

You will be astonished to hear that there are very few good sermon commentaries on the Song of Solomon. Ecclesiastes, yes. Lamentations, yes. Ancient Near Eastern erotic poetry, not so much. And yet, when I turn to the online key to scriptural allusions in hymns, I find a respectable number of hymns that refer to Song of Solomon. A 14th-century poet, Johannes Tauler, wrote,

As the bridegroom to his chosen,
As the king unto his realm,
As keep unto the castle,
As the pilot to the helm,
So, Lord, art Thou to me.

Chapter 2, verse 4, says “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love,” but Helen Lemmel in 1922 wrote,

We are children of the King,
And His praises we will sing,
As we journey to our home above—
His banner over us is love!

The first verse of our reading for today suggests an ardent suitor making a secret nighttime visit to his beloved’s bedroom: “I slept, but my heart was awake. Listen! my beloved is knocking. “Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.” But the 19th century hymn writer Fanny Crosby took that and wrote this:

Behold where He stands at the door of thy heart,
O sinner, awake ere thy Savior depart;
He calls thee in mercy from darkness to light,
His locks are all wet with the dew of the night;
Long, long He has tarried, and wilt thou refuse
The pathway of life and salvation to choose?

Somehow I don't think that's what the poet had in mind. I'm willing to concede that eroticism and the mystical experience of God can overlap in a Venn diagram, and I'm pretty good with our 14th century poet who portrays God as the heart of all things—but it is just very clear that the Song of Solomon is primarily a love poem. You actually can make God the male character and human beings the female character, or vice-versa, to interesting effect, but I think that's more of a conversation than a sermon.

What exactly do we have in this reading? It begins, as I said, with the suitor's visit to the young woman's bedroom. (A former student of mine pointed out that the poem is heteronormative and poly-exclusionary, and he's right.) "Open to me," he says. Oh, she responds coyly, "I don't know, I've already undressed . . . I'm all bathed and clean . . . how could I let you in when I'm so, you know, exposed?" And padding across the floor, she opens the door, only to find that he'd taken her at her word and left.

"I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer." So she apparently goes out into the city to look for him, because the next thing we know, the night watchmen have found her and have beaten her and at least partly stripped her. What's that about? Do they think she's a sex worker, and they're abusing her because they can? Or do they think she's a wayward daughter careless of her father's reputation who deserves punishment for being out after dark? Either way, the so-called sentinels assault this young woman. But she's so desperate to find her lover that she doesn't comment on them. She just says, "O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him this: I am faint with love."

Her women friends, of whom I am a big fan, respond candidly: "What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another

beloved, that you thus adjure us?" In other words, "there are plenty of fish in the sea. Are you sure he's worth all your anguish?" It is very important to have friends who will speak bluntly to us.

But wait, there's more. The second section of our reading starts with a meditation on the cosmic power of love. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm"—like having the name of your beloved tattooed on your body—"for love is strong as death, passion are fierce as the grave." This particular young woman and her beloved are like twigs in a hurricane, small human beings caught up in a powerful cosmic force. They may feel like they live in an enchanted bubble, with eyes only for each other, but they really are in the grip of an energy that is as strong as death is.

Then the camera zooms in again to the particular human beings in this story, and we hear the older brothers discussing their little sister. "What shall we do for our sister, on the day when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar." The older brothers, maybe a more benevolent version of the night watchmen, also imagine themselves to be in charge of the young woman's body. They are going to protect her with battlements or cedar boards.

The joke's on them, though; Little Sister speaks up to say, "I *was* a wall, and my breasts were like towers." The brothers' *defensive* imagery of a protective wall around their little sister is subverted by her assertion that she's her own damn wall, and her sexuality was actually a prominent feature of her edifice. Plus, she's already let her lover in: "I was in his eyes as one who brings peace," meaning, I was as one who surrenders, opens the gate, and allows the outsider in. No point in closing the door now, brothers; the fortress has been breached.

