SONG OF SOLOMON, A LOVE STORY
Song 2:1-7; 8:5-7; August 9, 2015

An aged King Solomon leans over his writing table. Even though he has over 500 wives, he spends most of his nights alone. He finds no pleasure in their company which has become tedious and boring. He is weary of their endless intrigues and squabbling. He stares at the flickering lamps on the table and sighs: “If only... if only I would have kept to God’s wisdom then my life might have been something like this... He begins to write what tradition has come to name “The Song of Solomon” or “The Song of Songs.”

It is the bride’s wedding night. All the intricate pageantry of a state wedding involving the marriage of a king has been accomplished. She has a moment to herself to let the events of the day sink in. As the Song of Solomon opens her thoughts and desires turn to her new husband: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you! Take me away with you – let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers.”

A chorus of friends breaks into her musings: “We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine.”

The young bride hears the voice of her lover call to her and he sings: “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves.”

Now begin a series of flashbacks as the lovers recall scenes from their idyllic courtship. They remember a day in the country as she sees him approaching flush with the exuberance and strength of young manhood: “Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills.”

Keep in mind this is the king. This is someone who would normally be surrounded by bodyguards and retainers of all sorts. No one could even approach the king except under the strictest of protocol and one false step would have the supplicant immediately evicted with perhaps a few painful blows from a burly royal guardsman to accompany him. But this young woman is the king’s beloved. They have given the slip to the entire royal household and it is...
just the two of them in the midst of a beautiful country setting. Without hesitation she runs toward him and eagerly throws herself into his arms. She showers him with kisses as he laughs and sings: “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful... there is no flaw in you!”

The beloved takes great delight in her lover’s appearance as well: “His arms are rods of gold set with chrysolite. His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold.”

The scene shifts again and the beloved calls to mind a vivid dream where she is awakened in the middle of the night by someone she thinks is her lover. She hears the latch to her bedroom door being raised and she is convulsed by sensual longings. She rushes to meet him at the door but when she throws it open he is gone. In a panic she sees herself in the dream dashing out into the street and frantically trying to find him. But the streets are dark and deserted and suddenly she is set upon by watchmen who begin to beat her.

Such are the fears of losing those we love the most.

Then the scene alters once again and now it is the wedding night. In barely disguised imagery the story describes with explicit detail the delights the newlyweds engage in. The Song of Solomon ends with a scene of the next morning when the two contented lovers are sharing pillow talk, hatching matchmaking schemes for a younger sister. The scene fades out as we are to imagine the brand new queen sitting up and coyly winking at her husband the king as she points to herself and whispers an invitation, “Come away, my lover, and be alike a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains.”

Pretty steamy stuff... and it is in the Bible no less! No wonder conservative Jews don’t let their young people read this book until they have gone through their bar-mitzvah and Catholics have long warned it is a venal sin for any laity to read this book.

The Song of Solomon is a romance. The term “romance” would not have been known in biblical times. The word itself comes from late Middle Ages France indicating something written in Latin (the language of the Romans) instead of the courser Frankish that was just at that time fully developing into the elegant and poetic French language. When we hear the word romance, we think exclusively of a love story. But the
A word implies more, in the broader sense it is a viewing of the whole world in an idealized way.

In a sense, the entire story of the Bible shows us the world as it is but then invites us to enter into an idealized reality. Where we so often see only grit and grim, pain and frustration, longing and loss, waste and indifference, God invites us to see our lives caught up in the magnificent story of redemption. When we sometimes are perplexed by the silence of God and his absence from our everyday lives, the romantic would have us see ourselves at the very center of God’s love and care, the apple of his eye.

St. Teresa of Avila, who was born in 1515, loved to read and study, especially the Bible. But then the Spanish Inquisition came along which forbade women to read. Teresa turned to God and asked him to teach her soul about divine love. Her subsequent writings were severely condemned but now she is considered by the church as an outstanding witness of the love of God.

Here is something Teresa said: “A thousand souls hear his call every second, but most everyone then looks into their life’s mirror and says, “I am not worthy to leave this sadness.” When I first heard his courting song, I too looked at all I had done in my life and said, ‘How can I gaze into his omnipresent eyes?’ I spoke those words with all my heart, but then he sang again, a song even sweeter, and when I tried to shame myself once more from his presence God showed me his compassion and spoke a divine truth, ‘I made you and all that I make is good. Please come close, for I truly want to get to know you.’”

