

The Voice of My Beloved (Song of Songs 2:1-17)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

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I am the rose of Sharon. I am the lily of the valley. Beholding herself in the admiring gaze of her Divine Lover she exults in her identity as God's beloved. I am the rose of Sharon. I am the lily of the valley. What comes to mind when we hear these first words in the 2nd chapter of the Song of Songs. My first thought was one of my earliest memories as a very little child standing beside my mother's garden with beautiful fragrant snap dragons towering over me. Next I thought of the blessing of flowers we enjoy each Sunday through Jim Poindexter's flower ministry. Thank you Jim. I also recalled an acquaintance of mine whose passion is wildflower photography. Up on the Blue Ridge Parkway she will go searching for that rare and beautiful wild flower and stumbling upon it, the joy of her discovery knows no bounds; her sense of wonder is contagious. I thought as well of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount when he spoke to the crowds of people on the grassy hillsides of Galilee, proclaiming to them that God's reign was within them and all around them, heaven on earth. Even now I can imagine that all eyes were upon Him as he leaned down and plucked a wildflower, staring intently at it as if the flower held some secret for him. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Consider the lilies of the field are here today and gone tomorrow. But in that brief moment of time that we are given, how beautiful they are; how beautiful we are. I am the rose of Sharon, I am the lily of the valleys. Can we imagine that God our Divine Lover would look upon us with such love that we could say of ourselves: I am a lily of the valley, I am the rose of Sharon.

You cannot approach great poetry like we have here in the Song of Songs as if it has one exact meaning for all time that can be pinned down forever. That would be like trampling upon wildflowers. But let's see if we can bring our attention to the subtle textures of this imagery. First, vs. 2 as a lily in among brambles so is my love among maidens. The poet seems to be emphasizing the hiddenness of it, the lily hidden among brambles. And so is her lover, as she declares: ³ as an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. Yes that is true: one would be surprised to find an apple tree in the middle of a forest. The Song of Songs is in some ways as hidden in the books of the Bible as a lily among brambles. I heard some of you even had a hard time finding this book in the Bible. You see we simply do not expect to find an erotic love poem tucked away in Holy Scripture. God is like a hidden lily in this book where God is not mentioned even once. As surprising as it would be to find an apple tree in a forest so it may surprise us to find God hidden in our sexuality and in our passionate desire for life itself. This poetry from the Song lifts up the theme of the hiddenness of the extraordinary in the ordinary. We do not expect to find God in the lines of a poem that celebrates the beauties of the human body or the bright ache of erotic desire, or the pleasures of lovemaking. The divine hidden in the human; word made flesh. But what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure. So let us return to the Song.

With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. ⁴ He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love. ⁵ Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love. O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right

hand embraced me! ⁷And so she tastes the fruit and she is transported. As if she is now in a banqueting house, a rich feast is set before her, fine wine, soft music, glowing light, a comfortable repose. And his intention toward me is love. His desire calls her to him. Their hunger and thirst for one another is to be sated in this banqueting house. The sweet ecstasy of their passion. They forget their own selves and their separateness in becoming one. Do we dare to open our hearts to this metaphor of Divine Love? And yet so many who have gone before us have known this divine love and have found in the Songs of Songs the only language that could express their loving union with God! Exhausted by this love-making she cries out for sustenance. Raisins. Sustain me with apples. For I am faint with love. O that his left hand was under my head and his right hand embraced me. This love makes both man and woman vulnerable to one another. But you see the woman's initiative is crucial. It is she who awakens and arouses her beloved under the apple tree. It is the man who waits for her invitation before he enters her garden of delights. We do well to remember that God is waiting for the first sign of our interest, our affection, our curiosity, our longing and desire. If the fire of love of God in you has become only a faint ember of a coal in your heart, we must blow on it gently until it glows. Arouse it carefully with the breath of prayer. And what we may discover is that the Holy Spirit Herself breathes with us to blow on the coal. God's desire is to kindle desire in us. If we cannot say honestly that we long for God then we begin where we are. Our prayer is to long for the longing. Our prayer is to desire the desire.

But then we get this strange warning: I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready! Do not stir up love until it is ready. This admonition is repeated three times in the Song of Songs. Do not stir up love until it is ready. Do not stir up love. Until you ready. What do we make of this? Origen of Alexandria, the first great theologian of the church in the 3rd century wrote prolifically about the Song of Songs. And yet Origen was fearful that someone who was immature in the faith would misuse and misunderstand the purpose of the Song. He recommended the Song only to those who were of sufficient age and wisdom. This warning Do not stir up love until it is ready strikes us in the midst of a culture which has cheapened and exploited sexuality. And ironically it is a warning to the church that we bear responsibility for this debasement of sexuality. The church over its history has seemed to condemn the loving expression of our sexuality and our bodies. The church's anti-body stance has in some ways fostered the extreme reaction that we have today which worships sexuality as an idol. Do not stir up love until it is ready. You may not be ready to stir up love within you but if you are ready the Good news is that it is not too late. Because listen in the secret chambers of your heart. It is the voice of our Beloved.

