

Where Has My Beloved Gone? (Song of Songs 3:1-11)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

Elkin Presbyterian Church

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Upon my bed at night I sought whom my soul loves. Many Christians who have pondered the Song of Songs have struggled to make sense of the plot line of the story. It has been very difficult to understand the sometimes confusing shifts in voices and scenes. If you have read it through you know what I mean. For example who exactly is represented in the masculine voice that we hear? Is this the voice of a king or the voice of a shepherd? Some commentators have actually speculated that these are two different characters who are competing for their beloved. If the SOS is confusing and hard to follow at times others have suggested we might have a clue right here in our text this morning from chapter 3 about how to understand the Song. Upon my bed at night I sought whom my soul loves. Maybe the best way to understand the SOS is as we would a night time dream. Maybe the beloved is upon her bed at night seeking her lover in a dream. We know from our own dreams that they do not always unfold in a logical way. Dramatic scenes and changing characters can shift instantly. Perhaps the best way to understand the SOS is like a dream in the night. And those who remember their dreams and try to work with them understand that every element of the dream represents some part of you. Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. “I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves.” The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. Have you seen him whom my soul loves?” Let us enter this dream and see what it can teach us about seeking our Divine Lover in the darkness of night.

The first thing this dream suggests to me is that desire is not an easy reality. Desire, sexual desire can bring experiences of fulfillment and intimacy in our life; in all our relationships and in our relationship to God. But desire can also bring about a fearful emptiness. Sighing, grief, tears. An uncertain waiting. An overwhelming sense of the absence of the Beloved. And so our text acknowledges this darker side of “eros”. I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. This love makes both man and woman vulnerable to one another. The woman seems to wrestle more with the absence of her lover. Where can I find him? The man is deeply challenged by the presence of the woman whose beauty seems to undo him. Desire is the longing that moves us. If you have ever been one who has sought God’s presence and could not find God this verse may resonate. Perhaps it resonates for you in those times when your faith seems empty. When you have no sense of God’s presence in your life, no feeling of comfort or direction or strength. And in such moments we may bury our loneliness for God forgetting that we are created for this relationship. Or maybe we cry out to someone, anyone who might tell us: where is my beloved? “I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”

Who is the sentinel that we find in the dark streets of the city? Again, there is no one interpretation as if the sentinel has only one meaning. But I can tell you who the sentinel is for me. The Sentinel for many in the history of the church is St. John of the Cross a monk who lived

in 16th century Spain. May I tell you his story? St. John of the Cross lived in the time of the Spanish inquisition. When the church was tragically waging violence on itself, on anyone who did not believe exactly as the authorities thought they should believe. St. John of the Cross was himself arrested and thrown into prison, beaten and starved for his so-called heresies. There in the darkness of his cell St. John survived this ordeal by reciting the SOS from memory and by composing poetry in his head as a long meditation on the meaning of this song for him in that terrible moment. It was this line as much as any other from the SOS that captured him, as he sought God in the dark night of his soul. Where are you God? I sought God whom my soul loves and found Him not. His meditation has become a classic in the history of Christian spirituality. A text that has lit a path way for countless others who have sought God and found him not. From that spiritual crucible, that dark night St. John has taught us that the seeming absence of God is simply one dimension of God's faithful presence. It is sometimes the experience of God's absence which spurs us on to seek a deeper awareness of God's presence. It is the experience of God's absence that creates the space to enlarge our hearts. And that whenever God seems absent, whenever it seems that God has abandoned us, it is simply God creating the space for our old god to die and a new greater sense of God to be revealed. Another sentinel for me is the Danish theologian and writer Soren Kierkegaard who wrote in his journal. As an adolescent I sincerely but wrongly believed that I could play with God as a child might play with a play mate in a sandbox. As a young man I sincerely but wrongly believed that with all my intellectual passion I might yet achieve union with God as lover who pursues his beloved. Now as one of age, I finally and humbly realize how mysterious God is, how infinitely beyond my grasp is this God I love, this Infinite and Mysterious God that loves me. I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.

You see the god we think we know and worship is too small. From time to time in our faith journey this god will pass away so that God can be revealed to us in a greater more comprehensive way. But this divine face revealed to us always remains veiled in mystery. One such saint who found St. John to be a sentinel in the dark night of her soul was Catherine Doherty who died in 1985. She wrote: "In such a moment, in such a dark night of the soul you will be shaped and shaped not knowing that you are being shaped. You will enter into a great darkness, a great aridity, a great temptation. But oh rejoice! For this is the desert where Christ spent forty days fasting! This is his hunger you are experiencing. This the Lover playing court to your soul, hiding himself, as lovers do so that you whom he loves might arise and go in search of him. The hide and seek of lovers, the eternal playfulness is now lifted to a supernatural plane. Be at peace!"

