The Song of Songs

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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Today we have a very unusual reading from, “The Song of Solomon”. I will refer to it by it’s Hebrew name, “The Song of Songs.” It is unusual because our we rarely read from it on Sundays. It is a beautiful ancient piece of poetry hidden in the middle of our Bible.

The Song of Songs is a love poem. The images are of a man and a woman filled with passion and desire. Thousands of years ago, the first commentators saw it as a love poem holding up the blessing and beauty of love. They read it literally as a man and woman in love. It was also interpreted as the relationship between God and Israel or God and all humanity. As the Early Christian Church was influenced by Greek thought, church leaders placed the importance of the spirit and soul above the human body. The passion and love of human bodies was put aside.

The Song of Songs became an aide in prayer as a meditation on God’s love for us and was symbolic of our relationship with God.

The use of the Song of Songs has a rich history. During the World Wars, women wrote parts of the Song of Songs to their husbands away in battle.

Every sabbath, Jewish people sing the Song of Songs at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. They sing it as a reminder of God’s love and presence with Israel.

As we begin September we start creation care month in the Episcopal Church, we can read the song to experience God through the eyes of the natural world.

Today’s reading from The Song of Songs starts with the return of one of the lovers. A scene is described of a man leaping, running down a mountain. He starts out far away and you can feel the excitement in the woman’s voice as he comes closer. The lovers are part of the natural world. Animals, plants, and landscapes are used to describe their feelings. The man is like a gazelle. He moves quickly. Seasons are used to remind us of the cycles of life and death. Singing by turtledoves is heard and the smell of blossoms are in the air. The lovers are apart and then come together. This apart and together is woven throughout the poem. You can feel their longing as they come closer. There is a searching and a finding. There is a mystery -a hiddenness- with each other as the man gazes from behind a wall.

We can think of this poem as the relationship between humans and God.

We can never see all of God. God is a mystery with hidden parts. We can only see small pieces of God at a time.

Nature reveals God. We must step outside to meet God. The woman in the poem must search outside of her comfort zone to meet her lover. We too must leave our comfort zone to see other aspects of God. We find our life in nature. Love is held and supported by nature. Our human bodies are vulnerable. We need nature to support us as we support our natural world.

Without a balanced ecosystem, food cannot be grown to sustain humans. As we change the balance, we are changing the system that supports life on earth. We are changing the created world. We only survive by supporting each other. Through our human vulnerability, we are all interconnected with each other and the natural world. The writer of the song knew this. He/She knew that they were not better than the natural world. They were not separate. They were one part of it intimately connected. As much as we like to think we can live on our own, consider this. This past week we had some excessive heat. The heat affects the activities we can do outside. More heat means more illnesses and deaths and more mosquitoe borne illnesses. Excessive heat can shut down highways and kill crops. It affects our food supply, our health, and our economy. We live among nature. Nature is us.

Some people say God is no longer accessible to us. God is not here. The Song of Songs reveals a god that is passionate. We read the Song and experience God as passionately loving us, passionately watching us, and passionately involved in the natural world. The natural world is a window to the mystery of God.

Some years back, when I lived in Valparaiso, we had a nice garden. It was fall and we had harvested all the tomatoes and zucchini. My sons and I were going away for fall break. Some sunflowers were in the garden. We didn’t plant sunflowers. My boys would eat sunflowers, and some would spill on the ground. (This is before genetically modified crops. Seeds would grow from store bought sunflower seeds.) One year we had pumpkins that we didn’t plant. One of the sunflowers that was growing had a broken stem. I propped the stem up with bricks to support it. When we returned from Fall break, the stem had healed, and the plant was 5 feet tall. The beautiful flower grew up towards the sun. As I observed it, I noticed the beautiful patterns in the flower. As the flower died and the seeds feel, I noticed the patterns on the seeds. The point is that I felt a connection to this plant. I saw the miracle of God’s creation in the healing, growing, and the death of it. I saw rebirth in the dried seeds falling. I saw the hiddenness of God in the beauty of the patterns.

The Song gives us another way to pray and encounter God.

God gives us this invitation in the Song of Songs, “Come away to hear the turtledoves. Come away to smell the blossoms. Come away to see the flowers. Come away to feel the sun. Come away to be with me”.