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The First Old Testament Reading: Zechariah 9:9-12

⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ¹⁰He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. ¹¹As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

¹²Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

The Second Old Testament Reading: Song of Songs 2:8-13

⁸The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. ⁹My 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. ¹⁰My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; ¹¹for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. ¹²The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. ¹³The 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.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon:

When he was a young man, Tony Campolo hated Sunday evening church. He could handle Sunday mornings – they were generally well put-together. Prime-time. The sermons had a structure you could follow – three points and a poem - and you could count on them to wrap it up in a timely manner. The evening services had a more slapped-together feeling. Sermons wandering around seeking a point. And while the morning service had three “selections” to sing from the

hymnal, sometimes in the evening service the minister would finally come to the end of his long meandering comments and then say, “Now. Does anyone have a favorite hymn they would like to sing tonight?”

That’s when Tony would know – without even turning his head – that old Miss Kirkpatrick was raising her hand in the back right of the sanctuary. She was as reliable as the rising sun. “130 in the Green Hymnal” she would cry out in her shaky voice.

“130 in the Green Hymnal” was reason number one why Tony hated going to the Sunday evening service. He was an Italian American sixteen year-old boy from West Philly. “You have to realize,” he says, “I grew up in streets where survival depended on looking tough and acting tough, so as to scare off predators. I tried to walk in a cool manner and act like I was a rough and tumble guy.” You know, not Tony but “Tony.”

But it was hard to be “Tony” and sing, “In The Garden.” It was a like a mash-up between a standard Baptist hymn, a bar song, and an earnest Broadway musical.

“I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses.” The second verse was worse: “He speaks, and the sound of his voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing.”

Tony refused to sing it. He just opened and closed his mouth silently, wishing he were anywhere else.¹

Why was he so uncomfortable? It’s possible that there was some homophobia there. There is a blatant romanticism to the hymn that is hard to ignore. Ostensibly, it’s written from the perspective of Mary, entering the garden where Jesus had been buried, only to discover that he was alive. By the time Elvis covered the song, it does seem like there was maybe a little more than religious devotion in the mix. Regardless,

¹ As recounted in Tony Campolo’s collection of stories, *Let Me Tell You A Story: Life Lessons from Unexpected Places and Unlikely People*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000.

one is asked to adopt a female point of view to sing the song. Some men have a problem simply doing *that*.

To be fair, one doesn't have to be homophobic or a chauvinist to object to "In The Garden." It was also a primary target of a long and scathing article about church music called, "Style or Substance?"²

"It should be clear to *anyone*," the author writes, "that modern church music, as a rule, is vastly inferior to the classic hymns that were being written 200 years ago."

Did I mention this was an article from the Internet?

"Before the middle part of the 19th Century," the article continues, "hymns were wonderful didactic tools, filled with Scripture and sound doctrine." The author offers the hymn "Immortal, Invisible," #12 in your hymnal, as an excellent example. "Around the start of the twentieth century, however, church music took a different direction. Choruses with lighter, simpler subject matter *proliferated*. Songs focused on personal experience and the feelings of the worshipper." Exhibit A? "In The Garden." You will note that "In The Garden" cannot be found in our hymnal.

It was written by C. Austin Miles in 1912. He was an American songwriter and former pharmacist with no theological education. Calling the song a "wretched favorite of the gospel era," the article goes on to assert that "aside from an oblique reference to the 'Son of God' in the last line of the first stanza, there's no distinctly Christian content to that song at all."

"The modern church," the article concludes, "fed on choruses with insipid lyrics, has no appetite for her own great tradition of didactic hymnody."

If it's not clear to you, I'm not completely on board with the author's takedown of "In The Garden." It's really interesting to me what qualifies

² "Style or Substance?" from *Grace to You Ministries*, June 16, 2009.
<https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A261/style-or-substance>

as “distinctly Christian content.” Nothing, apparently, from the neck down. Does it matter to us, what Mary might have *felt*, walking into the garden, discovering the Resurrected Christ? Does it matter what we might *feel*, contemplating the love of God, not just in abstract didactic terms but in the highly personal, incarnated form of a man named Jesus?

Between teenage Tony’s discomfort with the tender, feminine content of “In The Garden,” and some people’s discomfort with the sentimental, embodied content of “In The Garden,” we have stumbled upon most of the objections the church has to today’s salacious and seldom-held Scripture selection from the Song of Songs.

