

B Lectionary 22 9.1.24

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Focus Statement: God cares about our relationships with each other.

Well, this first reading is quite the left turn from what we've been used to. For the last two summers we've been working our way through the history of the people of Israel, and today, suddenly, we find ourselves in the middle of a poem. And not just any poem, but a love poem. No one is mistaking this for a psalm, Song of Solomon reads a bit like an emo teenager writing love poems to their crush, weird metaphors and everything. Let me read you just a taste of chapter four. "How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful... Your hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins and not one among them is bereaved...Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate...Your neck is like the tower of David, built in courses;" I don't even know what that means. But even without the hair like goats, teeth like sheep stuff, you may be wondering, why is this in the lectionary, why is this even in the Bible? For why it's in the lectionary, we've spent the last two Sundays reading about King Solomon and his wisdom. There are four books of wisdom literature in the Bible, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, all but Job are traditionally credited to King Solomon.

Of course, like much of scripture, it is unlikely that the person traditionally credited to it wrote it. First off, Song of Solomon is not even its correct title. The first verse, which would traditionally be the title, reads, "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's." The Hebrew here has a superlative meaning, so a better translation than that is even "the Most Excellent of Songs" or "the Most Sublime of Songs." As for the "which is Solomon's" tacked on the end,

one commentary pointed out that one theory behind why Solomon was given credit for writing this was because, having seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, he was assumed to know something about romance. One of my colleagues this week pointed out that as a king with a thousand women to his name, Solomon likely knew less about romance than he did about manipulating power imbalances.

Of course, the main reason why Solomon likely didn't write Song of Songs is one Gloria's going to like, it seems to have been written by a woman. The main narrator of the song is female. Even when her beloved speaks, his words are mediated through her voice. In fact, Song of Songs is the only place in scripture where a woman's voice is heard totally unfiltered. Sexism in the early church may well be another reason for the attempt to connect the book to Solomon.

The supposed connection to Solomon is why Song of Songs shows up in the lectionary, but why is it in the Bible to begin with? This is a problem theologians have grappled with likely since the book first entered the canon. Song of Songs is one of only two books that made it in the bible without a single mention of God. Ancient Jewish scholars read the poem as an allegory of the love of God for Israel, while Christians heard in it the love between Christ and the church. These ideas seem a stretch at best, because the poem is, as my grandmother would phrase it, pretty racy. "Hair like goats" is one of the tamer images. If you didn't grow up in the church, you may be surprised the bible contains something like this. If, like me, you did grow up in the church, your main exposure to Song of Songs may well have been reading it at youth group lock ins and thinking you were getting away with

something scandalous. This is a poem extolling the relationship between two romantic partners. In short, as I said in the beginning, this is a love poem.

It's a secular poem about romance, and I love that it is included in scripture because I think it tells us something important about the nature of God, which is that while we make a distinction between secular and non-secular, God does not. For God the secular also is sacred. All types of love, the love between families, friends, cherished companions, romantic partners, are reflections of the love of God. And Song of Songs teaches us important lessons about what love looks like. First off, love is equal. I mentioned my colleague's comment about Solomon's knowledge not of romance but of power imbalance, the love between the woman in Song of Songs and her shepherd is a love between equals. Both are committed to this relationship, connected to this relationship, to use a concept that has unfortunately necessarily become part of our common lexicon, both partners are consenting to this relationship. I say unfortunately, because consent seems like it should be an expectation of modern life but is not always. At the time it was written, consent, especially on the part of the woman, would have been unheard of. Remember King Solomon and his thousand wives. And yet, here in scripture is a poem extolling equality in relationship, told from the point of view of a woman. In the repetition of the possessive adjective "my" we hear the two insisting that he is as much hers as she is his. There is connection and commitment on both sides, joint ownership over the relationship rather than possession of any one person. The relationship highlighted in Song of Songs, in this sacred text of God, is egalitarian. No one partner has power over another.

In this equality, there is joy and intimacy and playfulness. Even for shepherds, I have to think that “your hair is like goats” is a funny line. There is a freedom of expression, a comfort in honest declarations of admiration that dances through the lyrics. One lesson we can take from Song of Songs is the challenge to compliment one another, to look for attributes we admire and to share them. Not just within romantic relationships, of course. I challenged the kids to think about something they love in someone and to tell them about it. This is a good takeaway from Song of Songs and a good challenge for all of us. But, I don’t know about you, the challenge might be easier in our more distant connections than in the relationships that our closest to us, in the people we see every day, maybe even share living space with. Your significant other may well not appreciate being compared to a goat, but certainly it is worth finding something that is meaningful to highlight. Song of Songs reminds us that love is built through shared conversation and dialogue. We cannot assume those we love know what we love about them, it is important to speak those words aloud.

Dear people of God, there is romance poetry in the Bible. Maybe not great romance poetry, at least to the modern ear, you may not want to compare someone’s teeth to freshly washed sheep, but romance poetry just the same. There is romance poetry in the Bible, poetry that speaks nothing about God and is instead a song of love between two people, because God knows that things do not have to mention God to be sacred. God is the creator of all things, and God created us to be in relationship, and so relationships of all sorts are sacred. And because they are sacred, because they are of God, God wants for us to have the sort of relationships that allow us to thrive. Relationships of love and mutuality, of trust and connection, of laughter, appreciation, passion, and joy. This particular example is one of

romantic love, but this example scripture offers covers all types and sorts of love relationships. In romance, in friendship, in partners and companions, camaraderie and bonds of all times and connections, God wants for us love and trust, admiration and joy, for the love we share with each other is a reflection of the love God has for us. Thanks be to God who loves us, and who created us to have and to give love to each other. Amen.