

“Back in My Day”  
Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

Rev. Liz Miller  
July 6, 2014

When I was a child, my most regular attendance at Sunday worship took place during summer vacation when I would visit my dad in Kansas. His sweet congregation was not so different from ours—except that even by Midwestern standards, they were in the middle of nowhere. And, instead of the church being surrounded by orchards like South Glastonbury is, they were surrounded by cows. One of the similarities was that like South Church, during the summer months, they did not have Church School. So from June to August, on Sunday mornings, I found myself sitting in a church pew. Back then, I wasn't much of a listener, but I loved to read. So when we weren't singing or reciting a prayer together, I would pick up the Bible from front of my pew, just like we have here, and flip through it.

One Sunday, as I was doing this, I discovered a book I had never heard of before. It was called Song of Songs. I scanned the pages and quickly realized that this was the raciest thing I had every read in my life. When I realized that I was reading love poems, some of them quite descriptive, I quickly shut the Bible and put it back in the pew holder. I was pretty sure that if anyone saw me reading that part of the Bible, I would get in trouble. All I knew for sure was that Song of Songs was definitely not in my children's Bible.

I didn't keep reading the poems, but they left an impression on me and I did not forget about them. In fact, little did I know that Sunday morning, but they would come in handy just a few weeks later when I was away at church camp with my brother James. At camp, he fell hopelessly in love with my best friend Kristy Luti. We were all about twelve years old, so this was some pretty serious first love. My best friend Kristy wanted nothing to do with him. So, James came to me for advice on how to win her heart. I suggested he write her a poem to express his feelings. He told me that was too hard. Feeling both generous and a little devious, I told him about the secret book in the Bible that no one else knew about. I told him that in that book, he would find love poems, and he could just write down a few

lines and give them to Kristy, passing them off as his own. He thought I was brilliant and the next day he delivered a beautifully plagiarized Song of Songs poem to his true love. Unfortunately for my brother, she was not convinced and was not impressed with his stealing lines from the Bible. My brother spent the rest of the summer heartbroken but to this day I maintain that Song of Songs is some of the best love poetry ever written.

It still surprises me that Song of Songs was ever included in the Bible, and that religious leaders have never found reason enough to boot it out of the Cannon. It seems like, at least today, Christianity has more of a reputation for putting limitations and restrictions on relationships and marriage. Even if it is not true for many Christians as individuals, as a whole we are not known for celebrating romantic love and passionate confessions of ones feelings. Maybe that is why we don't spend a lot on it in Bible studies or in weekly worship. But despite us ignoring it, Song of Songs stands firm in the Old Testament as an affirmation that it is okay, even recommended, to wax poetic about your hearts desires. One of the beautiful parts about it is that it is two voices, both in love, both celebrating the other. It goes back and forth and really celebrates those ideals of love: mutuality, affection, and passion.

I think one of the reasons that it has stood the test of time is that while some scholars maintain this is poetry written from the view of two people in love, other scholars argue that Song of Songs is a love poem written from the perspective of God and the Church to each other. The two voices are God and humans, both expressing their love for another—giving a totally different perspective on the relationship between mortals and the divine. We might think of God as a parent, or a friend, or someone watching over us, but the idea of God being someone you passionately love and who loves you back—that is a different. The love in Song of Songs is more playful and starry-eyed. It centers on nature and beauty and feels a little untamed. The God of Song of Songs is not a cold-distant overlord, but it is someone who knows you and adores you and who desires you to feel the same way. One of the things I enjoy about it is that it feels like it describes a love that is chosen. It doesn't feel like a love you have to feel because God made you and you owe it to God to show some love. But it feels like a real choice—

like humanity wants to love God. It is mutual, and it is special—something to strive for and cling to once it is found.

Personally, I don't have a strong opinion about whether Song of Songs is written about the love between two humans or the love between God and all of humanity. I love that it is love and I love that it is different from everything else in the Bible. I think it uses beautiful images that even today sweep us off our feet and remind us of the complexities and joy of being in love—no matter who is expressing it.

My favorite image from today's passage from Song of Songs comes from the lines that create the image of love as a refuge, something to escape to that will provide a nurturing, comforting place full of life and hope. Listen to these words again:

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.

I think we need more images of love like this. I think we need to hold onto the idea that love has the power of protecting us from the harshness of the rest of the world, and that it will carry us to a place more beautiful and serene than we thought possibly existed. This image of love as a refuge from the rest of the world is one that has the power to give us both strength and hope when we are stressed or tired or feeling bleak about our future or our children's future. Know that you are loved and that love will save you. There is a place where you will be embraced and sheltered. There is a place you can come away to, to escape and renew your spirits. That place is where you will find your Beloved.

For some people, I can see how their cottage on the shore or in the mountains becomes their place of refuge, where they are able to recognize the goodness in their life and the love that they have received. For others, I can see that place of refuge as being around a big dinner table, noisy with family or friends, sheltering you from the outside world and reminding you that love can keep you in the present moment, away from all your worries, surrounded by those people who embody loving kindness.

In the Gospel, we see that Jesus understands love as a place of refuge. He says, “Come to me, all

you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Are there any words that surpass the comfort of hearing, “I will give you rest.” “I love you so much, all of you, that I will love you back into wholeness and I will take away your burdens and you can lean on me when the weight of the world threatens to knock you down.” It is the same kind of love that Song of Songs speaks of, and it is just as poetic and powerful.

I think that in the summer there is a visceral shift in our lives. I don't know if it exists because we grew up having the summers off, or if it would have been there anyways. I wonder if it is the warm weather that shifts our core of being from the keep-your-head-down-and-focused attitude of winter to something lighter and dreamier. Whatever causes it, it seeps into everything, including our sense of spirituality. I think that especially in these summer months, it is important to be reminded of love—the love we have, the love we give to others, and the love that is available to us. It is important to be reminded of, well, not the hard work that love takes, but of the sweeter aspects. Summer is the season for experiencing love as a refuge from the rest of the world. It is a time for seeking out the people and things and places that give us that refuge and surrounding ourselves for them. On a long bicycle ride or eating blueberry pancakes at Rose's Berry Farm or on the golf course or sitting on the beach with a friend. Whatever it is for you, remember that those places of restoration and peace are places of love.

When I was a kid, Song of Songs both impressed and intimidated me. I knew that there was power in its poetry but I didn't understand it. As an adult it is easier to understand why a book devoted to love with many different kinds of images and expressions of that love remains a sacred text. We need that kind of love in our lives. In that one book, there is a love poem for every season, reminding us of the joys and temptations of allowing ourselves to love and be loved in return. And in that one book, there is an invitation, to create our own poetry—to seek out those places and people that fill us with passion and joy and renewal and care, and to transform them into love poems—whether it is with our words or our bodies or our actions. Amen.