

The Wounding and Healing of Desire (Song of Songs 5:2-9)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

Elkin Presbyterian Church

Sept. 16, 2018

I slept, but my heart was awake! Some Biblical commentators trying to make sense of the dramatic changes and shifts that occur in the plotline of the Song of Songs have said that the best way to understand the story is as we would if we were having a dream in the night. Is this yet another dream as we encountered in week 3 of this series? It seems to be: I slept but my heart was awake. Maybe the beloved is upon her bed at night seeking her lover in her dreams. We know from our own dreams that they do not always unfold in a predictable way. Dramatic scenes and changing characters can shift instantly as we will soon see. But what do we make of this curious phrase “I slept, but my heart was awake”. Stephanie Paulson the Harvard divinity theologian whose commentary on the SOS has been so extraordinarily helpful to me writes that this quiet little sentence “I slept, but my heart was awake” gets at something true about us. She writes: “Even when we feel more scattered than present in our own lives, even when we are distracted by many things, even when we are asleep, there is some part of us – even if it is a very small part and very hidden- that is awake and waiting. This is the place where love greets and addresses us- the part of us that stays awake longing and listening, the part of us that is reaching out for love, for God for our beloved, even when the rest of us is too distracted to notice.” I just want to savor that insight like honey on the tongue. Sigh. The Song of Songs invites us to learn to be kept awake by love. But this dream that starts out with such tender promise and potential turns into a nightmare of brutal violence.

She cries out: 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.” The Lover she longs for has come. And they will be reunited. But no, how can it be. She hesitates. I had put off my garment; how could I put it on again? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them? It is quite strange it seems that such trivial considerations could possibly have led the Beloved to hesitate and miss the opportunity to be reunited with her lover whom she has longed to see. But the Song of Songs paints a pretty realistic picture about the vagaries of the human heart. The Song reflects the fluctuations of our emotions, you might even call the fickleness of the human heart. We are always desiring and never completely satisfied. Even in our most intimate, mutual and loving relationships lovers are not always receptive to one another. Lovers do not always yearn for one another at the same time. Sometimes when we look for that open heart, that warm embrace, that listening ear, we do not find it. Sometimes lovers hesitate a moment too long and the opportunity is lost. The life of love is not without its moments of absence, unfulfilled longing, misunderstanding and hesitation. My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him. ⁵I arose to open to my beloved, I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer. Where are you God? Where are you?

The Song has already taught us that there are times when our Divine Lover seems very present to us in passionate embrace and there are other times when God seems absent. Here again the beloved’s longing for her divine lover propels her into the night searching the streets alone. This has happened once before in chapter 3 when she went out on the streets of the city at night

searching for her beloved, she encounters the benign presence of the sentinels. And then is instantly reunited with her Lover. But here she goes out and it is no benign sentinel that she meets but a gang that will mistreat her. And this is where the dream of love turns to a nightmare of violence. Making their rounds in the city the sentinels found me; the Beloved of God testifies: they beat me, they wounded me; they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls. Look at what happens to her. This time the sentinels are a threatening gang. She is taken. She is beaten. She is wounded. She is stripped. We can assume I believe that she was raped. Her dignity as a human being, the integrity of her body as a woman has been assaulted. This is more than a crime of passion. It is a degradation of love. It is a violent expression of distorted desire. What does this dream turned nightmare mean for her? And what can it mean for us, for all of us who are the Beloved of God living in a dangerous world?

This sermon is about to take an abrupt turn because our story has turned abruptly. I want to move forward here very carefully because we are now in territory of the human heart that has been wounded by violence. This text is a reminder that the world we live in is not wholly under our control. Desire leads us out into the world, leads us out into the night where we never fully know where each step we take is leading us. We encounter others and we live our lives the best we can and the world sometimes has its way with us. And we experience violence, affliction and loss. Who can live life in this world without at some point experiencing affliction in body and soul, a traumatic event that may damage our wholeness and leave us wounded. This kind of affliction can wound our desire for God; trauma can damage our capacity for love in all our relationships. We are sometimes broken by how hard life can hit us and hit the ones we love. Many different kinds of events can result in psychological trauma, including natural disasters as we experienced this week with Hurricane Florence or as Puerto Rico experienced months ago and is nowhere near recovery. Voices this week from Puerto Rico make it crystal clear that they feel abandoned by our federal government. We experience trauma through human-made disasters or conflicts like 9/11 that we have been remembering this past week. As we watched the moving ceremony at the 9/11 memorials in NY City, DC and Ohio we know that that for those who survived, for those who lost loved ones the healing process is long and never really finished. 9/11 was a collective trauma for this nation that we are still recovering from. Trauma can happen to us in childhood, making us feel powerless or unsafe, unable to trust others or feel good about ourselves. I read this week a heart-breaking story about those immigrant children who were separated from their parents at the border and have now been reunited. Their parents report that their children are traumatized. Clinging to their parents or the exact opposite- not wanting to be touched at all. Waking up in the middle of the night screaming. This is hard enough for children reunited to their families. But consider the hundreds of children still separated from their parents in detention centers around the country.

