

## Arise, My Beloved

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*Song of Songs 2:8-13 — The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. 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. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The 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.*

So, how many of you can recall hearing a sermon about the Song of Solomon—or, as it's often called, the Song of Songs? The book isn't very widely read in churches—not now, and not throughout most of church history—and if you read the Song of Songs from start to finish, you will immediately understand why. This book is a collection of love poems, which tell an ancient Romeo-and-Juliet-type story. And it's not exactly G-rated. So far as ancient literature goes, it's pretty steamy.

Moreover, there isn't much in the way of morality. The book isn't particularly concerned with warnings or guidelines. There are three verses that say, "Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready," but these three verses are surrounded by a hundred more that openly celebrate romantic desire and expression. The passionate young couple in the Song of Songs isn't getting a finger-wag here, isn't being told to wait until marriage—and they aren't. The book isn't giving them, or us, advice to remember, rules to follow, prohibitions to heed. The book is simply describing and rejoicing in true romantic love, mutually giving and mutually uplifting.

Now, given how fond much religion is of rules, and given how nervous much religion is about bodily pleasure, you can easily understand why this book hasn't shown up very often in church history. And when it *has* shown up, by and large, it has been...well, let's say, "imaginatively interpreted." Ancient rabbis taught that the Song of Songs was actually an allegory for God and God's people. It wasn't an erotic tale about the love of a young, unmarried couple; it was a theological tale about Yahweh's love for Israel. A couple hundred years later, once Christianity was founded, the church picked up on this Jewish interpretive strategy and put even more spin on it: the Song of Songs, Christian theologians taught, was actually a theological tale about Jesus Christ and the church.

Never mind that the book never mentions Jesus, who wasn't even born until at least 200 years after the Song of Songs was written (and by the way, no one knows for sure when it was written—it's possible that it was more like 1,000 years before Jesus was born). Never mind that the book never even mentions God. When the Song of Songs was written, whenever that was, it was not written as holy scripture; rather, it was written as secular poetry, performed in banquet halls,

harvest festivals. Perhaps we could compare it to a rock 'n roll hit in the 60s. Despite this secular context, both ancient Judaism and ancient Christianity were drawn to the Song of Songs, and in order to make it sacred, they thought that they had to get rid of its erotic meaning and replace it with theological meaning. So, that's what they did, and that's what's been done by the historical majority of Christian interpreters.

But that's not what I would recommend we do, friends. To be sure, the theological allegory is beautiful, and that's a fine supplement to our understanding of this book, but the way I see it, we don't need to be afraid of the Song of Songs' original meaning. We don't need to make it about theology in order to call it "scripture"; we can let it be, as it was meant to be, about romantic love. And here's why: even though God isn't explicitly named in the text, we Christians believe that every good gift comes from God, and we believe that romantic love is one of those good gifts, and we believe that God intended this gift for our pleasure and for our growth.

As the book of 1 John says, we believe that God is love. And so, we want to be on the look-out for God's presence in the world by being on the look-out for love in the world, even when the word "God" is nowhere to be found. Friends, our God who is love will show up in infinitely many ways—some expected, some surprising. God will show up in young lovers, eager to share their lives with each other. God will show up in Bear, training to bless people who need a calm companion. This morning, the Song of Songs invites us to notice and to celebrate love—true love, mutually giving and mutually uplifting—whenever, wherever, and however it shows up. Amen.