

## ***Arise and Come Away***

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

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Today we read from one of the most beautiful, and also one of the most mysterious, books of the whole Bible. We read from a book whose Hebrew name is *Shir ha-Shirim*, or Song of Songs, suggesting it's either a collection of songs, a Song of little Songs, or it is a song unsurpassed by any other, Song of all Songs. The content of the book suggests that it is either written by the great and wise King Solomon, or a tribute to him, so many traditions refer to this book as Song of Solomon.

But the Song of Songs is a short book that is placed very oddly in the Bible, between Ecclesiastes, a book of lamentations, and Isaiah's focus sin, destruction, and redemption – texts born out of the woeful experiences of the Israelites in exile. So the Song of Songs, an elaborate and fantastical love song, functions as an oasis of beauty and delight. Scholars have identified strong parallels between the Song of Songs and some ancient near eastern love songs and even wedding rituals. It is a book about relationship, from attraction to union.

If you are unfamiliar with this little book in the Bible, that's probably because the Church throughout history has had trouble knowing what to do with its mystery and sensuality. Many Jewish and Christian traditions have suggested that this love song is an allegory, representing the loving relationship between God and Israel or the loving relationship between Christ and the church. Whatever the song is or might be, it is clearly layered and symbolic and provocative, and we read this text from it today:

### **Song of Solomon 2: 8-13 (NRSV)**

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 turtle-dove 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.

My 3-year-old Matthew and my 1-year-old Anna Jean, almost every day, at just the right kind of moment, Matthew says, "Good night!" and Anna Jean says "Ni Ni," and they lie next to each other on the floor. They each know just what to do, and pull whatever blanket they can find over themselves, close their eyes, and convince the whole world they are asleep. Except, of course, for the fluttering eyelashes, the widening smiles, and the crescendo of excitement, "eeeEEEE." And suddenly, Matthew exclaims, "There's a tiger in my closet!" and Anna Jean exclaims, "Taaaaa!"

This game, which we have come to call, "There's a Tiger in my Closet," named after Matthew's favorite bedtime book, has evolved to have very little to do with the noisy and annoying Tiger that inspired the game, and everything to do with surprise and joy and playfulness. I don't know what this game is, frankly, it's very hard to describe what happens, but it is very easy to describe what happens to me when I watch it – I'm captivated in a playland. Their joy, their pure delight, their playfulness, draws me to loosen my tie, grab whatever blanket or towel I can find, and lie on the floor, with my eyes fluttering and my smile widening, just waiting to burst in delight. Now I may weary a bit with the second hundred consecutive iterations of "There's a Tiger in My Closet," but my joy does not.

The text we read today from the Song of Songs is a transfer of playful, alluring, magnetic energy, generated by love. It begins with the voice of a maiden exclaiming to us, her audience, "The voice of my beloved!" Look, she says to us, look, he comes! We cannot see through her window, but she describes what

she sees for us, “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.” Look, Look! This mysterious and wondrous text we read today is an opportunity to be grabbed by the sleeve of someone captivated in a playful love land with her beloved. We are brought along by the force of her excitement, she pulls us toward the window, and she will not let go of us, even as we feel her energy begin to move from the window to the door.

Now she draws us into her moment of ecstatic anticipation in specific ways. First, she bears witness to us. The love she feels, the call she hears, the beloved she sees, she cannot keep it to herself, she exclaims it to us. A love like this, a feeling like this, it must be shared, it cannot be contained by any person, it overflows in the form of witness. Not calculated and structured witness, but bursting witness.

The second way she draws us in is by calling upon our ears. The voice of my beloved! We are tantalized by her overflow of emotion to LISTEN to the voice! But who is this mysterious beloved one of whom she speaks? What voice to us? Perhaps, as Jewish tradition would read, it is the voice of God, summoning the maiden, the people of Israel. Perhaps, as Christian tradition would read, it is the voice of Jesus Christ, summoning the maiden, the Church. Perhaps, though, it is just the voice of a person, summoning the maiden, another person, into playing in the budding fields, inviting us to witness this passionate human love. However we understand this beloved, this voice, it is one who calls, one who comes bounding, one who stands gazing just outside the window.

The mystery of this voice becomes clearer to us when the maiden hears her beloved speak to her through the window, through the lattice, and lets us in on it. He speaks and says, “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 turtle-dove 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.” It is a voice that loves, summons, and proclaims that winter is gone and spring is here.

Perhaps we can identify the voice by that which it speaks – love, summons, assurance. What are the things in your life that speak this? The Lord your God in scripture, who says through the prophet Isaiah, “Come you who are thirsty, come to the waters,” the waters of my eternal Word sent to change the world (Isaiah 55). Or Jesus Christ in scripture, who says in Luke’s gospel, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.... The Father in heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11: 9-11). This is the voice of the Lord, as witnessed to us in our scriptures, and it certainly does love, assure, and summon us as the voice of the maiden’s beloved. This is the voice of the Lord, the voice of Jesus, which we hear in our worship life, in our faith journeys.

