

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17 (Year B)  
Song of Solomon 2:8-13  
Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
September 1, 2024

### **A Love Poem Like No Other**

There are Sundays throughout the year when church attendance is predictably low. The Second Sunday of Easter is nicknamed “Low Sunday” for good reason. The Sunday after Christmas Day is usually pretty sparse. And then, there are Sundays that fall on three-day weekends. But you – the faithful gathered today – have chosen a special Sunday to buck the trend! First and foremost, today you have the privilege of witnessing the baptisms of Georgie and Maryam, who moments from now will be grafted into the Body of Christ. This morning you also heard from a book of the Bible we don’t encounter very often. Indeed, this book comes around only once in our three-year lectionary cycle. Which is to say, the odds of hearing it read on a Sunday are 1 in 156! And yet, it contains some of the most beautiful, most stirring, most lyrical verses in the entire Bible.

Today, our Old Testament reading comes from the “Song of Solomon,” sometimes called the “Song of Songs,” and this biblical book is in a category all its own. For starters, it has one curious distinguishing feature. It is one of only two books in the Bible that never mentions the word “God” (the other being Esther). This book is also set apart by its form and genre: the Song of Solomon is a poem. And while there are other books of poetry in the Bible, the Song stands alone because it is a love poem. Across eight chapters of poetic verse, the Song of Solomon invites us to eavesdrop on a dialogue between a man and woman. Two lovers wholly consumed by desire, who long for nothing more than to be together. Listen again to these words from this morning’s passage:

*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...*

Now, you might be inclined to ask, as many throughout history have asked: why is a love poem that never mentions “God” included in our canon of scripture? To be sure, it almost didn’t make the cut! The decision to include the Song in the canon of Jewish scripture was marked by intense debate. In ancient times, the book was thought to have been authored by King Solomon, and that certainly worked in its favor. It also helped that this book about passionate love had some highly impassioned defenders. The great first-century Rabbi Akiva is famously quoted as saying, “‘The whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the [sacred] Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.’”<sup>1</sup> And in our own Christian tradition, the early Church Fathers wrote countless sermons on this book. St. Gregory of Nyssa’s 15 homilies on the Song of Songs, for example, are counted among his greatest works.

So, if we have this love poem that never mentions God in our canon of scripture, what meaning do we take from it? Throughout history, there have been a couple main schools of thought about how to interpret the Song. The most ancient interpretations treat it as an allegory, which diverts the focus from the love expressed between two humans. As an allegory, the love between this man and this woman points to something beyond itself, to a deeper, hidden meaning. In Jewish tradition, the allegorical reading suggests the poem is really about God’s love for ancient Israel. While the Christian allegory views the lovers as an analogy for the love between Christ and his Church. But in modern times, a growing chorus of interpreters urge us to read the poem for what it appears to be: a poem about human love that celebrates how glorious it is to be in love. In this spirit, the Episcopal Church offers a passage from the Song of Solomon as an option in the marriage liturgy. Indeed, almost every couple I have married has chosen to include a reading from the Song!

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous. “A Pesach Love Story,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, 29 Mar. 2013, [www.thejc.com/judaism/a-pesach-love-story-jr0cx6p1](http://www.thejc.com/judaism/a-pesach-love-story-jr0cx6p1).

And what better place to hear the words of lovers consumed with desire than at a wedding?! A ritual that unites two people in heart, mind and body. But this morning, we are not gathered to celebrate a marriage, so what are we to take from this text for today's celebration?

The good news is, we do not have to limit the Song to a single meaning. A poem about two lovers, or an allegory, it doesn't have to be one or the other. We can hold both interpretations as we seek meaning in this remarkable book of sacred scripture. Today, much like we do at a wedding, we are celebrating a covenant. Only, the covenant we celebrate today is the covenant established in the sacrament of baptism. An unbreakable covenant of love between God and Georgie, and God and Maryam. A sacred covenant between the Creator and his creation. A text about yearning and desire between two lovers might, at first glance, seem out of place at a baptism. But yearning and desire, and indeed all-consuming love, are most certainly present at baptism. Today, I invite us to let the words of these two lovers speak about God's love for us. The love that is on full display today in the sacrament of baptism.

Today's passage opens as the woman imagines her lover leaping across mountains, bounding over hills, as he eagerly pursues her. In our baptism, God pursues us with the very same urgency and eagerness. Through holy water and ancient prayer, in our baptism God comes to us with the same all-consuming desire, uniting us to God in a mystical union. In our poem, the lovers use a single name for each other: "my beloved." When Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism, God cried out, "this is my beloved son." And when we emerge from the waters of our baptism, we, too, are named beloved: a beloved child of God. In the Song, the lover invites his beloved to glory with him in the splendor of God's creation; to leave behind the gloom of winter and delight in the flowers and the dove song of springtime. In our baptism, we, too, are invited to leave behind the winter of sin and death and delight in the spring of new, resurrection life.

In the end, it does not matter that the Song of Songs never mentions God by name. It's celebration of human love and human longing is holy. And today, as we prepare to baptize these two

precious children, the Song points us to God's love and God's longing for union with us. As Georgie and Maryam come to be baptized, they will encounter God's all-consuming love and desire in the waters of this font. The place where God seeks us. Where God calls us beloved. Where God fashions us into a new creation.

*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..."*

Amen.