We have a very young couple happily exploring love and eros. We have night watchmen and brothers who want some control over what's going on. And we have girlfriends of the young woman who are there for her but are not going to pretend an enthusiasm they don't feel. I think this poem is certainly a celebration of erotic love, but it's also a reminder that lovers *don't* actually live in their own enchanted bubble or create their own reality. Love is a force bigger than ourselves that sweeps us up, a force that can make us think that we've invented a whole new world—but it's a tale as old as time. The lovebirds are following an ancient pattern, a well-trodden road.

This young man who walks away from his beloved's doorstep when she puts him off flirtatiously—it could be a simple misunderstanding, easily rectified, or he might genuinely be a jerk. We don't know. But there's a darkness about her vulnerability—the night watchmen assault her when she runs out to find him, and we're reminded that infatuation can bring on recklessness. It can make you a victim of people who have marked you as a target, when you thought they only meant good for you. Hopefully most of us survived our first love affairs with only broken hearts, rather than hurting our bodies or losing our homes. But a person who is so infatuated that she forgets boundaries and common sense is in serious danger.

This is why I love the girlfriends. They don't have a lot of lines, but they go straight to the point: "What is your beloved more than another beloved?" They are not telling her what to do, the way the older brothers do, but they are asking her to draw on her own wisdom, to remember her own autonomy. You know he's not the only man out there. Surely you value yourself enough, respect yourself enough, not to take dangerous risks for him. The girlfriends, AKA daughters of Jerusalem, remind the young woman that she can set high standards for

boyfriends because she is an autonomous human being. She does not have to pursue some guy who shows no regard for her well-being.

Is that a little too Andrea Dworkin? I don't mean to be a wet blanket. It's actually a beautiful love poem, most of it—a celebration of intoxicating eros. But all the other characters in the poem besides the couple remind us that we don't live in a vacuum or a bubble, that love affairs take place in the midst of other people's dramas. I would like us to enjoy our creatureliness while maintaining our equanimity. Like Merlyn in T. H. White's masterful, must-read Arthurian saga *The Once and Future King*. (Did anyone see that coming? I didn't.) Here Merlin has been warning the young Arthur that he will not always be there to tell Arthur the right thing to do.

“What is this you keep talking about, about not being here, and the tumulus and so on?”

“It is nothing. I am due to fall in love with a girl called Nimue in a short time, and then she learns my spells and locks me up in a cave for several centuries. It is one of those things which are going to happen.”

“But Merlyn, how horrible! To be stuck in a cave for centuries like a toad in a hole! We must do something about it.”

“Nonsense,” said the magician. “What was I talking about?”

“About this maiden. . . .”

“I was talking about advice, and how you must never take it. Well, I am going to give you some now. I advise you to think about battles, and about your realm of Gramarye, and about the sort of things a king has to do. Will you do that?”

“I will. Of course I will. But about this girl who learns your spells”

“You see, it is a question of the people, as well as of the kings. . . . I want you to think like yourself, so that you will be a credit to all this education I have been giving you—afterwards, when I am only an old man locked up in a hole.”

“Merlyn!”

“There, there! I was playing for sympathy. Never mind. I said it for effect. As a matter of fact, it will be charming to have a rest for a few hundred years, and as for Nimue, I am looking backward to her a good deal.”

There we go: mad, passionate love; even betrayal; but equanimity. May we all be as wise as Merlyn, and may all our Arthurs become wise so that Merlyn doesn't need to tell them what to do any more.

Let us pray:

O God,

We ask for your wisdom to discern your ways and path for our own lives.

We ask for your wisdom to discern how to deal with others we meet and to whom we want to become close. May we love freely and with equanimity. May we be generous but not reckless.

We ask for your wisdom in the difficult situations we have to deal with as we go through life.

We ask for your wisdom that not only enlightens us but transforms us and guides us in our daily walk with you. **Amen**