Song of Songs is a book of the Bible, tucked into what is known as the Wisdom literature. It takes its place alongside the Psalms and Proverbs, the Books of Ecclesiastes and Job. Each book has its own perspective but they are all assembled around the broad question – what does it mean to live a wise and holy life? We are most familiar with the Psalms, the prayers and songbook of Scripture. The Proverbs offer short sayings that record wisdom from previous generations. Job tackles the painful mysteries of suffering. Ecclesiastes asks deeply philosophical questions about the meaning of our work and existence. And Song of Songs? Song of Songs is the book we pray our children won’t read until they are of age.

It’s credited to King Solomon, which is why it is sometimes called “Song of Solomon.” But it is also widely believed to have been written later than that, which is why it is also called “Song of Songs.”

‘Song of Songs’ is one of only two books of the Bible – the other being Esther – that never mentions the name of God. That’s exactly one time less than “In The Garden,” for those keeping score at home. It is also distinct in its celebration of romantic and sexual love, in somewhat explicit if metaphorical detail. The metaphors are largely agrarian and, I should add, hilarious.

“How beautiful you are, my love,” says the man:

Your eyes are doves behind your veil.
Your hair like a flock of goats,
 moving down the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn lambs
 that have come up from the washing,
all of which bear twins,
 and not one of them is bereaved. (4:1-2)

In other words, you have all your teeth *and* you brush them.

Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
 behind your veil.
Your neck is like the tower of David,
 built in courses;
on it hang a thousand bucklers,
 all of them shields of warriors. (4:3-4)

Try that one on for size, next time you are in the doghouse. I'll spare you the lines about the two fawns and the secret garden. I think you get the point.

Song of Songs has very little in the way of a plot but is rather a series of poetic monologues, back and forth, between a man and a woman who are very much in love. The words "bride" and "bridegroom" are used, which helped my childhood Sunday School teachers, who were adamant – *frantic* – even, in their insistence that this man and woman are married and that this was, in fact, the *point* of the book. One does wonder why they spend so much of their married life creeping around at night, trying to find each other in the shadows of the city – but never mind that. It's clear enough to me that regardless of their marital status, the point of the book is the *passion* that they have for each other. All-consuming, single-minded, not yet entirely fulfilled.

Another highly unusual element of the book is its strong female voice. While Song of Songs is a back-and-forth between a male and female speaker, the female voice comprises 75% of the book. In the opening verses of the first chapter she says, "I am black and beautiful, O

daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon” (1:5).

So – what we have here is ancient Wisdom literature, included in the canon of our Holy Scriptures, written almost exclusively in the poetic voice of a young black woman who seems quite comfortable articulating her passion and desires, engaging in a conversation with a man which has no hint of the patriarchy found in many other Biblical texts. In the height of their passion, they are equals. It’s an extraordinary and underappreciated part of our Sacred Text. You are looking today at the one and only appearance of Song of Songs in our three-year lectionary cycle.

Which is not to say that the book has always been unappreciated. Quite the opposite, actually. The Jewish tradition began regularly using Song of Songs in worship in the 2nd Century. In the Sephartic tradition, portions of the book are recited aloud every Friday night. In the Medieval era of the Catholic Church there were more sermons preached on Song of Songs than almost any other book. 2nd Century Rabbi Akiva famously said, “All of eternity in its entirety is not as worthy as the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel for all the Writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”³

I love that quote because it hints at a play on words in the very title of the book. Originally, the Holy of Holies was the interior space of the Tabernacle where the Ten Commandments were kept. But when King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies was its innermost room. It seems fitting that the Song of Songs might refer to Solomon’s *other* superlative accomplishment – a song above all songs, lyrical poem through which one can enter the loving presence of God.

In addition to being sacred, the Holy of Holies was also considered to be quite dangerous. Only one priest entered it, only once a year, on the day of Yom Kippur. Some traditions speak of tying a rope around the priest’s waist, so that if he perished while in the sacred space his body

³ Rabbi Akiva’s celebration of Song of Songs is elaborated upon here:
<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/portion-of-the-week/.premium-1.586052>

could be removed without anyone else having to enter it. That which is holy, the tradition seems to say, also *costs* something.