In the Song of Songs we are the bride and God is the bridegroom. Jesus compares his promised second coming to planet Earth as a bridegroom coming for his bride (Rev 21). He also compares the grand reunion we will have with both him and all the people we have known and loved but have lost as the “marriage banquet of the Lamb” (Matt. 22, Rev. 19).

In a world of noise and distraction where it seems like we are the victims of impersonal forces far beyond our capability to understand, much less control, the bridegroom sings to his often afflicted and storm tossed bride who is not easily comforted: “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be
shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).

We go through most of our days anxious and worried about so many things. Never far from our ragged consciousness is the nagging feeling that it is somehow all up to us. If we don’t do it, the job won’t get done. We have to be on the go every minute, alert that we don’t miss any detail, leave any crucial job undone. We have to make sure our kids are involved in every conceivable activity so that they don’t miss out on anything either.

After my second wife died from what was supposed to have been a safe and all-but perfected minimally invasive surgery to reinforce a heart valve, I spent many sleepless nights wondering what I could have done differently and why didn’t I realize the extent that things were going from bad to worse during the five weeks after the surgery as she slowly bled out internally from multiple lacerations? But the single best thing my lawyer, a dedicated and compassionate Catholic layman, told me is that I was not the one who had failed, I was not the one who was negligent and indifferent – the surgeon and the nurse practitioners were all guilty of that. I was only going on what we were being told by them.

We tend to shoulder such impossible burdens. We worry about the major catastrophes as well as the everyday stuff: what shall eat and what shall we drink and what we will put on. We worry about our kids and our parents and our brothers and sisters. But the lover of our souls reminds us to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He cares for them, does he not? And won’t he do so much more for us, whom he gently chides with the label “little-faiths,” if we but only seek his kingdom before all other things? (Matt. 6:25-34).

We so want to say: “Yes but... we still have to do our share, God only helps those who help themselves don’t you know...” But when we do this, the bridegroom only sighs deeply and looks at his bride with the greatest sadness in his eyes.

He wants to say to us, “I will teach you, even as I taught Moses on the back side of the desert, and as I taught Paul in Arabia. So will I teach you and assure you that I am with you always, even to the end of the age. “

As we saw last week, the writer of Ecclesiastes warns repeatedly about
basing the worth of our lives by the work that we do or the things that we accomplish. He tells us that all of our trophies and diplomas, all of our achievements and recognitions, all the stuff we accumulate and spend our days taking care of, are vanity and a mere chasing after the wind. To which the bridegroom adds: “There is no virtue in activity as such – neither in inactivity. First we must be ministered to by him so that our ministry to others flows naturally from the overflow of our communion. Especially our service to God but also our service to all others must not be forced or labored. Like Mary, the sister of busy, busy Martha, we must learn the art of sitting at Jesus’ feet and learning from him before we engage in our labors. When Martha complains that Mary is not doing her share, Jesus gently chides her, “Martha, dear Martha, you are worried about so many things but Mary has chosen the better way” (Luke 10:38-41). Like Martha we must hone the art of learning to be ready, but not to be anxious. We must learn to say ‘no’ to our restless egos and the unfair demands of people and say ‘yes’ to the call of the Spirit. “Come away my beloved, and be as the doe upon the mountain; yea, we shall go down together to the gardens.”

Most assuredly God gives us all gifts and graces for vocation and ministry and he expects us to use them. But let’s end by bearing in mind that all that we are and all that we do is but a foreshadowing of what is to come.

I Corinthians 13:8-13: All the special gifts and powers from God will someday come to an end, but love goes on forever. Someday prophecy, and speaking in unknown languages, and special knowledge – these gifts will disappear. Now we know so little, even with our special gifts, and the preaching of those most gifted is still so poor. But when we have been made perfect and complete, then the need for these inadequate special gifts will come to an end, and they will disappear.

It is like this: when I was a child I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I became a man my thoughts grew far beyond those of my childhood, and now I have put away childish things. In the same way we see and understand only a little about God now, as if we were peering at his reflection in a poor mirror; but someday we are going to see him in his completeness, face to face. Now all that I know is hazy and blurred, but then I will see everything
clearly, just as clearly as God sees into my heart right now.

There are three things that remain – faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of these is love (Living Bible paraphrase).