

Sermon for Proper 15 C
August 15, 2010
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham
The Rev. M. Lise Hildebrandt

Listen again to the words of Jesus: "I came to bring **fire** to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! . . . Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." Not the usual mental picture most of us have about meek and gentle Jesus, is it?

I have an outrageous suggestion for you: I suggest that this is Jesus' love song to his people. His love-song.

In fact, I believe that the Bible is filled with love-songs between our God and God's people. That may not be so easy to see, especially when you get into the "Thou shaltts" and the "Thou shalt nots." It is easier to see in the readings from the prophets, which we have been hearing. From Isaiah today:

"Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."

Two weeks ago from Hosea:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."

Of course, in these love-songs there is also the anger and grief of a broken heart. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God's love for Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, which has turned away.

"And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

Even with a broken heart, the Lord reaches out to his people. In Hosea, the Lord speaks to the people of Israel, the northern kingdom. Even as they have affairs with Egypt and Assyria, rather than trusting and loving God, God promises to come after them as a loving parent, a forgiving spouse:

“They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. . . My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. . . They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes,” says the LORD.

This is the whole of the Bible narrative, really. God loves humans; humans turn away. Humans realize their need of God, turn, and call on God. God comes again, singing his love song. Humans sing their love-song back, until they forget or get distracted or life gets hard.

Scattered through the Bible are love songs to God. Miriam’s song:

“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
The Lord is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation . . .” (Exodus 15:1,2)

Mary’s song:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant . . .”

The psalms, which are filled with both praise and broken hearts:

“O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,
as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.” Psalm 63

“Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful,
for I have taken refuge in you;
in the shadow you’re your wings will I take refuge
until this time of trouble has gone by.
I will call upon the Most High God,
the God who maintains my cause.” (Psalm 57)

We read these Scriptures as if they are grocery lists or newspaper accounts, but they are love songs. Let’s try reading together a piece. First, let me ask you to close your eyes and think of which piece of Scripture is your absolute favorite. What story or psalm or phrase has the most power for you? Don’t panic. Just relax, breathe, allow your mind to open. Something will come in. If it is a hymn, that’s fine too.

Share? Choose one. Will you read it?

I went to a workshop while I was on retreat which was about the power of the spoken word—how poetry read aloud can transform life. (Kim Rosen—Saved by a Poem.) And it was good. And I came away thinking we have already a whole body of poetry, of story, of song that we know but we don’t use. How much power if you each could own and read Scripture in your own voice, through your own life experience, and even be able to share that with each other? Let us practice together. . . .

The biggest love song of all is God's love song to us through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus says, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" he is talking about his coming death, which he both dreads and embraces, for he knows it is the ultimate expression of love. And he knows that some people will accept the love letter, the love song, and some will reject it, causing friction and division among people and households. It is the bold bald statement and demonstration of love, laying it out unmistakably, the love who arrives, suitcase in hand, declaring, "I love you and I will follow you to the ends of the earth, no matter what."

This is an invitation. If you say yes, you will still sometimes get scared or overwhelmed and say no, but maybe you can say yes 51% of the time, 53%, 70%. If you say no, it's never too late to say yes, to let the no become 75%, 50%, 48% of the time. Do you accept? Can you hear God's love-song to you? Can you respond back?

Let us pray. AMEN.