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St. John in the Wilderness  
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### Preaching Sex

The Lectionary is really something, isn't it? You all know what the Lectionary is, right? Well, if you don't, let me give you a brief explanation. The Revised Common Lectionary is a resource that a lot of mainstream denominations use for Sunday worship. It is basically what picks our readings for each Sunday. In other words, if we were a non-denominational church or a Baptist Church or something like that, the preacher would choose the Bible passages for each Sunday and do sermons on what he wanted.

As Episcopalians, we have a Lectionary that forces us to read more of the Bible than we would like. We have Year A, Year B, and Year C, and then it repeats itself. It gives us samples of almost everything in the Old Testament, including the most "important" texts, and it has us reading through almost all of the New Testament. It lines up with the seasons of the Church, also. There are other lectionaries the most relevant being the Daily Office lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer which reads through all of the Bible in two years.

So, if you're a preacher, then one of things you will often do is check on a text that is going to be read on Sunday morning to see how often it occurs and when it is coming around again. For example, we have the Song of Solomon today. Did you hear that sensual Old Testament reading? When I saw it come up, I had to look up how often it occurs and my suspicion was confirmed. This is the one time this book of the Bible comes up every three years. It's now or never, ladies and gentlemen. You might hear this at a wedding. It's an option to be read at a wedding, but this is the one time it is read on a Sunday morning. The Lectionary is just dangling it in front of us like a string before a playful kitty, like a lure rippling across a pond in front of a hungry large-mouthed bass!

The problem with preaching the Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs as it's also known, is that it's about sex. I'm pretty sure it's all about sex. As scholars like to say, this is erotic love poetry and I'm pretty sure that is one topic that people really don't want to hear a sermon on. I'm pretty sure that if I had a spinner -- kind of like what they have on Wheel of Fortune -- and on it there were four options: 1. Sermon about money, 2. Sermon about politics, 3. Sermon about sex, and 4. Just read the phone book for 15 minutes. I think that all of you would be hoping that spinner would go around and around and stop on the phone book! Well, too bad. Because today the spinner landed on sex so let's get preaching, shall we?

Here's what the text says:

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....

My beloved speaks and says to me:  
“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;  
For now 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.”

The Song of Solomon is love poetry and our passage today has the tamest verses in all of the eight chapters. It's a poem between two people who love each other deeply and long for each other -- physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Now, if you're dating someone, you may not want to quote from the Song of Solomon. Some of it won't translate for today's ears. If you tell your love that their “teeth are like a flock of sheep” (4:2), or “your neck is like a tower of David” (4:4), well, it might not go well for you. She might not like hearing that “her breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies” (4:5). So, read carefully, but yes this book of the Bible is love poetry between two young people. They talk at length about each other's bodies and it's pretty wild, pretty imaginative.

But then again, it's in the Bible, isn't it? It's being read at church on a Sunday morning thanks to that pesky Lectionary. Why would we have this kind of erotic love poetry in Church? What kind of sense does that make? Isn't the Church supposed to be at a minimum silent on sex and at most against it?

Well, the answer is actually “no” to that question and this book is here for that reason. The Church has made a huge mistake in running from sexuality. One of the first commandments God ever made was for Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. And the metaphor throughout the Old Testament and into the New is that the relationship between God and God's people is a marital relationship. Christ is the bridegroom of the Church who gives his life for her, for you.

The Church is the bride of Christ, and even this text in Song of Solomon has been understood as talking about the deep love between Christ and his Church.

While the Church has been silent on sexuality lately, our culture has been louder than ever. As one preacher said, “Why should Hollywood always get the first and the last word on sex and on love?” We have allowed the world to define sexuality and to sell it for profit. Here you find the Bible -- you find God -- celebrating romantic love and that’s kind of awesome. In Song of Solomon, it’s a relationship of mutual respect and attraction. That’s a good thing. It reminds us that sex is a gift from God and it’s not sinful, dirty, wrong, evil, or any of those things. Like all gifts from God, it is to be enjoyed and valued in the proper context. It’s not to be worshiped. It’s not a tool for manipulation or self-promotion. It’s not a way of asserting power over another person.

God does not endorse the exploitation of other people. You are made in God’s image. That’s what the Bible says. You are made in God’s image and of infinite worth and value. That is at the center of our relationships with other people and so, if Song of Solomon is going to be read instructively for Christians, then we have to name that sex can be a destructive force in people’s lives. In Christianity, it’s not about the objectification of another person. Sex is about the union of two people in heart, body, mind, and soul, which is why the Church has taught it is reserved for the covenant of marriage.

You see, Hollywood has spoken so loudly and so often about love and sex, that we forget what it actually is supposed to look like in God’s world for people made in God’s image. The giving of a body casually, or the giving of a body without the heart and mind attached to it, wounds people. It hurts people because you are an entire person. You are body, heart, mind, and soul, and when we live as if we are not, we tear at the fabric of our very humanity.

Or, let’s say you’re a middle schooler, making a fast and confusing transition into adulthood, and your main sexual ed instructor is not a teacher, it’s not a parent, it’s not the church. Instead, it’s Hollywood, it’s Netflix, or even it’s pornography since, for example, most boys are exposed to porn for the first time by age 12 or 13.<sup>1</sup> Now you’re being taught some really shallow and messed up lies about who you are and what it means to connect deeply with another person. Young people are wounded when they learn sex from pornography and Hollywood and then they try act out what they have seen in the context of a casual or romantic relationship.

The Good News is, as Song of Solomon reminds us today, that you are capable of loving better and more completely than that. And the Good News is always that no matter what you have done sexually or what has been done to you, you are loved, you are forgiven, and you matter to God who gave his life for you in Christ Jesus. Because in the end, the deepest parts of ourselves are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fightthenewdrug.org/real-average-age-of-first-exposure/>

longing for real and loving relationship and that is exactly what God gives us in Jesus Christ. That is what the Church is here for: real and loving relationship with God and with one another. And that is what our romantic relationships are meant to reflect, too. Just as Christ gave himself to us in vulnerability, humility, and love so are we called to romantic relationships where two people love one another sacrificially. It's not about taking what belongs to you. It's not about satisfying some sexual need you have. It's about giving one's entire self to someone who is willing to do the same for you.

So, congratulations! You survived your first sermon on the Christian view of sex. The good news is that the Song of Solomon won't come around for another three years. The bad news is that next week I'm preaching on politics and money.