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Song of Solomon

The book of the Song of Solomon is small. It is only eight chapters long and I have only heard it read at weddings. And so it was a nice surprise to find it in my calendar of Biblical readings that guide what I use in my prayer life and in my preaching life. In Jewish tradition this is what is said about this book: "All the world is not worth the day that the Song of Solomon was given to Israel; all the Scriptures are holy but the Song of Solomon is the holy of holies." It is erotic, it is sensual, it is beautiful, it is controversial, all things which a preacher finds terrifying to talk about from the pulpit, especially a white anglo-saxon protestant one. This book is controversial to the point that there is argument on whether or not it should even be in the Bible. But those who know the Jewish perspective on this book are not about to take it out of our Scriptures. But still, it is, after all, the only book in the Bible that speaks from a woman's voice. There are other books and stories in the Bible that are about women, take Esther, Deborah, Ruth, the Samaritan woman, Mary, Jesus' mother, and Mary Magdalene, and many, many others that aren't named and that we rarely hear about. But they are all narrated from another person's voice. And so this is the only book where the woman herself speaks of her own experience and desires. And not only is she a woman but she is working class. She is speaking here about her lover whom she unites with, is separated from and then unites with again. The character in this book, who is also probably the author of the book is living her life without shame, she is living fully and without holding back self expression despite the judgment that is thrown her way from her community.

One theologian has said that the Song of Solomon stands as a corrective to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. In the Garden of Eden we find sexuality entangled with guilt and judgment and shameful nudity. In the Song of Solomon we find love woven with play and imagination and delight. And there is no guilt found anywhere. Though God is never named in the Song of Solomon, God's delight and creativity saturates every verse and is embedded in each fleshy word.

There has been great divergence in thought concerning the meaning behind these fleshy words of this book. In the past theologians would try to argue that this book was really about God's passionate love affair with God's people. It is a metaphor they would say. Today, across the board theologians agree that this really was a recording of two lovers who refuse to be whom their society has prescribed for them.

The woman in this book has been discriminated against in her life. She claims "I am black and beautiful...do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me...they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept." She was forced to work out in the fields in her life, the result being blackish complexion, which made her the object of stares of her lighter skinned female companions who don't work in the fields under the sun. She was a worker and a woman and despite the judgment that her companions project onto her because of her social status she still claims her right to love, to feel passion and desire and happiness.

This passage, this entire book even, is refreshing and challenging for me. More than about physical intimacy and sexuality it is about how we passionately live our lives on a day-to-day basis even with roadblocks ahead of us. There are many ways to show our passion and each one of us is given the gift of self-expression to witness to that passion that God has for each one of us. Jesus was an incredibly passionate, embodied, unabashed lover of his time, loving the world to the point of giving his life for it. And here we have a precursor to that, we have an example of desire and passion and exuberant joy that two lovers experience and believe that they have a right to know and revel in, regardless of the judgment of the world around them. They are claiming their right to their place at the table to love, **the winter is past and the rain is over**. Flowers are coming on the earth, joyful singing has come, the fig tree puts forth new fruit.

It is time for new life and we have the honor of glimpsing into what that looks like. They give us a model for how to live, **how** to choose life over death, how to relish in the rare moments of

intimacy and vulnerability and beauty.

Sometimes it takes being close to death to know how to live. I remember being in youth group when I was a kid and doing this exercise where we would write the epithets on our gravestones or our obituaries, what we wanted them to say about us when we left this world. It is kind of morose now that I think about it but the exercise really worked for me. I did experience a lot of death around me when I was a child and so I knew that life was only a mere visit to this earth. I was one of those strange kids who wrote her will at age 13. I didn't have much to give away, my clothes would go to Goodwill and my most prized possession, my violin, would be for my little brother Matthew and my \$50 I had saved up would go to my little brother John Martin. My experience with death and those exercises in youth group helped me begin the long journey of knowing what mattered and what was the small stuff that I shouldn't sweat.

Many people have told me about how tragic events in their lives changed how they lived going forward. When the tragedy was over they had no choice but to leave their concern for properness at the expense of speaking the truth. They learned to be able to apologize even though it may compromise their pride. They learned to speak up when others around them may not agree. They stopped fighting to work their way up the ladder at a job they didn't want. They refused to deny a love or a passion because parents or employers or friends may disapprove at the expense of fulfilling one's soul. Our modus operandi switches, we become less judgmental, we learn to savor the moments each day puts before us.

God is bidding us forth. Leave the old life behind and live into the spring! The cold and protective days of the winter are gone, you will no longer be soaked by the rain of grief. See the flowers budding on the earth, pay attention, spring is here, there is new fruit that I am birthing inside of you!

I have a crown of thorns plant on my kitchen windowsill that loves to soak in all the sun it can get. Every once in awhile it buds these beautiful little red flowers and just the other day I noticed one coming. And then I went in to work and the plant I have there is budding as well this gorgeous white flower. A friend of mine believes that when her plants bud it is God speaking to her. And so I have taken this on as well, the buds appearing against all odds of my poor ability to take care of plants is truly a miracle and they force me to gain perspective, slow down, notice the little things that matter and let go of the little things that don't.

And so I want to ask us this question here today. What do you need to let go of so you can savor sacred moments? What decisions are you making that are helping you live into all of whom God has created you to be? What relationships are you in that are destructive to your soul? And what relationships are helping you grow into your fullness? And at St. James, what are your priorities? How do you make sure people feel invited and welcomed? How can you help each other and support each other to be passionate followers of Jesus, filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit? How can you listen to each other with open ears and open hearts, respecting that your opinions are grounded in your own experience, knowing that each of you has a part of the truth that makes up the whole truth of the story of God's working through God's people? When do you feel passion and joy in being with each other as the woman in the Song of Solomon longs for her lover? How is St. James different from the other churches in just a few block radius of 141st and St. Nicholas Avenue? What are you resisting that may bring upon judgment by your neighbors but that would bring forth great joy and passion and faithfulness as a community following Jesus? Are you in a period of winter and rain or are the flowers appearing on the earth and is the sanctuary filled with the singing of turtledoves? As we calm down in the summer these are always good questions to reflect upon.

Against all odds of skepticism, violence, resistance, war, and rejection in this world, God still loves us with the passion and intensity of the loving lovers in the Song of Solomon. We are simply left with the choice of how to respond to God's passion for each and every one of God's children. There isn't any one of us that is exempt from God's passion and desire. All of creation is valued equally in God's knowing regardless of their social status and standing, regardless of what

they have done in their lives that they regret, regardless of the discrimination they experience in their lives. We are called to respond by knowing that all of life is sacramental for a sacrament is simply when something holy happens. Fredrick Buechner writes that if we weren't as blind as bats, we might see that life itself is sacramental. And so as we break bread and pour wine at this table of neverending welcome, at this table of plenty and desire, let us respond to God's passion by learning through the example of the most passionate One how to live and how to die.

A reading from the poet Mary Oliver entitled When Death Comes:

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

When death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.