

30 August 2015

Look! I'm Preaching from the Lectionary!

Song of Solomon 2:8-17

I should probably explain my sermon title before we get started, since not everyone here knows what a lectionary is. A lectionary is a worship guide that suggests scriptures for the readings and sermons for each Sunday of the year, following a regular three-year cycle. Pastors who “preach the lectionary” just open the lectionary each week to see what they’ll be preaching on, and they know that thousands of other preachers, all around the world, will be preaching from the same texts. Up until 2010, we preached lectionary here. Pastor Karen Ebert and I had different weeks, but we both used the lectionary as our starting point.

In 2010, though, we switched to planning our own preaching schedule and doing sermon series. I still do this. I like having the freedom to plan sermons in response to specific questions from the congregation, or specific needs in the community, or a book that I’ve read or conference I’ve attended. So I plan to continue doing sermon series, but I do recognize that preaching the lectionary has its advantages. The main one is that it forces preachers to tackle passages of scripture that they might never have chosen for themselves. So, anyway, I finished a series earlier this month, and I had a few odd weeks to fill in before I start a new one in the fall, so I thought, “Hey! I’ll just preach from the lectionary on the 30th.” Here’s the Old Testament reading for the 14th Sunday of Common Time in the Revised Common Lectionary: Song of Solomon, chapter 2, verses 8 through 17.

*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 turtle-dove
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.
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.
Catch us the foxes,
the little foxes,
that ruin the vineyards—
for our vineyards are in blossom.’
My beloved is mine and I am his;
he pastures his flock among the lilies.
Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle
or a young stag on the cleft mountains.*

See? This is why I don’t preach lectionary. What am I supposed to do with that? It appears to be a passage about two lovers slipping out together after dark on a spring evening. I suppose it could be worse: the next chapter of the Song of Solomon begins a long and detailed meditation on *all* the body parts of the different lovers. How am I supposed to draw some deep spiritual meaning or moral lesson or theological truth or challenge to justice or practical advice for living from all this explicit sensuality?

Okay, deep breath. Maybe it’s not quite as bad as it sounds. As it happens, when Rebecca and I were members of the Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, we heard a preacher speaking from this very passage, from that bit about catching the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards. As I recall, the preacher said that the foxes represented the *little* problems that face the church, things that seem insignificant, like gossip and divisiveness, but that damage the church from within. Well, that’s certainly true. Gossip and church dissension are *not* insignificant. They do great damage. Just one question, though: *What?* Where do you find gossip and church dissension in a verse about foxes in a vineyard in the middle of a love poem?

No, whatever we do with this, we can’t just pick one small part out of it and pretend the rest isn’t there. Fortunately, we have a long tradition of interpretation that deals with the book as a whole, going back to the Jewish rabbis in the first century. These rabbis interpreted the book as an allegory of God’s love for Israel. God was the male beloved, and Israel was his bride, and everything else fit somewhere in that allegory. Now, the “Israel” stuff didn’t work so well for early Christians, most of whom were Gentiles, but the allegory idea was easy to adapt. In Christian hands, the book became an allegory for Christ’s love for the Church. And no one explored this allegory more fully than the great 11th century preacher St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who preached a whole sermon series explaining this book and its allegorical meaning.

Let's look at an example from Bernard. In Sermon 14 "The Church of Christ and the Jews," Bernard deals with a passage that describes the two lovers – which, remember, are Christ and the Church - passionately embracing. Bernard says, "The bride and groom are within by themselves enjoying the mystery of their mutual embraces, safe from the jarring turmoil of carnal desires, from the restless intrusion of sensible images." See? The Song of Solomon, using the outward form of an erotic love poem, is *really* about the pure love of Christ and the Church, a love that is untainted by fleshly desires and will not be led astray by sensual imagery like the stuff that fills the Song of Solomon. Got all that? It's like interpreting a slasher movie as an allegory about the peaceful resolution of problems. Perfectly reasonable, right? So now I think we're ready for Bernard's Sermon 10, which is entitled: "The Breasts and Their Perfumes."

I actually copied down some great quotes from that sermon, but I think I'll spare you. I've made my point. Allegorical interpretation here is blithering nonsense. And that leaves us with a few questions we should ask. What if this book in the Bible is really just about two people in love – with all the longing and imagining and physical attraction that comes with that? And what if that's *all* it's about? What if we aren't *supposed* to find some hidden theological truth here?

But if all that's so, that leads to other questions. Doesn't that sort of diminish the Bible? I mean, people come to this book looking for spiritual guidance, don't they? What if they open it up, looking for theological instruction, and find the Song of Solomon? Won't that be a disappointment? Well, no. Probably not. In fact, I may have just introduced our youth to their new favorite book of the Bible. But you can understand the question, can't you? This sort of thing just isn't what we think of when we think of Holy Scripture. If it's really just a love poem, that means that we might need to rethink our idea of the Bible.

By coincidence, that's what my next sermon series is about. I want us to think together about what the Bible really is – and what it isn't. I'm guessing everyone here who has ever tried to read the Bible has been puzzled by the sense that this book isn't what they were expecting to find. Next week, I'd like to hear some of your questions. But that's all for next week. For now, we go back to the Song of Solomon. And we don't try to find any deep, mystical meaning. And we don't look for theological insights. And we don't look for practical help with our Christian walk. And we *don't* pretend that it's really about the exact opposite of what it's saying. Instead we read it with pleasure, enjoying the words and images, and thinking about someone we love and smiling. Because it's a love poem. Isn't it cool that our Bible has a book-length love poem in it? Love must be a gift from God.

Isn't God good?