Part of my experience at the monastery was the opportunity to receive spiritual direction from one of the monks. What is spiritual direction? It is the ministry of a wise elder who is skilled at listening to another as they explore their spiritual life and try to discern where God is moving within them. I was describing a moment of discouragement in my spiritual journey, sharing how little progress I have made, how prone to wander I am, and the monk said you are feeling compunction. Compunction? I seemed to remember that word from somewhere. Compunction? I asked. Compunction is the sorrow we sometimes feel when we experience the distance between us and God. The great spiritual writer Thomas Merton who was also a Benedictine monk writes that compunction is the great spiritual writer who was a monk, compunction Is a spiritual grace an insight into our own depths that sees through our illusions about ourselves sweeps aside our

self- deceptions and daydream and shows us exactly as we are. A liberation from falsity, a glad and grateful acceptance of the truth and a resolution to live in contact with the deep spiritual reality which has been opened up to our vision -the reality of gods will in our lives. Where is my beloved? In the dark night of the soul, God is creating the space for the old self to die and a new more faithful self to be born.

⁴ Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me. She knows the joy of reunion. The one who seemed so far away is close again. But notice that she is now clinging to her Divine Lover. Can one truly cling to God? She is trying. She has learned what she can from this moment. But she will have more to learn as we will see in the chapters ahead. She has more to learn as she herself understands because she repeats that same warning again that is repeated three times in the Song: ⁵ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready! The Song begins with the soul that is seeking, a hunger and thirst for romance with the divine. As we have seen this love makes both man and woman vulnerable to one another. The experience of love yields joy and ecstasy but it is also filled with disappointments, with conflicts, and breakups, with unrequited longing. And so it can be in our relationship to God our Divine Lover. We seek God but are not able to find her. Or we have an experience of falling in love with God and then the experience fades. We experience fluctuations of the soul as we come in and out of an awareness of God's presence. Because it is a love poem it is also about the risks of loving, of absence, missed meetings, unresolved yearning and seeking without finding. Do not stir up love until it is ready for once love is aroused we must rouse as well. Once love is awake, we must awaken. In the deepest possible sense. For love asks everything.

The lovers are as physically intimate as it is possible to be but as intimate as they are they always seem to be losing one another. SOS is a song of love but inevitably a song about separation, hesitation, missed meetings, vulnerability, misunderstandings and the ache of absence. Stephanie Paulson is a contemporary theologian at Harvard Divinity School whose commentary on the SOS has been an extraordinary help to me. She writes: "Have you ever woken up next to someone you have known and wondered: who are you? Sometimes this question floats up when we are disappointed; when our beloved has broken a promise or betrayed our trust. But sometimes the question arises out of the ordinariness of life when suddenly we can see that the one we love – the lover, the sibling, the child, parent or friend is more than we can ever know." Hidden-ness and not-knowing are as much a part of loving another as is sexual union. Bernard of Clairvaux an 11th century monk who wrote countless sermons on the Song of Songs said that no matter how much we delight in the beloved, there is always something about the beloved that is farther out, or farther in. Something about the beloved that remains a mystery to us. Even the lovers' intimacy gives way to a sense of the mystery of the other who can never fully be known or captured. We remain mysteries to one another. In erotic life, in family life, in community life, in our life with God we never fully know the other. The search for the beloved does not end with sexual union or marriage, baptism, weddings. Such moments are not the end of the search to know the other but a renewal of the search, a chance to begin again. O God you are good, you are just, you are wise. You created us and sustain our lives. We know your stories. We have sung your songs. But who are you?

But then this divine dream shifts again and we are plunged into what seems to be a very strange wedding scene in vs.6. A wedding procession coming from the wilderness as the Groom and His party approach. What is that coming up from the wilderness, like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant? ⁷ Look, it is the litter of Solomon! Around it are sixty mighty men of the mighty men of Israel, ⁸ all equipped with swords and expert in war Look, O daughters of Zion, at King Solomon, at the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart. I have to be honest with you. I struggled to make sense of this text; this wedding scene so very different from the weddings I have seen like the beautiful wedding procession of Ben and Rachel who I had the honor to marry last spring. And I wondered again about the male character in the Songs of Songs: Is he a mighty King as depicted here or is He a lowly Shepherd as we encountered last week? Who are you O Lord? Who are you? And then quite by accident I stumbled upon a story again from one of my favorite theologians Soren Kierkegaard who was writing on the SOS with this very scene in mind. It goes like this. Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist-no one dared resist him. But would she love him? She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could the King know for sure? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal. The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise – the king took on a totally new identity – He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers. But the servant-form is no mere outer garment, and therefore the God must suffer all things, endure all things. He must suffer hunger in the desert; he must thirst in the time of his agony; he must be forsaken in death, absolutely like the humblest — behold the man. Our Crucified and Risen Lord. In Christ, God has become a human being. Yes, indeed the King has become a shepherd- Our Divine Lover desires more than anything else a love between equals. Thanks be to God.