The heart wounded by trauma needs a lot of love but it has difficulty receiving the love it needs. Trauma makes it hard to receive love from others, from ourselves, from God. It seems blocked because we find it hard to trust again. In such trauma, we cry out to God, where are you? Where are you? This disturbing scene from the Song of Songs depicting sexual violence has led me to turn this sermon in a different direction from the other sermons in this series. This morning I want to focus on the trauma that arises from sexual violence and domestic abuse and what that does to the heart's ability to love. We all know that the Roman Catholic Church is reeling from the latest disclosure that has revealed a continuing epidemic of sexual violence across the church

in Pennsylvania. We are horrified by that and the systemic cover-up of these crimes against children carried out by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. I strongly believe that the church must be cleansed of any who have participated in the crime of abuse or the crime of covering up abuse, no matter how high up the hierarchy these crimes occurred. And I grieve for the church universal. Lest we think this is just a Roman Catholic problem, we know the mainline Protestant denominations have their own realities of abuse that occur. Years ago the General Assembly of the PCUSA was one of the first mainline denominations to address this crisis with a major policy statement on sexual abuse and domestic violence. Called "From Mourning to Dancing" this study sought to explore the root causes of domestic violence, to assess the church's complicity in this pervasive problem and to propose ways in which the church can be more responsive. By domestic violence the report employs a broadly inclusive term that encompasses physical, emotional and sexual abuse found in all familial relationships: child to child, parent to child, spouse to spouse, partner to partner. The study also addressed the violence that occurs in dating relationships. Collectively as the church, we simply cannot continue to have our heads in the sand. For the church to be more responsive to this epidemic of sexual violence we must first remember who we are. The first step is return to our tradition and to ground ourselves more deeply in what we believe. As people of God, as a community of faith we affirm that human beings are created in the image of God and are worthy of abundant life. Human beings are created to live in right relationships with one another that include peace, respect, mutuality, dignity, joy and most of all love. We are created free, with the God given capacity of consent in our relationships and the right to live without fear of violence. As a church we must be absolutely clear that sexual violence is the gravest of sins because it desecrates God's good creation and violates God's commandment to love.

The second step for the church is one of confession. We must confess that at times we have been complicit in sexual violence. We have not always heeded the victims' \ survivors' cry for help. I have several friends and colleagues who were abused and whose families and churches would not believe them or acknowledge the truth. The church best offers support for the survivors by its belief in the liberating power of the truth. Domestic violence is a painful subject to talk about. It's one that is rarely ever heard discussed in a church setting. And yet this past week Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine and a national religious leader wrote in an editorial that he was challenging the preachers of this nation to speak out more clearly and more often on sexual assault and domestic violence. Wallis said that we must take domestic violence out of the personal individual realm and make sure it is understood as a social justice issue of the greatest urgency. We are witnessing a breakthrough moment of truth telling in our nation in recent months with the #metoo movement. After a long time of being silenced, the voices of women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted are finally being heard. And taken seriously. Survivors of sexual harassment and violence who have not always been believed are standing up for themselves and finding more support than ever before. Families and congregations can provide support for survivors as they walk step by step along this spiritual path to healing. We can offer accompaniment to them as they move through the stages of grief, as they learn to trust again in spite of profound betrayal. The ultimate healing of the wound of sexual violence and abuse is found in the gradual restoration in the survivors' sense of self of the sacredness of each person in the eyes of God. Each and every one of us is the Beloved of God.

Where are you God? For anyone who has ever suffered a trauma, especially the trauma of sexual violence, the question we cry out to God is where are you? This terrible scene from the Song of Songs describing the Beloved of God being attacked in the night reminds us first of all the dangers to love that exist in our world. It reminds us of all the realities that can threaten the joys of human relationship. The Song began with these innocent words: I slept but my heart was awake. May humankind wake up from the nightmare of sexual violence. May we wake up to God's dream for the earth, as a place where human beings can flourish in mutuality and respect. May we wake up to God's dream of a world in which our essential vulnerability as children of God is sheltered by God's love and the love of neighbor. May we catch sight of a world worth our best energies to create, support and protect- God's dream for a world where all God's children can love and be loved.