

Love Songs

Gathering

*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle. This week, it would be appropriate to find a **green cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of "growing". Start by lighting the candle. The candle helps to centre us. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*



A video of the music, readings and reflection can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/593626995/3ac613f3e1>

Introduction

This week has seen us enjoy sunshine, and endure a great storm - literally. We continue to watch the people of Afghanistan and Haiti. We live in the midst of a pandemic, finding our world much more narrow than it has been, working hard to encourage each other to be vaccinated, relying on our health professionals to keep us safe. We give thanks for safety and security and health care and communities that care.

Acknowledgement of Country

We listen to the breath of the earth.
May we hear the groaning of creation.

We listen to the sighing of the wind.
May we hear the songs from the skies.

We listen to the movement of the oceans and waters.
May we hear the shared waters of life in our being.

We open our ears to the wisdom
of the Land and her peoples.
May we listen, both to the silence and the speaking.

We honour and pay our respects
to those on whose Land we meet,
especially the Wadi Wadi people of the Dharawal nation.
We pause and we listen.

A silence is kept.

Those who have ears – Hear!
May we hear the voice of the Spirit in Creation,
Now and to the end of time.

Call to Worship

In the letter attributed to James, we find this:

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

(James 1:27)

Let us pray...

God of winter and springtime,
this week we have been battered by wind and rain,
and we have captured glimpses of the springtime that is to come.
In all the storms we encounter,
we give thanks for your faithful presence,
we praise you for the stillness that comes in the morning,
we celebrate the new life that emerges in time.
God of sunshine and stillness,
gather us in your peace.
God of wind and storm,
gather us in your wildness.
God of love and care,
gather us - separated by distance, drawn together in you.
Enfold us and prompt us as we seek to be the people you call us to be.
In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Listen - I Rejoiced When They Said, Let's Worship (Seasons 6-20)

I rejoiced when they said, "Let's worship,"
I rejoiced when they said, "Let's rise."
I rejoiced when they said, "Let's worship,"
worship our God Most High!

*Words: Lynn Bauman
Music: Linnea Good
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Prayer

Eternal God,
source of light and truth and life itself,
you never change in who you are,
your essential being remains the same,
and yet there is infinite variety in the ways in which we experience you,
the creative solutions that you find to the problems which beset us,
the new ways of believing and behaving that you invite us to explore.

We give thanks for your constancy
and your fertile imagination.
We bathe in the light of your word,
and sometimes, when it threatens to burn us, we try to hide from it.
We relax into the solid assurance of your love,
and worry that we cannot fulfil its demands.

Gracious God, we come to tell you what you already know:
that we have not lived up to our own highest standards, never mind yours;
that we have said one thing and done another;
that we have spoken without thinking
of the hurt our words might cause;
that we have talked too much and listened too little;

that we have prided ourselves on being good Christians and neglected the needs of others.

God, you do not need us to be perfect, for then we would not be ourselves, the fallible creatures that you love. What you do need is for us to be filled with the life of your Spirit, living examples of your power and your desire to make all things new.

You need us to be truly and fully alive,
as one day the whole of creation will be.

So work in us, we pray, the transformation that we cannot accomplish on our own.
Plant the seeds of your Word deep within us, and let them grow into lives that are congruous with who you have called us to be.

May we grow steadily more gentle, truthful, generous and kind;
may we speak less and listen more;

notice what needs done and get on with doing it;

not looking for any praise or reward other than knowing that we are doing your will.

Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 40, resources for 29 August 2021, p.12

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Song of Songs 2:8-13

⁸ The voice of my beloved!

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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me:

'Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;

¹¹ for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.

¹² The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.

¹³ 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.

Reflection

Let us pray...

Holy One, may the light of your love shine in us that we might be a lamp of compassion, illuminating the way of justice and peace. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for 29 August 2021, p.174

It is very rare for us to turn to Song of Songs - sometimes heard at weddings, sometimes considered in a Bible Study, but rarely heard in our Sunday services.

Even amongst the Jewish community, this book is rarely read in the Synagogue, and at one time, young boys were not permitted to read it until after their Bah Mitzvah!

