

North Kildonan United Church

29th August 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“For Now the Winter is Past”

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Several years ago I was asked to preside at an outdoor wedding in Assiniboine Park. The exact location chosen was the French Formal Gardens, that broad expanse of grass and scrubs and flowers which once existed at the southeast end of the park. It was a beautiful location, though completely devoid of any cover or shelter. In recent years that entire section of the park has been completely redeveloped, including the closing of the entrance from Corydon and an impressive conservatory still in the midst of construction.

Of course none of those plans were active all those years ago when we met for the Friday evening rehearsal for the wedding. The weather forecast did not bode well for the next day, and as we moved through the rehearsal the skies were dark, heavy and threatening. I suggested to the couple that we should consider relocating the wedding to an indoor location, perhaps the hall where the reception was to be held. The groom brushed off my concern with the famous words of more than a few couples: “it won’t rain on our wedding.”

The service was set for two o’clock the next day. Saturday’s clouds were just as heavy as the night before. We arrived at Assiniboine Park and set everything up for the wedding. The sky was not at all promising, but buoyed up by the certainty that it wouldn’t rain on their wedding, we all assembled and we began the ceremony. A welcome was extended to all, the opening prayer was offered and the various questions asked. I was just about to read the first lesson when there was a tremendous crack of thunder, the sky opened up and the promised rain began in earnest. As I mentioned earlier, that part of the park offered no shelter at all. I announced the service would continue at the reception hall, quickly grabbed the church register and headed for my car. It rained so heavily that the bridesmaids had to go to one person’s home and put their dresses in the dryer. After that downpour I suspect more than a bit of hair dressing and make up reapplication occurred as well.

The two o’clock wedding resumed close to four o’clock at the reception hall. The guests assembled in various stages of dryness and once we were all settled I resumed the service from where the downpour had interrupted us.

So there we were, fresh from the rainstorm, if fresh is the right word to use, and I began the service with the same words we heard earlier: *“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for the now the winter is past, the rain over and gone.”* A few people in attendance smiled at the coincidence of such a lesson chosen on such a day.

The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, depending upon your tradition, is rarely heard outside of wedding ceremonies. The lectionary only provides this reading once every three years, and no other parts of the book are suggested for Sunday services.

Which is unfortunate because it contains many beautiful and moving passages, such as this from the 8th chapter:

*“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;
For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love all the wealth of one’s house,
It would be utterly scorned.”*

The entire book is love poetry, a dialogue between a woman and a man who are deeply in love with each other. At times the language is more graphic than what we are used to in scripture, and there are those who down through the centuries have questioned the inclusion of this book in the canon which we know as the Bible. They questioned its inclusion because, like the book of Esther, God is not mentioned at all. And, quite frankly, the church has at times been embarrassed by the sensuality in this series of love poems.

So commentators have tried to say that the passion described in this book might be understood as an allegory describing the love God has for Israel or in Christian terms the love Christ has for the church. Seen that way, it really isn’t about two people deeply and wildly in love with each other, but it is an illustration of the depth of love God has for us and we have for God. Like all interpretations of scripture, there may be truth in that understanding, and far be it from me to say that Hippolytus and Origen in the third century and John Calvin in the 16th century are wrong. Those three are Christian scholars, yet in about 90 A.D. a gathering of Jewish sages debated the place of this book in the Hebrew Bible. They too decided it was an allegory on the love between God and Israel.

The allegory path may say more about the discomfort those commentators had with human desire and physical passion, and their need to, as it were, tone the text down a bit. And who knows, they may be on to something, but not for today’s sermon.

Instead, let’s see this as a dialogue between two people deeply in love, totally captivated by the beauty and charm and strength and vitality of each other. This dialogue speaks of faithful love, where each only has eyes for the other, and when they are not together they yearn to be reunited. These two lovers are fully alive, and their love for each other, their passion for life itself, gives glory to God our Creator, the one who has

given to us the gift of love, the ability to love, the desire to be in love. God may not be mentioned by name in this book, but each exquisite detail speaks of the wonder of God's handiwork in creating them, in creating us, in God's image.

Hear these verses leading up to today's reading:

I am a rose of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys.
As a lily among brambles,
so is my love among maidens.
As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his intention towards me was love.
Sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples;
for I am faint with love.
O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me!
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the wild does:
do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!

These two lovers are clearly young, but such passion is not reserved only for the young. In her commentary, Alphonetta Wines writes: *"I am reminded of a couple that I know. Married thirty years, they act like teenagers when they are around each other. I remember once when the husband had been away travelling for work as he often does. On this occasion, a Thanksgiving community dinner, they had not seen each other for several days. His eyes lit up and he hugged his wife with such tenderness that everyone could feel the presence of love in the room. Ask anyone in a happy marriage and they'll tell you, there is nothing like it. Whether it is love's first dawning or the seasoned love of having lived and loved for decades, committed lovers would have it no other way."*

Later on the commentator, in talking about the woman whose voice we hear in today's passage says: *"the audience hears her voice as she reminisces and anticipates love. Neither shy nor reticent, the onset of spring stirs her desire for the one who loves her. Frequent references to nature are an indication that both understand their love to be in agreement with the goodness of God's creation. A glimpse of her beloved is all she needs to reflect on his voice calling her to love. Not once, but twice in these few verses, she imagines his voice inviting her to 'come away'. Completely enthralled, later in verse 16 she affirms: 'My beloved is mine and I am his'".*

The Song of Solomon boldly reminds us of the gift of true, committed, faithful love. A gift from God, to be treasured and respected and honoured and celebrated. We need to hear that song of love more often.

But this wonderful poetry has broader implications. In a recent commentary from The Christian Century on today's passage, Austin Crenshaw Shelley writes:

"After nearly a year and a half of physical isolation from others due to a global pandemic, this week's reading from the Song of Solomon takes on yet a new meaning. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone." These words convey the delight and relief we will feel when we re-emerge and begin to initiate human contact once more with those whom we love outside of our own households.

We are human beings, wired for sensual interaction. We long to see in one another's faces the very image of the God who made us. We need the touch of one another's embrace to embody the act of loving our neighbours as ourselves. We desire beauty—to taste plump figs straight off the tree, to smell the lavender that blooms in the field, to hear the turtle doves as they lift their voices in song. These acts seem no less holy than breaking bread or sharing wine.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. These are the gifts of God for the people of God."

Or as the sermon title asserts and then continues: *"for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come."* Thanks be to God. Amen.