

The Voice of the Beloved

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

⁸ The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;

¹¹ for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

¹² The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

¹³ 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.

Our scripture is from the Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs or Canticle of Canticles. It can be read as erotic love poems or allegorical readings. Our passage teaches us about various kinds of love: the excitement of the love between two young people; the mutuality of love; the love of God for God's people; and what love, in the presence of God for all eternity may be like.

In *West Side Story*, Tony and Maria, lovers as young and sentimental as the lovers in our passage, sing: "Tonight, tonight, I'll see my love tonight." That is not a bad gloss on our text. Of course that does not mean that anything goes or that all the appropriate virtues of commitment, exclusiveness, and stability are not important! The Song of Solomon conveys the voice of a young shepherd woman deeply in love, whose senses are vibrantly tuned to every aspect of her beloved and of her natural surroundings, and who reports a lengthy and sensual poem of longing that her beloved has conveyed to her. The woman is speaking, recounting her lover's words as he urges her into the springtime. The lover's voice attracts the woman's attention; then she sees him, first from a distance and then, suddenly, very

close, close enough now to call her with tender intimacy. The energy of his running continues as he looks through the windows. His eagerness is irrepressible, and his gazellelike leaping portrays not only strength and vigor, but sexual energy, the thrill of self-forgetful, driving desire. That desire now inhabits his eyes, his gaze thrusting through the lattice into the house. The wall of the building has brought him to a halt; now he must persuade and entice.

The power shifts to the woman; she must decide to come out, into the blooming, fertile world. Perhaps behind this image is the practice, found elsewhere in the ancient Near East, of keeping the bridegroom waiting while the bride perfects her beauty and apparel. This waiting is important, because it shifts the balance between the lovers. His reduction to eager looking, to standing outside, intensifies the worth of his beloved. Waiting honors love.

He invites her to join him outside, now that the rain has stopped and the clouds have thinned to shreds, and life is rising from its wintery defeats. She belongs here, in all this luxuriant countryside; for him, she crowns it with her beauty and, in embracing him, makes him a home with turtledoves and flowers in the fruitful earth.

After the heavy rains of early spring, the Palestinian fields are thick with flowers, commanding the ground with color, opening with a suddenness that the poet has previously associated with the lover and his rush across the hills. "The vines are in blossom, they give forth fragrance" (v. 13a). The poet appeals repeatedly to the senses, shifting from hearing to sight, as the lover is heard, then looked for, to hearing again, when the lover pleads with the woman, and then back to sight and hearing together in the flowers' opening and in the singing of birds. We can almost taste figs and smell the enticement of fragrance of spring. He concludes repeating his plea, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" (v. 13).

The sensuality of all this helps us know that our sexuality is a gift from our Creator. At the very least, the presence of this poetry in Scripture reminds us that sexual love with its delights is not a secular event but an expression of the divine love and longing that brought all that we know into being, a reflection of the harmony God seeks with us and for us. **Alan Gregory**

Second, our scripture teaches us about the mutuality of love. The marvelous stag gazes in the window: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." Is he asking her to leave country, city, or family to establish a lineage or fulfill a promise? Is he expecting subordination? What he actually says is, "for now the winter is past, the rain is over." He is inviting her to join in an unthreatening, flowering, singing landscape fruitfully fit for love. Often in the Cantic, she asks the same of him and pursues him effectively (3:4). Their songs can be heard without strain as an allegory of the *mutuality of love*. Why mutuality? It may be because ideas of love generate a sense of mutuality that becomes part of the logic of love.

Love so desires its return that love almost *is* this desire; and when it forgoes this desire—when it cares and delights in the other, forgetting anything in return—it seems to transcend itself. The ultimate logic of love is self-surpassing. The Cantic explores love becoming extravagant toward another. So when we associate it with God's love for Israel or the church or the soul, are they so far off. The logic of self-surpassing love has a beginning in these songs of mutual, erotic, friendly, familial, aesthetic desire: "Come to my garden, my sister, my bride.... Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love" (5:1).

