“Arise, My Love, and Come Away”

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13; James 1: 22-27

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I invite you to go home this afternoon, pour yourself a tall, cool glass of iced tea, get yourself a fan in case you are overcome, and read all of the *Song of Solomon*. It’s only eight chapters long but it is packed with emotion.

This book of the Bible, theologian Walter Brueggemann says, is “…love poetry of an unrestrained passionate kind …. [I]t is clear this is human love expressed erotically and without restraint. It voices the most elemental delight in the presence with and embrace of *the beloved*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

So why is this love poetry in the Bible? Perhaps it’s about more than these two people in love. For thousands of years, the Jewish people have read Song of Solomon poetry as the loving relationship between God, or YHWH, and God’s beloved nation of Israel. Many Christians, who read Old Testament scripture with the understanding that Jesus is God’s son, read the love poetry as the relationship between Christ and his beloved Church.

Knowing something for sure, having that definitive “right answer” makes us feel secure. When I was 18 and seeking absolute, right answers, I had a few teachers I could trust at Lakeside High School: Ms. Sanders for Physics, Coach Redford for Calculus and my very favorite, Ms. Mary Shelfer for English. I remember asking her for the exact meaning of a poem that I just did not understand. And Ms. Shelfer’s very frustrating but of course correct answer to my question was, “It means whatever it means to you when you read it.”

Presbyterian Pastor Eugene Peterson says when you read poetry in the Bible, “You’re not trying to figure things out, you’re trying to enter what’s there.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Sometimes there is no one “right answer.” And so *The Song of Songs*, the *Songs of Solomon*, these eight chapters of love poetry are about two lovers or YHWH’s love for Israel or Christ’s love for the church or maybe even about something else as we, the people of Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church, read it today, in September of 2018.

Take a deep breath in. Exhale. Take another deep breath in. Exhale. Rhythmic, deep measured breathing has a calming effect. Has anyone here ever taken a yoga class? Each yoga class is unique. In most of the yoga classes I’ve taken, the teacher opens by sharing something that will be the focus of that day’s practice. This is often a piece of Eastern wisdom writing and the content may focus on being present and living fully aware of each moment. One of my favorite teachers, Josie Adler, sometimes brings her dog Bodhi to class. Dogs have a way of appreciating each and every moment.



This photo, taken last week, was the perfect illustration for the wisdom Josie shared: she talked to us about “contentment.” Just look at Bodhi, fully and completely content. Not looking ahead at something that could be even better than this moment, but living for now, appreciating where we are.

Living “in the now” is important, and the Bible has a lot to say about being present:

Psalm 118:24 (ESV) *This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

Matthew 6:34 (NIV) *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.*

But today’s scripture is not about contentment. It’s about anticipation. The verbs in this poem are leaping and bounding, gazing and singing. It’s scripture that puts you on your toes. It’s about being ready to arise and come away. Because there is something amazing calling to us.

This poem is filled with invitational words about love. Everything about this scripture evokes forward motion toward love. You can hear his voice. He’s speaking, inviting you to “arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

My doctor, Rick Robbins, calls winter, October through February, “the heavy months” probably because his patients tend to put on weight from eating delicious food and curtailing their level of activity. Winter isn’t in and of itself a bad season. There are times when it’s important to be still, to discern, to be heavy and go deeper rather than go forward. There is a beautiful song in the musical “Wicked” called “Dancing Through Life” that disparages living without stillness, without any deep thought, living without winter, living *an unexamined life*. The vapid character sings, “Why invite stress in? Stop studying strife and learn to live the unexamined life.”

Being content, looking inward is important. Winter matters . . . but so does spring. I believe Pleasant Hill Presbyterian is nearing the end of our winter. As we pause on the precipice of a new time in our church’s history, it’s essential we examine who we are and let that inform where we want to go. The listening sessions conducted by the Pastor Nominating Committee gave all interested members of the church a chance to talk about our identity and our dreams for Pleasant Hill’s future. Your words have shaped the description of who we are as a community. Our self-proclaimed understanding of identity is an essential component in the search for our new Senior Pastor.

“Arise, my love, and come away.” What if these verses aren’t about two lovers? Or about YHWH’s love for Israel? Or about Christ’s love for the church? What if this scripture is about us and the new leader of this church, a person who is already headed our way?

“Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.”

“Look, there she stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.”

It is time for us to get on our tippy toes. To lean forward in anticipation. To listen carefully for the voice of our beloved new Senior Pastor. He or she is not asking to join us inside our walls, behind the lattice, but will call us out to new things. To come away. To follow Christ in a new way in this new season.

*Song of Solomon* tells us today that our future pastor, who even at this moment God is nudging in our direction, rejoices in the possibilities of spring. The turtledove is singing, the vines are in blossom. How are we to smell their sweet fragrance if we remain content, sitting inside our walls. For the church does not exist to replicate itself.[[3]](#endnote-3) The church must move forward, in new directions and with new ministries, to thrive.

What we have known has been so good, and so sweet, and was so right for that time in the life of this church. And now, what is to come offers us a new fragrance, a fresh blooming, new fruit that we can bear.

These tables provide us space around which we can gather as YHWH’s chosen, as Christ’s beloved church. As the James scripture says, we gather as “doers of the word.” And as we arise, and come away, we will take Christ’s table with us, to extend this table to new people, to put this table in new places and to set this table in new ways through new ministries because “winter is past, the rain is over and gone, and the time of singing has come.”

Arise, my love, and come away.

Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 324-325. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Eugene Peterson interview with Krista Tippett for *On Being*, aired on NPR radio September 2, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. From an interview Rev. Marthame Sanders conducted with a self-proclaimed “Done” with the church. This video was shown at the Presbytery of Atlanta called meeting on August 18, 2018 at Roswell Presbyterian Church. <http://www.atlpcusa.org/meetings/statedmeetingresources.html#aug18> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)