One gets a similar sense of danger from Song of Songs. “Love is strong as death,” it says in the famous 8th Chapter. “passion fierce as the grave. It’s flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame” (8:6). Again and again the woman reminds her friends, “Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!” (2:7). Why? Because it is dangerous. Because it will *cost* something.

The word “passion” of course, literally means “to suffer for.” Hence the passion of the Christ, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus on behalf of all people. A passionate love gives itself away. It is not to be undertaken lightly.

It’s funny. We think of America as a sex-saturated country and in some ways it really is. I was amazed to learn this week that there is more money generated by the pornography industry than the professional sports industry in the United States of America.⁴ Think about that for a second. We are a sex-saturated culture, and but the vast majority of the sex that we see is by definition disposable, objectified, violent, self-gratifying. For entertainment. Depictions of committed love and intimacy – sensual, egalitarian, faithful, sacrificial – are actually extremely rare. I would argue that even if the love depicted in Song of Songs operated strictly on the human level, it would be well-worth including in our sacred tradition.

But I think we can go further than that and see what the ancients have always seen – that the vulnerability of our romantic and physical desire can serve as a window to the deep-seated needs of our spirits. A hunger which is ultimately only satiated in the consuming, self-sacrificing love of God. “You arouse us,” wrote Augustine of Hippo to God, “you arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”⁵

⁴ “Pornography Statistics: Who uses porn?”

<http://www.sagu.edu/thoughthub/pornography-statistics-who-uses-pornography>

⁵ Augustine’s *Confessions*,

<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/ourheartisrestlessuntilitrestsinyou/>

“¹²The flowers appear on the earth;” the woman says in today’s reading. “The time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. ¹³The 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.”

Winter is over, and spring has arrived, and we find ourselves back in the garden, to teenage Tony’s dismay. Hearts full of love, swooning at the beauty of the birds and the bees, consumed with desire for the One who loves us like no one ever has. If we allowed ourselves to imagine, for a moment, needing God, *desiring* God in the manner we’ve desired another human being, we start to realize what such a love might impose upon us. We start to imagine how far we would go in the service of such a love. We start to imagine how we might talk in public about such a love. We start to imagine how we might change.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m all for theologically robust hymns. I happen to really like “Immortal, Invisible,” and I do find some more modern songs vapid. But at the end of the day, let’s not be afraid of *passion*. Certainly, let’s not disqualify it as “authentic Christian content.” Let’s not be ashamed of the love that flushes our cheeks and makes our heart beat faster. Because let’s be honest – it is, as the end of the day, the *vulnerability* of our love that opens us up to connection with another. It is the very openness of our love that gives us deep knowledge of the Other. When it is all said and done it will be our capacity for tenderness that becomes capacity to understand God. It will be our restless desire, a gift in itself, that allows us to rest in God’s arms.

Here’s a little irony for you. No one knows the exquisite pain of young love like teenagers. “The first cut is the deepest,” says the song. The young lovers are running through the streets in search of a man or a woman who understands them, thrills them, knows them in a way that – instinctively – they understand that they deserve to be known. No one knows young love like teenagers. But sometimes you have to live a little before you can fully understand the spiritual wisdom that underpins that ache. Perhaps that is why there is no God-talk in Song of Songs.

Perhaps the metaphor invites us to put it together ourselves. Perhaps part of the work of spiritual formation is learning to listen to our hearts and our bodies, even as we cultivate our minds and our spirit. Surely that is what God did, in the audacity of the Incarnation, clothing the power of infinite love in skin and flesh and bone that it might be small enough to find intimacy with us. Jesus is the place where spirit and body meet. “Lo, he comes to you,” says Zechariah, “victorious and triumphant” but also humble on a donkey, like the lead in a spaghetti Western. Our Reformation brains push back against the romanticism but I think we would do well to listen to our hearts on this one. Because its speaking in a language that we happen to already know.

“I’ve got to tell you,” said Tony Campolo, finally. “The older I get the more I’ve grown to love #130 in the old green hymnal. The older I get, the more my attitude changes, to the point that these days I love to sing that song. I especially love to sing the chorus, where it says,

And he walks with me,
And he talks with me,
And he tells me that I am his own,
And the joy that we share as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.