Where is this garden and whence arises the logic of love? Literally, the lovers enjoy their bodies as gardens, in sex and friendship. Ethically, they beckon each other into a garden of mutuality, where they will gaze, listen, and grow without subordination. Theologically, they go into the garden of creation—suggested by

the lushness around them—where divine love is creating the logic of love. Eschatologically, are they not singing that "love is strong as death" (8:6), leaping along a biblical arc of meaning, where love has the last word and the first? **Larry D. Bouchard**

Third, this scripture teaches about God's love for God's people, recounting God's love for Israel and the history of their relationship. Both Jewish and Christian, reads the poetry theologically, viewing the ecstasy between the man and woman in the setting of the natural world as reversing the alienation among the first couple, their God, and their garden the earth.

The imagery conveys the quickening of the earth and of the heart, following winter's dormancy: the earthy smells that arise as the soil warms, vegetation shoots up and blossoms, and the birds once again find a day worth singing over. All the earth does what it was made by its Creator to do: turtledoves coo, fig trees fruit, vines flower fragrantly, and humans love and delight. In this garden, unlike Eden so long ago, the natural world including its human population responds harmoniously to the promptings of the season, as we were all made to do. Nothing is amiss, nothing is skewed, all things work together for good, and all are blessed together. Young love awakens fertile and ripe and expectant, as perfectly tuned to its surroundings as bees to the nectar they seek, filled with possibility and delight.

Isaiah compares God's love for Israel to a lover growing a vineyard for the beloved:

Let me sing for my beloved,

My love-song concerning his vineyard. (Isa. 5:1)

In the book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom comes to woo faithful followers with language that is inescapably romantic; the whole poem reflects the frustration of desertion:

Wisdom cries out in the street;

in the squares she raises her voice....

Because I have called and you refused,

have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,...

I also will laugh at your calamity;

I will mock when panic strikes you. (Prov. 1:20, 24, 26)

When Jesus calls out in Matthew 11 for folk to come to him, he is of course the wise teacher and thoughtful Messiah we respect so much; but he is also a reflection of Lady Wisdom standing on the street corner calling out with longing, looking for love. Maybe he is even a reflection of the lover so longed for by the woman in today's Song:

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes,

leaping upon the mountains,

bounding over the hills. (Song 2:8, 10)

Jesus, my beloved, speaks to me and says:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are

carrying heavy burdens,

and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28) **David L. Bartlett**

Marvin Pope's commentary on the Song of Solomon is filled brimful with commentary on this passage as well as the rest of the book, commentary that allegorizes the love poetry as loving communion between Israel (or the church) and God. While much of Christian teaching and preaching are in terms of tasks, calling, and even arduous suffering, such are not ends in themselves. The greatest gift of all is the gift of Sabbath, in which Israel was commanded to rest and savor all the delights of divine bounty, including the gifts of food, of family, and of sexual love. **Patricia Tull**

Last, the passage tells us of what it will be like to be in the presence of God for eternity. Christians have long distinguished between the literal and the spiritual meaning of Scripture. The spiritual meaning was further divided into the allegorical, which dealt with doctrine; the tropological, which showed us how to live; and the anagogical, which revealed our final home. The anagogical, then, interpreted Scripture in terms of the "last things" and, in particular, opened up visions of heaven, our eternal home in God. Song of Solomon 2:8-13 invites such an anagogical reading. Christ runs toward us, with the eagerness of God, as urgent as a lover, long parted by darkness and hard rain. Christ invites us—he does not command us, he does not seize us, he entices us by loving persuasion. He shall raise us into God's new creation, which is brimming over with life, budding, growing, singing, and chattering ridiculously. Jesus declares the peace of God and everything is fruitful. Within this glory, he calls us, as if we were fair and unblemished, because in his mercy, we are just that, and lifts us into an eternal fragrance, a joyous offering to the Father. All is fertile again and shall be always, in this spring without a winter.

Whatever heaven is like, it will not be less than the sensual wonder of this song, nor will it simply be different: it will be that wonder, only flowing over, unconstrained, fulfilled in the excess of infinite love. **Alan Gregory**

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