

*The Story We Need to Hear*

A Sermon on Song of Solomon 2:8-13 by the Rev. Philip Major

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One of my favorite activities on my day off is to go to the big downtown library, on Salina Street. Right now I'm reading this book from the library about Elizabeth Nietsche by Ben MacIntyre. I found this book in the history section. Some weeks I'm browsing in the history section, while other weeks I am more in the mood for a biography or a book about gardening. You will almost never find me looking through the fiction section of the library, but I know there are many great books there as well, such as my all-time favorite: "The Solace of Leaving Early" by Haven Kimmel.

As far as I'm concerned, almost any of the books in the library would have something to offer me, it's just a question of what is the right book for this particular time. What is the message I need to hear this week? The same thing is true for the books in the Bible. All of the books of the Bible have something to offer us, but there are particular times and places that make us especially in need of one sort of message or another.

This is one of the things I treasure about worship in the Episcopal Church. Each week we hear lessons from four different books of the Bible. Each one of the lessons has something to offer us, but there is often one particular lesson we especially need to hear.

Consider the readings assigned for this week. Our passage from the book of James is beautifully written; it's a strong statement of one of the core ideas of Jesus' ministry and teaching. We are to *be doers of the word, and not merely hearers* of the word. God calls us not just to listen, but to do something, to bring God's love all people, taking special care to address the needs of the people who need it most. Taking into consideration your past and present actions, it seems this is a message the people of St. Paul's have heard and understood.

Our Gospel passage, from Mark chapter seven, is especially relevant today. Many people, especially those with wealth, are very concerned about the cleanliness and purity of their food. People stir up fears about migrants crossing the southern border by making the unChristian claim that they would bring terrible diseases and might somehow poison the blood of current citizens. Especially today, many people are most concerned with all sorts of dangers that come from outside us.

Jesus' message is that the big dangers don't come from outside us. He tells us to stop being afraid of other people. He tells us to stop creating boundaries between ourselves and those who are different. In today's passage he says, *there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out of a person are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.* I think you have probably heard this message before.

Jesus turns our normal concerns upside down. The greatest dangers we face do not come from outside us, but come from mistakes that we are making: adultery, greed, selfishness, envy, pride, violence, and not telling the truth. Though we sometimes struggle to follow Jesus' instructions to us, from all of my interactions with each of you, I can only conclude that you have integrated this idea of self-examination into your life. We confess our mistakes. We ask for forgiveness, because that is what Jesus teaches us.

There is one passage in our readings that might be less familiar to you. You have probably not heard these verses from The Song of Songs many times before. Today's passage is the only portion of The Song of Songs found in our lectionary, and this passage was incorporated into the lectionary just thirty years ago, in 1994. Yet this is the book I would choose for the members of our congregation to hear and read, in this particular time and place.

You have been working for many years. Even through times of great difficulty, you have persisted with faithfulness. When a world-wide pandemic forced us apart, you remained connected with one another. You created new ways to serve those in greatest need in our community during a

time of separation and uncertainty. You have been seeking to serve Christ in all persons. For all you, the ones who are seeking to be servants of God's peace, this is a story you need to hear and remember.

The story is found in the verses of this poem, considered the greatest of all poems found in Hebrew Scriptures, and thus called The Poem of Poems or, more commonly, The Song of Songs. The poem tells of the love between two characters. The commentaries about The Song of Songs seem to be divided into two groups, with half of the interpreters saying The Song is a poem about a relationship between two people, and the other half saying The Song of Songs is an allegory describing the relationships between God and each one of God's people. I'd like to suggest that the poem allows for both interpretations. So let's take full advantage of it, and consider what it says about our spiritual relationships as well as our physical existence and physical relationships.

The Song is about a mutual relationship. You have a mutual relationship with God. You have a desire to be in the presence of God. God has a desire to be present with you.

The Song is sometimes expressed in the voice of a male character, but more often it is expressed in the voice of a woman. Both the female and the male characters are good and both the female and the male bodies described in The Song are good and beautiful. God is affirming of us as women and as men.

In her commentary Phyllis Tribble points out that in The Song, the love between the characters exists for itself. In other words, God doesn't love us in order to accomplish something. We don't love God in order to accomplish something. The love is enough. In the same way, if the two characters in the poem are seen as human, the love between them exists for its own sake. They don't love each other in order to accomplish something else, like to have children. I like babies and children as much as anyone, but the love between people exists for the sake of love itself, and the love between God and us exists for the sake of love.

The Song celebrates our physical existence. Our passage begins, *The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.* Voices are important. Voices are beautiful. Your voice is beautiful to the person who loves you. Though we know God is speaking to us, it's difficult for us to hear the voice of God as a physical voice. Yet, I am also sure that your voice is precious to God. As you are speaking or singing or laughing today, consider that God treasures the sound of your voice, the same way you treasure the voices of your loved ones.

The Song describes the desire between these two characters. *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.* When we read the entire poem, we see that the love between the two characters does not come to a place of stability and fulfillment quickly or easily. This does not mean that the love is not genuine. The lack of stability does not mean the love has fallen apart.

This is true for us in our relationships with those we love and in our relationships with God. Sometimes we feel close to God. Sometimes God is like a gazelle to us, standing behind our garden wall, watching our every move. At other times it feels to us as if God has disappeared into the trees, like a gazelle. In my experience, even though we say we have a desire for God, we are the ones who most often wander away from God.

Finally, let's notice that The Song is about attention, specifically about undivided attention. *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."* You have a long list of tasks to accomplish, but there comes a time to set aside your list of tasks. The time comes to give your undivided attention to one who loves you. This might be a friend or a grandchild. Love means giving them your undivided attention for an afternoon, or an hour, or for ten minutes.

*Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.* God's desire is to be with you. God's great desire is for a portion of your undivided attention. God loved you first, and God loves you always. This is the story we need to hear.