We hear the voice of this magnetic love when we go to the scriptures, when we go to worship together, but there are other voices we hear that have this ring to it, living voices in the world. Loved ones, church friends, and even strangers come bearing love, assurance, and summons to our lives. These are the voices that come bearing gospel love, hope, and calling, that come to us as God does. The maiden draws us into these voices of our life, and implores us to LISTEN to them!

The third way she draws us in to the love she is experiencing is by calling upon our eyes. Look, Look! Look, he comes, bounding over the hills like a gazelle!

One of the best illustrations of LOOK! I’ve ever seen is in the movie *The English Patient*. The other love story in this movie is between a Sikh soldier named Kip and a nurse named Hana. As world war II comes to a close, they cross paths at an abandoned monastery, where they stay and come to know each other, eventually to fall in love. One romantic evening, Kip lights a path of candles from Hana’s room, calling her away, and when she comes he drives her to the monastery chapel. It is dark and mysterious, a chapel at night. When they arrive, it is clear that Kip has rigged a harness, ropes, and a pulley, which he attaches to Hana, and then

lights a flare and hands it to her. Then Kip uses the ropes and pulley to lift Hana up into the air, soaring, floating in the chapel, and brought face to face with the beautiful images of the faith – the Lord’s Supper, prayer in the garden.<sup>1</sup> In a moment without words, Kip calls Hana to look at the images of her faith, the promises of its assurance, in this new moment, in this new light, from this new vantage point of weightlessness. If you’ve seen the movie, you remember this scene, one I remember as a lover’s playful summons to look! Look outside the narrows of the place you sit, it’s new, it’s alive!

The charge of the witness, the maiden, is to listen and look. Listen to the mysterious voice that calls, and look at the one that comes bounding, the one that stands gazing through the window. The charge of the beloved is to arise and come away! Get up and come outside the place where you are, the place that masks you from the beauty and joy of the world outside. There is a whole world out there, a world of abounding grace, a world so full of life and song that it will render us all playful and joyful.

At a recent assembly of the World Council of Churches, they had as their theme, “God, in your grace, transform the world.” As they translated this theme into a number of world languages, it was discovered that in Portuguese there is a double meaning to the word for “grace,” which also can mean “humor” or “play.”<sup>2</sup> The Song of Songs invites us into a world of grace, but a playful grace that might be better defined by Portuguese. The world of playful grace that awaits us outside is the world beyond what we see when we sit around, it is the world in full view when we get up, arise, and come away. Who doesn’t know the joy of the first day of spring, which breaks through the ice and cold of winter, and brings forth a world that makes us want to run outside and play. Arise and come away, says the beloved, to a world of playful grace and love.

I had a professor who once told a story about being on the Massachusetts Turnpike one afternoon on his way home. Traffic can be impressionable on this route, but this particular day there was an epic gridlock. It was 95 degrees, and thousands of cars stood still. An hour went by, nothing, another hour went by, nothing, another hour went by, nothing. People turned their cars off, and began to burn up and swelter. If you know any average Bostonians, you might be able to picture the developing scene. Horns, curses, yelling. No one knew what was happening.

Then people got out of their cars, and walked to see what had happened. And over the hill they discovered that a delivery truck of Jay’s potato chips had overturned on the turnpike. It turned out that what was blocking their route was not a crime scene, or a pileup of cars, but thousands of tiny bags of potato chips. The army of angry gridlocked people looking for an object of their ire found nothing but thousands of bags of snack food laid before them. What? They said. They were Bostonians, they didn’t say it that nicely. But they were incredulous at the scene they encountered. Then one of them looked with an impish grin and said, “well we better get started” and cracked open a bag of potato chips, and started eating as they stared at the mess. With nothing else to do, they handed out bags of the potato chips and began to eat. They began to talk to each other, laugh together at the absurdity of the moment, and wonder how in the world they were going to get out of this complete and utter mess in front of them. So they stood there, together, eating chips, waiting for the obstacles in front of them to disappear.<sup>3</sup>

It was a moment that summoned some angry people in traffic to consider the grace of the moment, lying just ahead. The ridiculousness of the grace they encountered, and the transformative power of this grace, caused life-hardened people to become playful, enjoying a good salty communion.

Listen! Look! Arise! Come away! Hear the summons of this love, of the world of grace that love points to and the world of grace that sprouts forth from it. It’s all alive and real, but it is not here, it is OUT THERE!

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<sup>1</sup> *The English Patient*, directed by Anthony Minghella, written by Michael Ondaatje.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, *Feasting on the Word*, Vol. 4, Song of Solomon 2: 8-13.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Coles, as told in a lecture at Harvard University, Spring 1996.