are invited by God to live in the spring time of God’s love.

And for us, for Christians, we find the spring time in the Risen One...through Christ we have been raised to a new life...transformed through God’s grace and love.

And yet, of course, we still experience wintery times...and in those moments, we can listen and hear God call us to remember the power of love as communicated to us in the Song of Songs.

We can hear God say to us: “ARISE!”

Amen.