Apparently it was considered a bit too racey for young ears. On the other hand, I have found that pointing young teenagers to this part of the Bible can sometimes renew their interest in the Scriptures!

So what is it about?

Well it is a collection of poems, love poems. The Song of Songs - meaning the best song of all songs.

There is no narrative, no development of a particular story line, rather a collection of themes that are woven throughout. So like more modern collections of poetry, there is no point going looking for an overarching storyline - it is not there.

And who wrote it? Most scholars agree that although sometimes attributed to Solomon, it is unlikely to have been written by him. Perhaps "dedicated" to him is a more accurate description, particularly when we remember that Solomon was a man who had many, many wives (1 Kings 11).

An important question to ask of this book is why is it here? Why is it included in our sacred texts? Usually the answer to that has something to do with what it might teach us about God - but God is not mentioned in this text.

So perhaps this book has more to do with what we can learn about ourselves...

Jewish scholars have interpreted the poetry as an allegory of God's love for the people of Israel. Christians came along and, drawing on Paul's references in Ephesians about Christ's love for the church being like a bridegroom, tried to impose a similar interpretation here. While I think the Jewish interpretation is more faithful to its original context, I don't think that captures the depth of possibility for this book either.

The poetry captures the joy and beauty of love's desire. Its rich use of metaphor invites us to consider the meaning of the images it is painting for us. It undoubtedly embraces physical desire to be something of beauty.

Importantly, it gives voice to women in the expression of mutual love and desire in a culture where power rested in men and women were merely chattels. It counters the narratives in other parts of the Hebrew scriptures where men have all the power and control. Here the woman not only speaks, but she speaks boldly of her love and desire for this man, a desire that is undoubtedly mutual.

So maybe this book reflects something of the love God intends for all of us to know and enjoy - a love that is surprising and deep, beautiful and creative, reflecting Creation's response to Spring, filled with anticipation, promising new life; a love that bring energy and joy into the world it encounters.

And perhaps that is where we are now - waiting for the final blast of winter to tire itself out - looking forward to the burst of Spring we know will come. Perhaps you can spend some time this week, reading Song of Songs for yourself - lose yourself in the images, enjoy the beauty and hope - do we yearn for God in the same way these two people yearn for each other? One commentator described this book as one that "eludes a fixed interpretation" - so immerse yourself in the possibilities this book offers - however you understand it, may its beauty, joy and energy inspire you.

If you would like more on the Song of Songs, here is a short video from The Bible Project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KC7xE4fgOw>

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

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' ⁶He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honours me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

⁷ in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines."

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

...

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

...

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the Church.

Thanks be to God!

Reflection

And so after immersing ourselves in beauty and joy and energy of love, Mark's gospel takes us into a conversation Jesus is having with his own faith leaders.

"Your disciples don't wash their hands!" (7:5)

And they weren't just concerned with the spread of a virus!

No, this was about the traditional purity laws - possibly developed as much for health reasons as religious ones - but nevertheless had become religious rules, the breaking of which was interpreted as a lack of faithfulness, a breaking with God, if you like.

So this conversation is between Jesus, a rabbi, and his religious leaders, the Elders. Jesus quotes Isaiah's words, a prophet who had critiqued the way people were living out their faith and set up a dichotomy between commandments of God and human traditions or customs. And then he calls out, in the verses we skipped over, the practice of declaring one's goods a gift to the temple, which meant they couldn't be used for anything else, as a way of avoiding one's responsibility to care for aged parents! Not OK, says Jesus.

And then he adds, it is not what goes into our bodies that defiles but what comes out. Again, we cannot miss the link this has to the Jewish understanding of purity and holiness. Jesus is challenging the rules that make it possible for someone to live in a

way that causes harm to themselves and others and to simply wash it all away if they do so in the way prescribed by the Elders.

At the same time, for we who live in a world where that kind of washing is no longer practiced, we are still left with the warning about that list of vices - they come from within, from the human heart (7:23, 21) - remember for Jesus, the heart is not just the pump that moves blood around the body, or the heart of our emotions, "heart" is a wholeness - body, mind, spirit - where our being comes together in decision-making and subsequent action.

And notice there is a fairly comprehensive list here, not dissimilar to the lists Paul provides later in his letters, where envy, pride and folly are spoken of in the same breath as murder, adultery and deceit.

