

Yearning for God in the Song of Songs

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Arthur Holder at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, San Rafael, CA on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2017.

The Bible uses many different images to talk about our life with God. There is the metaphor of the journey, as in the Exodus from Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land. There are stories of ascent, like Moses climbing Mt. Sinai to meet God in a dark cloud, or Jacob's ladder with angels moving back and forth between heaven and earth. Sometimes the biblical writers envision our lives as seeds growing to maturity, or houses being built on firm foundations, or flocks of sheep being guided by the shepherd. Moving into the realm of human relations, Scripture talks about God as our mother, father, king, lord, judge, and friend.

But perhaps the most striking image—and certainly the most intimate—is when the divine/human relationship is described as a love affair. We find God described as our Lover in many books of the Bible—in Hosea and Jeremiah, in Ephesians and Revelation, and in the psalms. Above all, we have the luscious imagery of the Song of Solomon, as in the reading we heard a few minutes ago. Although it was attributed to King Solomon, this book was also known as the Song of Songs, because it was the most beautiful of all biblical songs.

There are no direct references to God or temple or nation in the Song, which is a series of poems in dramatic dialogue between two young lovers. In its original context, the Song of Songs was a celebration of earthly human love, which is probably why the lectionary has us reading it today as a response to the story about the courtship of Rebecca and Isaac. But from ancient times Jewish interpreters have read the Song as an allegory referring to the love between God and Israel, and Christian interpreters have continued in that vein by reading it as referring to Christ and the Church.

So today we are invited to take on the role of the bride who cries out with delight: “The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.” And then it is as if we hear Christ himself speaking to us: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

In the early church and throughout the Middle Ages—even right through the Reformation era—the Song of Songs was among the most popular and well known of all the books of the Bible. There were more medieval commentaries on the Song than on any other book, and some of them went on for hundreds of pages. (St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th century preached eighty-six sermons on the Song, and he never got through the second chapter of the text.)

Nevertheless, I am guessing that for most of you this is the first time you have ever heard a sermon about the Song of Songs. It may even be just the third or fourth time you have heard it read aloud in church, except maybe at a wedding. As far as I can tell, there

were no readings from the Song of Songs appointed in any Episcopal Prayer Book, either for Sundays or weekdays, until we adopted the Revised Common Lectionary about ten years ago. Now we get these six verses as an optional reading twice every three years, and that's all. It's not much, but it's more than we have had for the last 450 years.

In seminary I learned that a sermon should have just one main point. But that isn't going to work today because this is the only chance I am going to have to talk with you about the Song of Songs. But don't worry! I have managed to limit myself to just five points on what we can learn about the Christian life from ancient and medieval interpretations of the Song of Songs.

1. The very heart of Christianity is mysticism—an intimate personal relationship with God. The commentators often talk about this in terms of “mystical union” or “spiritual marriage.” Certainly our religion involves doctrine, and laws, and institutions. But none of those good things will save us or bring us fulfillment, apart from that personal relationship with God. Speaking of the Song of Songs, St. Bernard said, “This sort of song only the touch of the Holy Spirit teaches, and it is learned by experience alone. Let those who have experienced it enjoy it; let those who have not, burn with desire, not so much to know it as to experience it.”

2. The Christian life is all about coming to our senses—or better, about coming through our senses to God. The Song of Songs is full of the language of bodies and sensations, right from the first verse: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine.” The touch of a hand, the taste of honey, the fragrance of incense, the sound of a familiar voice, the long lingering gaze at a beloved face—that's how the Song teaches us to experience life with God. The commentators tell us that there is a connection between our physical senses and what they call the “spiritual senses” through which we come to know the divine mystery. This tells us something about sacramental worship, and the way in which the natural world can bring us to a deeper faith.

3. The story of the individual Christian recapitulates the story of God's people throughout history, in ancient Israel and in the Church. Some of the commentators focus on the corporate dimension and others on the individual, but all of them acknowledge that the bride in the Song is both the Church in general and the particular human soul. When I read about the children of Israel wandering in the desert for forty years, that is my personal story just as much as it is our story together. When I read the New Testament, I can identify with Mary Magdalene, or doubting Thomas, or the woman at the well, or Paul who in today's epistle talks about not being able to do the good that he wants to do but doing the very thing he doesn't want to do, because all of us are lovers of the same Lord.

4. Gender and sexuality are critically important in the Christian life, but never in a simple way. Many of the ancient commentators were insistent that the Song of Songs isn't about sexual love. Some of them said that no one should read this book until they were

middle aged because young people would be inclined to misunderstand all those verses about beautiful bodies and burning desires. But there is no getting around the frank sexuality of the Song, and that naturally includes gender. You might think that a book written over 2,000 years ago in a patriarchal society would probably identify God with the dominant male partner in the relationship, and humanity with the submissive female.

Well, that's only partially correct. The woman actually has more lines in the poem than the man does, and she is very much an active partner in their courtship. Some modern interpreters have even speculated that this may be the only Old Testament book written by a woman.

And the history of interpretation presents us with some pretty dramatic gender-bending at times. Male monks have readily identified with the woman in the Song because the Latin word for "soul" is *anima*, which is a feminine noun. Since Christ was identified with the Old Testament figure of Lady Wisdom (as in today's gospel where Jesus is talking about his own ministry when he says that Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds), the bridegroom in the Song was sometimes addressed as female. The 13th century Flemish mystic Hadewijch, for instance, envisioned herself as a male knight paying court to Christ in the guise of a noble lady whose name was Love. And some male commentators did not hesitate to use explicitly homoerotic language in expressing their devotion. If the Song of Songs had a Facebook page, the entry under "Relationship Status" would probably have to say, "It's complicated."

5. Finally, and most important of all, the Song of Songs teaches us that the Christian life is more desire than fulfillment. Our relationship with God is never going to be perfectly easy, or peaceful, or happy, or satisfying—not in this life. The Christ who appears to us as the bridegroom in the Song is constantly fluctuating between presence and absence. One minute he is here, and the next minute he is gone. We come face-to-face with the Beloved, but only as though through a lattice or window in the thick wall of our mortality and sinfulness. We have blissful moments of grace in prayer, but we also have long periods of dryness and even despair.

This is not because God has abandoned us, but because God is so good, so beautiful, so full of love that we can never possess God completely. No matter how much we know of God, no matter how fervently we yearn for God, there is always more. When you are in love with God, there is always more. Always more! Always more!