

Song of Solomon 2:8-13
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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

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.

There are some days in our lives that are transitional, we measure time as before that day and after. A graduation day, a wedding day, the birth of a child. And there are some years that are transitional as well, sometimes called “liminal.” I suspect that in the decades ahead we will look back at 2020 as a liminal year—so much has changed in the last year or so. Things were cancelled or postponed because of the pandemic, we had a crazy presidential election, we are doing church differently. In some ways, it has made us think about the world differently. But there are other liminal times in our lives, times of transition. For me, although I didn’t realize it at the time, 1981 was a liminal year. I spent the summer of 1981 in Boulder. I was 22 years old and a new college graduate. It was one of those liminal times—caught in the margins between my undergraduate education and my seminary education in Princeton, New Jersey in the fall. I was working in Boulder, but I had a job that gave me every Friday off. Since none of my friends had Fridays off, I determined to fill those days with meaningful activities. One of those was to hike up a few of Colorado’s fourteeners: the peaks in Colorado that reach above the 14,000 foot mark in elevation. Of course this was when I was much thinner. One of the ones closest to my home was Gray’s Peak, the tenth highest peak in the whole of the Rockies, but a relatively easy hike. Still, it takes several hours, so I left early in the morning before it was light. I arrived at the trailhead and began the hike. By 10:00, I had left the tree-line below me and was walking through

rocky glacial fields. By noon, I was within sight of the summit though I did not allow myself to look. I kept my eyes on the trail; I wanted my first view to be made from the summit itself. When I finally arrived and looked around, it did not disappoint. Gray's Peak is the highest point on the Continental Divide and so I could look north to Long's Peak and south to Pike's Peak with ease. Sunlight and clouds played off the rocky peaks creating shadows. I suddenly understood what "purple mountain's majesty" looked like. There were patches of white where snow remained. Farther below, the purple melded into the deep forest green of the tree line of Englemann Spruce and Sub-Alpine Fir. But looking back up to the mountain tops, it was the sky that was most arresting. The higher one gets, the less atmosphere and haze one has to look through and so the deeper the shade of blue. It was a literal and figurative mountaintop experience—one of those moments when the awesome grandeur of God is intimate, transcendent and powerful.

But then I took my eyes off the sky and the horizon and took in my immediate surroundings and standing only about ten feet away from me and looking at me with curiosity and caution was a snow white mountain goat and her kid. If you've not seen them before, mountain goats have white curly fur and black horns and hooves. They are usually shy but that high up they have little to fear from exhausted hikers like me. Eventually I became less interesting and so the mother went back to munching lichens off the rocks. I looked farther down the south slope and saw a dozen or so more of the herd. The closeness of the goats amazed me as much as the view from the peak. The glory of God is revealed not only in the transcendent vista, but in the immanence of God's creatures. It was powerful...

My experience in the mountains was one of intimacy with God. Like in the Song of Songs, it was a celebration of the natural world, of creation. We experience God in nature, in the mountains, in the trees, the birds, and in the love of another. It is in nature that we often most closely experience God's transcendence, and immanence, and power. It may be the stars at night or closeness of a well-loved

dog, and according to the Song of Songs, it may be in the amazing experience of being loved by another person. All are ways that we know God through the physical world. It is not enough to say we know something about God by admiring his work, like admiring and thinking we know something about Da Vinci because we've seen The Mona Lisa. Creation is not just the work of God, creation *is* God. That day on Gray's Peak was a day that I began to see God in creation. That's why it was a liminal moment for me.

Over the last two weeks we've been reading about Solomon and talking about wisdom. The first week we said that wisdom is the gift of being able to see the connections between things. Last week we said that wisdom was the ability to see the connections between people. But today we can see that wisdom is even more than that. Wisdom is seeing the connections between us and all of God's creation.

The Song of Songs celebrates all that God has created. It is a song of love between two people, but notice that it also celebrates the mountains and hills, the animals, the joy of spring and flowers, the fruit of trees and the wine that comes from the vines. It is a celebration not just of being in love with another, it is a celebration of being in love with all that God has created.

It is being in love with God, who is embodied within creation itself.

