

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.”

“My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.” What on earth is this doing in Holy Scripture? “My beloved speaks and says to me, ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away’.” Don’t you just wonder? “...the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.”

This is the one and only time in the three-year lectionary cycle that any part of the Song of Songs shows up. At first blush, this love song full of lush and erotic imagery may seem inappropriate for Holy Writ. And yet, here it is.

So, while everyone else is on vacation, let’s talk about sex. Right here in church.

Christians have a reputation for talking about sex like school marms, wagging fingers at people and arguing over misunderstood human biology and psychology. Americans in general seem to be obsessed with sex and prudish about it at the same time.

So this is a rare opportunity to talk – in church – about the gift of sexuality with appreciation and gratitude.

The Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon in Christian bibles, is a poem about the sexual awakening of an unmarried young woman and her lover. The two meet in an idealized fertile and abundant landscape presented as another Eden. And here, they discover the pleasures of love expressed physically.

Like the Eden stories in Genesis, the poem portrays a passage from innocence to experience, but with profound differences. In Genesis, the loss of innocence is fraught with consequences. The Song of Songs presents a similar border-crossing that, instead, results only in the joy of discovery.

The part of the poem that we heard this morning is the most sensuous part of the sexiest book in scripture. Set in early spring, a time of ripening when the winter rains have ended. Vines are blossoming, and the air is alive with the songs of turtledoves and nightingales and filled with the sweet aroma of fresh green figs. From the other side of a wall, the young woman's lover calls to her, inviting her to experience nature in its fullness.

Now, a great deal of scripture – both Hebrew and Christian – was written from a male perspective. Women are often presented as passive and acted upon. Some parts of the church still define women as the second gender subordinate to men.

And yet, here is a poem from at least 300 BCE that shows us a woman being assertive, not aggressive, and sensuous instead of submissive, in the pursuit of her lover. Throughout the Song, the two take turns inviting one another in an expression of love that is entirely reciprocal.

Both are described in tender images – as lilies and doves or gazelles – and both are given imposing, powerful images like pillars or towers. They share a love between equals.

If anything, the young woman is the more forthright of the two. She speaks the very first line of the poem: “Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses! Your sweet loving is better than wine.” And hers is

the last line: “Hurry, my love! Run away, my gazelle, my wild stag on the hills of cinnamon.”

Her spirit of joyful urgency, her enthusiastic, life-affirming and active courtship have been obscured by 2,000 years of translations and interpretations that present her as passive and properly bridal. If we were to read further in the New Revised Standard Version that we heard this morning, we would even hear a reference to her wearing a veil. The Hebrew does not support that clumsy attempt at forced modesty.

Sexuality in Hebrew scripture was not a sin. In fact, in the book of Proverbs, sexual attraction is considered one of the wonders of the world. St. Paul’s teacher, Rabbi Gamaliel, reported that twice a year, the young women of Jerusalem would dress in white to dance in the vineyards while reciting the Song’s unmistakably erotic verses. That did not, of course, go unchanged.

That said, to read the Song as condoning promiscuity or casual sex is to miss an essential point. The elegant vignettes throughout the poem present a sexuality that is characterized by mutuality and joy, and above all, by fidelity. They have eyes only for each other.

And so, if we can get beyond the discomfort of the men who have tried for centuries to paste a verbal fig leaf over her confident adventurousness, we can learn from a passionate and unapologetic woman full of enthusiasm and determination in her pursuit of a healthy relationship.

There are passionate and spirited women in other love stories. But for most, like Shakespeare’s Juliet with Romeo, love is tied to death and tragedy. Think of the love that Wagner’s Isolde carried for Tristan, or how Brontë’s Catherine suffered for Heathcliff, or all that de Troyes’ Guenièvre endured for Lancelot. For all of them, love is a kind of painful torture.

By contrast, both lovers in the Song not only cherish the love they share, they revel in it. And their story is not set in politically volatile situations like Verona or Cornwall or the courts of Camelot; nor are they wandering the desolate moors of Northern England. The setting of the Song of Songs is a lush and bountiful natural paradise;

a setting that brings to mind another couple – the people that God set in the first Eden.

Professor Ellen Davis at Duke University's Divinity School makes a compelling case that the Song of Songs effectively reverses the curses of the Garden of Eden. The mutuality of the lovers in the Song, she points out, repairs the rupture between the expelled Adam and Eve, and locates these new lovers into a new garden.

In Genesis, God says to Eve: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." In the Song, the woman herself declares, "I am my lover's, he longs for me, only for me."

Now, it could be argued that the Song of Songs deserves a place in scripture for the sole reason that it celebrates faithful and exclusive human love. But there is an even more compelling reason that it remains a scriptural treasure.

There is an echo in the woman's claim: "I am my lover's, he longs for me, only for me."

In the context of the Song, her words are not giving voice to a clutching possessiveness. She is describing a full belonging of two unique people – each one choosing to be *for* the other. She implies a commitment in each to nurture the well-being of the other.

The ancient rabbis heard the echo in her words of the covenant that God made at Sinai and repeated throughout the history of the children of Israel. "I will be your God and you will be my people."

The rabbis took her words to be a declaration that the rupture between God and humans in the Garden of Eden was being repaired. As powerfully as the spiritual forces of sin and evil desire us and seek us out, preying on our weaknesses, the rabbis heard her saying that God, the Divine Lover, desires us and seeks us with *far greater* passion, running toward us through the lushness of a new Eden delighted by our strength and beauty.

"The primary purpose of religion," Cistercian Abbot, Fr. Thomas Keating, once said, "is to help us move beyond the separate-self sense to union with God." What delighted the ancient rabbis was the notion that God's burning desire for the most intimate unity possible with each of us and all of us will overcome all separation if we give

the totality of our being – bodies, hearts and minds – as freely as the woman gave hers in the Song of Songs.

The Song does not end with a fairy-tale “happily ever after.” Instead, the lovers are left hoping for a moment still to come and yet they are filled with eager anticipation. The art of religious life, then, is learning to trust that God’s presence is drawing closer, always closer, and in new ways.

And instead of passively waiting, we can move assertively to give our entire selves to God alone, our Divine Lover, including those living in chosen or circumstantial celibacy. Some of us will give or have given ourselves to God in faithful, committed and mutual human partnerships. But all kinds of relationships can reflect God’s more extravagant love; as soulmates made in God’s own image. Because the new Eden is emerging, and it is located in human love and in this very moment. We are allowed into the Garden now for as briefly or as long as our awareness can be present to it.

And in the abundance of that new Garden, we learn to see that different ways of expressing faithful and mutual love are notes in a thrilling and heavenly symphony of love. One day, God will bring us into the new Garden in its fullness where all God’s children will enjoy the dignity, equality and freedom that God intends for us.

“The voice of our beloved: listen!...Our beloved calls to us: ‘Hurry, my love, my friend, and come away!’”

Works cited or consulted:

- Bloch, Ariel A., and Chana Bloch. *Song of Songs*. Random, 1995.
Davis, Ellen F. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
Pilon, Juliana Geran. *Soulmates: Resurrecting Eve*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2017.