What matters is not what we eat, or how many times we wash our hands, or how many of the rules we keep, but the heart that is expressed in love and compassion.

In James 1:27, we hear this: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Keeping ourselves unstained by the world does not mean staying away from or separating ourselves from the messiness of the world. There is nothing to be afraid of in sitting with people who are very different from us, who experience life differently, who live by different religious understandings - rather, we are called to be right there in the midst of it all - caring for those in distress and radiating hope and light and love.

Who are the people, where are the places, in this community that we need to spend time with and care for?

Loving God, move within us, shaking out all the rot, and re-igniting the fire within us that seeks to share love and practical care in our world. May we rejoice in the beauty of your love and grace, and in our rejoicing may we bring joy and hope to others. Amen

Responding

Listen - Be God's (Seasons 9-10) - see the video

Or look up *Love's Divine All Love's Excelling* and spend some time reflecting on the words of this beautiful hymn.

Prayers of the People - Meredith Yabsley

We have come together to worship, to hear God through the scriptures, to hear a message to us in our lives and now we are called to pray for others, to speak to God for those not able to speak for themselves, for those who can't, for those who won't for those who don't have the words...

Gracious God,

We come to you with our prayers for others.

You gave us a beautiful world, crafter over billions of years and yet we have taken from it all we can as fast as we can. We have turned out beautiful planet into a tip

But this is not what you wanted for us.

We pray for those who are working to restore and renew our planet. We pray for those who plant trees, who develop new technologies, we pray for those who speak words of wisdom and who guide leaders, we pray for those who yearn to care for all your creation-land sea and sky and all that fill them.

*O, Lord hear our prayer, O Lord hear our prayer,
When I call, answer me
O, Lord hear our prayer, O lord hear our prayer
Come and listen to me.*

You created us for peace, for harmony and for relationship. We have argued over land, over minerals, over fuel and over people. We have created war and havoc.

But this is not what you wanted for us.

We pray for those who work with refugees and asylum seekers, helping find them new lives of peace and safety. We pray for nations to open their hearts and their borders to help.

And we pray for the perpetrators – those who rule with an iron fist. We pray for them to feel Your love. May they know your grace and forgiveness, so they can build homes and lives instead of controlling them with fear.

*O, Lord hear our prayer, O Lord hear our prayer,
When I call, answer me
O, Lord hear our prayer, O lord hear our prayer
Come and listen to me.*

You made us strong and healthy but now we've become sick and we don't have words enough even to ask. We are frightened for ourselves, for our families and for our community. We are frightened.

But that is not what you want for us.

We pray for all those on the frontlines of health care – for those who provide care, for those who support the grieving, for those who create the treatments and vaccines, for those who clean to prevent spreading more sickness, for those who will lead us into recovery.

May they all feel the blessing of your Spirit.

*O, Lord hear our prayer, O Lord hear our prayer,
When I call, answer me
O, Lord hear our prayer, O lord hear our prayer
Come and listen to me.*

Offering

Take a moment to reflect on God's goodness to us, to you.

What of your resources - time, skills, money etc - can you offer for the sharing of God's love in the world?

Every good and perfect gift comes from you, O God,
and not just the gift,

but the generous impulse that prompted it to be given,

and the grace needed for it to be received with the same openness of spirit.

It is part of a relationship,

in other words, rooted in the love which flows from you, our maker,

through the whole of creation, and finds its way back to you,

enriched and multiplied a hundredfold.

Accept our gifts, most loving God, which come from you,

and which we gladly return. Amen.

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Sending

Song: The Peace of The Earth Be With You (Season 9-36)

The peace of the earth be with you,
the peace of the heavens too;
the peace of the rivers be with you,
the peace of the oceans too.
Deep peace falling over you;
God's peace growing in you.

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Sending and Blessing

Whether speaking on the phone,
Face-timing, or Zooming,
or as you encounter others on your daily walk or shopping for essentials,
may you be a blessing - sharing love, compassion, joy and hope.

And the blessing of God: divine Mystery, divine Word, divine Presence
be with you this day, and always.

Rev Kath Merrifield
29 August 2021