The voice of my beloved! She declares in vs.8: Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. ⁹ My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, Gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. ¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. Here is the sound she has longed to hear. It is the voice of my beloved, she declares. Do we hear the voice of our beloved? It is hard, ever so hard to hear because of all the noise in our world. And if we do shut down the noise in our immediate environment, we find that it is still noisy inside us. Inside our heads. This is what benefited me the most in my 30 days of silence in the monastery. The vow of silence taken by the monks is the framework for cultivating within oneself a place of silence where one can hear the voice of the beloved. It is like when the Risen Christ speaks to Mary Magdalene in

the garden of the empty tomb. The one she thought was a gardener is her Beloved. “Mary” Jesus speaks to her; he calls her by name. Mary I am here. Long to hear that voice. The voice of our beloved, to hear that voice and turn toward the face of love. To see those eyes gazing at you, filled with love. A voice that calls your name. Knows you through and through and is madly in love with you.

And he comes to us like a stag or deer bounding over mountains and high places. Moving toward us in mercy and compassion. No obstacle can come between us or separate us from that love. No height nor depth. No distance is too great. The Divine Lover instantly leaps over all our fears and regrets, our doubts and uncertainties. Even a life time of running away from our Divine Lover is over in an instant, The Beloved is there instantly with us. For us. Filling the God-shaped hole in our heart. “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. ¹² The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. ¹³ The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. I cannot hear this phrase “the flowers appear on the earth” without thinking of the spring of 1998 that we experienced in southern Arizona. About once or twice a decade the rains will fall in the southwest at just the right time throughout the year to allow an explosion of flowers across the desert. 1998 was such a year, what Barbara Kingsolver the famed novelist called the Halley’s Comet of desert wild-flower years. “Our desert hills and valleys were colorized in wild schemes of maroon, indigo, tangerine, and some hues that Crayola hasn’t named yet. Our mountains wore mantles of yellow brittlebush on their rocky shoulders, as fully transformed as eastern forests in their colorful autumn foliage. Abandoned fields--flat, long since left for dead--rose again, wearing brocade of color”. The human heart experiencing the love of the Risen Christ is a like a desert exploding with flowers. The Songs of Songs declares that the human heart can be like a blooming garden.

Here is yet another metaphor offered to us by the Song of Songs, a metaphor for the human heart. A Garden! Maybe even a Garden of Eden? The theologian Phyllis Tribble believes that SOS redeems the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. Here the fruit of the tree is to be savored. Unlike the first garden where it was forbidden. Here in this garden the fruit is tasted, savored, swallowed and digested. This is a garden to be enjoyed. Perhaps it is the garden before the fall. The Song of Songs reverses the tragedy of the fall from the Garden of Eden. Perhaps it is the garden yet to come when God restores creation to the condition of paradise. Perhaps it is the garden that can be even now if we look upon the world around us with eyes of love. If you read the Song of Songs from beginning to end, and I encourage you to do that, notice how the beauty of creation is praised and poetically extolled. St. Augustine, the 5th century theologian and Bishop of N. Africa, wrote “I turned to the earth sky and sea, the animals the sun, moon and stars and says “Tell me of my God Tell me something of Him? Creation answered with one voice. Saying the Hand that made us is Divine. My question was the gaze I turn on them. There answer was their beauty”. For the lover is always one who sees beauty in everything. The care that the lovers take with one another seems to grow organically out of their care for the life of the earth. Creation is a blooming garden, fruitful home for their love. They bring their love in line with the rhythms of the earth. Their care for all the growing things in the world becomes an image of their care for each other. The SOS offers us a vision of living gently in the world. Arise my love and come away. Arise in the power of the resurrection. The winter is past. And spring has come. The grays of winter have been transformed into the colors of spring. By my love for you our Divine

Lover says, love the world. See the beauty. Walk gently on the earth. Arise with eyes that see the new creation all around you.

Arise my love and come away. The winter is past. Could winter be the dryness, the coldness, the lack of passion and growth that we have experienced in our relationship to God? God wants us to know the spring time of resurrected life in this world and the next. Flowering within us. Singing of birds, the fruiting of trees and the blossoming of flowers. Arise and come away with me. In this world and the next know the abundant life of resurrection. Do we hear the voice of our beloved calling to us? Do we see him bounding over the mountains and Lift up your eyes to the hills from whence cometh our help. Our help comes from God who is bounding toward us. The Divine Lover asks the Beloved to see all around the riches of resurrection life to bid the Beloved to come, to follow. It is no time to be passive. When we hear the voice of the beloved we must respond or we might miss the opportunity. We must follow but where are we being summoned? We might like to keep our Divine Lover in the private chambers of our heart. In the secret place of our personal devotion. But our Lover is summoning us to mountain leaping and hill skipping. And you too can bound across the mountains and above the cliffs.¹⁴ O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. Our Divine Lover is summoning us to the high places as in the words of the prophet, God makes my feet like hinds feet and sets me upon the high places. God sets our feet now nimble as a deer on what appear to be higher more transcendent places beyond our ability to climb. God wishes to be known not only in the private chambers of our heart but out in the world, in our daily duties, in the everyday work of survival, in the peaks of challenge and in the valleys of struggle. Even in the wilderness experiences of our lives. The Divine Lover is everywhere and calls us to embrace the world and all of life. The Divine lover is leading us forward as God moves farther out into the world. Arise my love and come away. May our response be akin to hers when she replied: “My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains”.