



**BENEDICTUS**  
contemplative church

31 August 2024

Pentecost 15 (Song of Songs 2:8-13)

**'Arise my love'**

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Today was the last day of Winter, and now, if we follow the Jewish practice of beginning the new day at dusk, we are at the beginning of Spring in the southern hemisphere. It is a time of quickening.

When I was a theological student in the late 1980s one of my colleagues decided to get married and asked me and another student to dance at his wedding. We agreed and someone worked out some choreography for the dance. We danced to a poem from the Song of Songs,

'Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;  
for now the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtle-dove  
is heard in our land.  
The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.  
Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away.'

How do these images speak to you I wonder? Notice how you respond and what the invitation is for your life.

I remember, on that day when I danced, I wore a stunning pink taffeta dress that I had bought from the op shop and my partner wore my brother-in-law's wedding gear, some beautiful blue satin harem pants and an open neck white shirt. My dance partner was married with several children and I was single when we danced together. Apparently we looked as if we were so in love. We danced and then ran out of the church hand in hand at the end of the dance. That was my first deep encounter with this text, dancing the words with a colleague at a wedding!

Nikolai and I read them to each other when we were courting and sent messages to each other quoting these and other verses from the Song of Songs. Sounds a bit corny, but it worked!

It was these words and words from St John of the Cross, 'Dark Night of the Soul', sung by Loreena McKennitt that led me on my InterPlay journey.

I also remember reading a large chunk of the Song of Songs to some spiritual direction students that I was leading in an embodied spirituality workshop. I think I scared them off.

The Song of Songs was probably written about 300 years before the common era and it is one of only two biblical books, Esther and Song of Songs, where there is no mention of God. The poems are spoken by a man, a woman, and a chorus, daughters of Jerusalem, that periodically comment on what is happening between the two lovers. Unlike most books in the scriptures, the woman's voice is clearly heard. In the intimacy and anticipation of love, her voice rings out in "close to 75 percent of the poems."<sup>1</sup> The whole text may have been written by a woman.

In ancient canonical lists the Song of Songs is counted among the wisdom books along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Whether or not Israel's sages actually wrote these poems, it seems likely that they were responsible for preserving and transmitting them.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between the lovers is mutual and consensual. Each extols the beauty of the other and the desire for each other, I suppose the only jarring part of the narrative is where the young woman is abused by the watchmen as she goes in search of her lover.

I love the verse near the end. 'Love is as strong as death passion fierce as the grave.' We had that verse and the verses from today at our wedding, read by two people who were madly in love.

So why read this reading? Why reflect on it? Why is it in the Scriptures? Many theologians through the centuries have tried to tame it and speak of the love of Christ for the church or the love of God for Israel. They have tried to apply what someone called, the 'antiseptic of allegory to the book's sensuality'.<sup>3</sup> It is of course about human love and passion and I like the way it normalises and honours that experience, important because in the church we often shut out this conversation and in society it is often denigrated. No dancing in church because it leads to sex, no sex in church because it leads to dancing! I want to honour this young love and express how enlivening it is to hear these words and picture these images.

Perhaps it is a foil to scripture texts which portray women as seductress, women who use men for ensuring their ongoing line, or women of power who use their sexuality for the good of their people, women who are raped to protect their father or brother. It is an antidote to the stories we hear today of sexual violence, inappropriate behaviour, denigration of women and so on. Here is a beautiful young woman and young man, open and free.

This text portrays freedom and beauty and desire. It celebrates the human body and sexual attraction. It celebrates human love, human erotic love. It is worth reading and worth celebrating, a celebration of beauty and passion, a rising of energy, joy, life.

1:2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine,

3 your anointing oils are fragrant,

your name is perfume poured out;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-song-of-solomon-28-13-4>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2010/04/wisdom-on-sex>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2010/04/wisdom-on-sex>

1;15 Ah, you are beautiful, my love;  
your eyes are doves.

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,  
so is my beloved among young men.

With great delight I sat in his shadow,  
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

..5 Sustain me with raisins,  
refresh me with apples;  
for I am faint with love.

6 O that his left hand were under my head,  
and that his right hand embraced me

Alphonetta Wines sums it up:

In a day and time when music and movies simultaneously extol and exploit love distorted, abused, and taken for granted. In a day and time when there are women's shelters to protect women and their children from domestic and/or family violence. In a day and time when human/sex trafficking rivals the drug trade for illegal financial gain. In a day and time when headlines daily affirm that women around the globe are kidnapped, raped, and disrespected. In a day and time such as this, we need to hear the Song of Songs.<sup>4</sup>

But what has it all got to do with God? With our deepening and opening?

It arouses my senses, so, how does this fit in with a contemplative church? It only fits in with a contemplative church that is fully alive, and alert to the whole of life not just above the head or in the heart.

Contemplatives are embodied. Contemplative practice enables us to shine, as we immerse ourselves in love in the secret places of our hearts. Being immersed in love surely then enables us to share that love in the world in so many different ways. These words of love and affirmation are much needed in our world. These words flower with love. They speak of mutuality and commitment and tenderness. They speak of beauty and delight. Maybe if we soaked in them a little more we could be a little lighter ourselves. In this manifestation they talk of heterosexual love but that doesn't take away from all other forms of love and passion. They may even encourage a deepening of our passion for the divine, a fling of giving and receiving.

At Benedictus it is possible they enable us to see each other differently, to gaze on the depths of those beside us and to see 'the inner spark of love' that Meister Eckhart speaks of. Sometimes our spiritual practices seem to be disembodied, from the neck up, sitting still and meditating. For me it is both/and. Both silence and stillness, and action, love embodied in the world arising from my stillness, from my core.

That would be enough, though for some it is in relationship with Jesus, where there is intimacy that goes beyond words,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-song-of-solomon-28-13-4>

'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine'.

Jesus says to his disciples 'come away to a quiet place and pray'. The Lover says 'arise my love, my fair one, come away and play' The first thing Jesus says to Peter after the resurrection is 'Do you love me? Do you love me more than these?' No dogmatism and sterile theology, just love, present to the moment, rest, refreshment, delight.

Song of Songs is also about desire;

Searching and finding and searching and finding, taking us back to the innocence of Genesis where the male and female were naked and safe. Taking us to the garden of Eden.

Commentators speak of the dangers of sexual love because it can be all consuming. They name it R rated. There is that danger. Spirituality and sexuality are so close and can be so powerful and so dangerous and so life-giving.

What this text does for me is, it wakes me up and invites me to savour beauty and life and those I love. It entices me and moistens my dried up body. I am seduced into being alive and following my passion. And God who is Love, God is underneath, within and between all that happens in this story and in mine...

Christine Valters Paintner writes that 'We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become... She invites, 'Consider who or what you love and the ways you commit to the strength of this love in your heart.'

I commit to live my passion for life, for Godde, for Nikolai, fully alive and juicy.

Alphonetta Wines asserts and I agree,

We need to hear voices that speak boldly of true love. We need to be reminded of what love can be. Scholars tell us there was much debate whether to include this book in the sacred text. The text is richer and the world is forever blessed and grateful for those who won the argument for its inclusion<sup>5</sup>.

Arise my love, and come away..How beautiful you are, my love,  
how very beautiful!

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-song-of-solomon-28-13-4>