That might be a new concept to you so let's take a moment to let that settle: God is embodied in creation. Actually, it is a very old concept, St. Augustine of Hippo wrote of God, "Since nothing that is could exist without you, you must in some way be in all of this."¹

But, St. Augustine and others aside, historically the Christian tradition has portrayed God as distant from his creation; one of the historic ideas that the majority of theologians have held is that creation is comes solely by the power of God, and that he created from nothing "ex nihilo," a Latin phrase

¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.2, trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 3-4

meaning “out of nothing.” But the Celtic tradition have thought differently. The Celtic scholar J. Philip Newell notes:

It was after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century that the church began to teach its doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. In response, Celtic teachers have said again and again over the centuries that creation does not come out of nothing. It comes out of God... [Ex nihilo] says that the physical universe, including our bodies, consists of not sacred substance but of empty substance. At best, matter existed to be the humble servant of spirit. At worst, it was the feared enemy of spirit.²

So imagine: if the alternate is true, that all of creation is part of God, then each of us is part of God and so is the flower outside and the running stream and the bird in flight, and all that is. Theologian Salli McFague says, “It is God’s nature to be embodied, to be the one in whom we live and move and have our being.”³ The Song of Songs teaches us that God is not just evident but present in creation itself—in the animals, the plants, the mountains.

There are two remarkable things about the Song of Songs: first, it is one of the only books in the Bible that does not mention God. And, second, it is mostly in the voice of a woman. Some scholars says she may be one of Solomon’s foreign wives. Maybe. I personally believe these two unique qualities are inter-related. I believe God isn’t mentioned because the speaker herself is God, only she is Wisdom, the female voice of God. Her love song is to her creation and the relationship is anything but removed or distant. Many Jewish rabbis and early Christian preachers interpreted this as a love song between God and God’s people. In fact in our marriage ceremonies to this day we say that God has given us marriage as a “holy mystery in which two people become one, just as Christ is one with the church.”

Wisdom helps us to see connections. In both Hebrew and Greek thought, wisdom is female. In Greek, wisdom is Sophia, and is that aspect of God that helped create the world. In Proverbs 8 wisdom is

² J. Philip Newell *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 53

³ Sallie McFague *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) p. 72

personified as a woman after whom we should all seek but she is also credited with a primary role as God's tool in creation. God has created the world in wisdom, therefore knowing his creation is beginning to know wisdom and, if we are right in saying that God created the world not out of nothing but out of God's self, then we are beginning to know God.

So, what if we are the substance of God? And what if the person sitting nearest to you in the pews is also the substance of God? What if Wisdom compels us to honor the inter-connectedness in all creation? That you can't be your best self without me and I can't be my best self without you?

And what about the orphan or the widow that we are supposed to be caring for. We are connected to them as well. That's why we are all diminished by the violence in Afghanistan this week, because we are connected to those Marines, and their families, and the Afghanis who lost their lives, and even to the suicide bomber. We grieve, because something of God is lost, something of us is lost as well. And we know that this is not how things are supposed to be.

There's a reason that these images from the Song of Songs are reminiscent of a garden. I think it is an intentional call back to the Garden of Eden. Perhaps it is true that there is within us a memory for a paradise that we have never seen. Maybe planted deep within us is a desire to get back to that place, that garden where all nature was at peace, where love was a joy, and where we walked with God in the cool of the evening. The images from the Song of Songs evoke those thoughts in our minds, not just walking in a beautiful, bountiful garden, but coming together in love. It is reveling in our creatureliness, rejoicing that we are physical and spiritual, that we learn about God. We learn that God is wonderfully creative and endlessly loving. We learn that not just by reading the Bible but by walking in the garden. I believe that part of the reason that we acquired this property next door is not just because of the house, but because of the green space, the garden if you will. Because we believe that there is a connection between our property and the grounds next door, between our memorial

garden and the gardens that can exist to the south, between the green space that you see when you drive up Gull Road and the village green and the Gull Prairie Preserve to the north. And we are the stewards of the gardens that God has given us. WE are connected. Wisdom that tells us that we are all connected—to one another, to the rest of creation, and to the God who made us all.