

“Planting Sunday”

Season of Creation

Based on Song of Songs 2:8-13

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Today marks the beginning of a new series of messages centered around creation and our responsibility to be stewards of the earth. This Sunday is called Planting Sunday. Planting seeds is the beginning of the growth process. Today we are beginning a journey of exploration of the wonder and beauty of creation and our role as stewards. Next week is Mountain Sunday. As we consider what mountains can teach us, we will be challenged to protect and care for the earth. The following Sunday is Sky Sunday. On this day we will reflect on the difference between dominion and exploitation. After that is Harvest Sunday. We will consider the process of cultivation and harvesting the fruits of our labor. The series concludes with a time of blessing the diversity of creation on our home, the earth. Later that afternoon we will have a blessing of the pets which is open to the community. So that’s the direction we are taking through this month of worship.

The background of this focus on creation in September is something that was started by a Lutheran pastor in Australia back in 2000. Other church groups picked up on this, making September a season of creation, an annual period of time to celebrate the diversity of creation and to renew the commandment given to us by God to tend to the creation, which we read about in Genesis. If you want to know more about this worldwide, ecumenical observance you can check out seasonofcreation.org. There are a lot of resources on their site. In fact, later this month I will be providing all of you various resources that you can access to learn more about creation care and what things you can do to be better stewards. So stay tuned for that. (As an aside, I know we have a few other things going on this coming Saturday, with the prayer walk and the happiness class, but there will be a big rally at the State House advocating for creation care this Saturday at 11 a.m.)

Let's turn to the scripture reading we have for today. It happens to be one of the assigned texts in the lectionary for this Sunday. In case you don't know, the lectionary is a collection of scriptures assigned for every Sunday over a three year period. It covers of course a huge chunk of the Bible. I like using the lectionary because it forces me to work with texts that I would not likely have chosen on my own. It helps us get exposed to a much wider swath of scripture. Every sermon I have shared with you since I have been here has been based on a scripture assigned for that particular Sunday. There is always an Old Testament reading, a psalm, a New Testament reading and a Gospel reading. Today we are looking at the Old Testament reading, one of those rare Sundays where the reading is taken from the Song of Solomon.

The Song of Solomon is not your typical book in the Bible. It is a book of love poetry. It is included in the section of the Bible devoted to wisdom writings, which also includes Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. God is not mentioned once in the whole book. Esther is the only other book in the Bible where God is not mentioned. Solomon is identified as the author of this book, him being known as the wisest king Israel ever had. But it is very uncertain that he actually wrote this book. There are three voices in this book. There is a man, a woman, and a group of friends. It is the voice of the woman that dominates this book. She is free to speak from her own perspective. She voices her own longing and passion, her own frustrations, her own delights. So many books in the Old Testament are about the exploits of male leaders, of politics, battles, palace intrigue, and the like. But this book gives us a glimpse into the more private lives of Israel. We hear the voices of a young man and woman in love, pursuing each other before they are able to be married. The images are sometimes erotic, sensual and lush. Many of them we can't make sense of because we don't know the cultural context. And frankly it's tenuous exactly why this book is even in the Bible. Jews often interpret it as a metaphor of God's love for Israel. Christians have taken it to be about Christ's love for the church. But interpreted as it is, we have a young woman and a young man in love with each other, pursuing each other, but never consummating their love, always just out of each other's grasp. For me, the Song of Solomon is about that passionate pursuit of

the divine, of God and I pursuing each other, getting close but always just out of reach. The book challenges me to acknowledge that relationship with God is much more than a head thing. Love includes passion, longing, desire. If we are in love with God, should passionate desire be a part of that love? Yet we have a tendency to suppress that aspect of love when it comes to religion. To connect passionate desire for relationship with Jesus comes across to us as a bit extreme, even a little risqué. But that's why I think the Song of Solomon is valuable to us. It presses us to consider how we incorporate passionate desire into our love relationship with God. It's a good question to sit with for a while and ponder, which is one reason why this book is included in the wisdom section of the Bible.

Anyway, let's focus on what is going on in the text we have before us this morning. It begins with the woman, the lover, looking out and seeing her beloved leaping across the mountains and bounding over the hills like a young stag. Can't you see it? And then he is standing on the other side of the wall where she is. She is sitting in her room in her house looking out the window at him and he has drawn near and is looking at her from outside. And he calls out to her, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away with me." He goes on to say that winter is over, the rains have stopped. In Israel, winter is the rainy season. But now the season has transitioned to spring time. The time has come for her to get out of the house, come outside and enjoy the beauty that all the rainy season has helped to bring about: flowers everywhere, the singing of birds, including the migrating turtledove, the fig trees bearing fruit, blossoming vines giving off fragrance. Again, the beloved says to his lover, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." Come out of your house and let's play!

Spring is such a wonderful time of the year. It's my favorite season. Is it yours? We can open the windows and air out our homes that have been closed to keep out the cold winter wind. The temperature warms enough that we can sit outside or go for a nice, leisurely walk. The air smells of life, those scents of flowers and of warming soil. Everything is green. It is like the earth is fresh and new again, a new start, a fresh beginning after the long dormancy of winter. It is no

accident that we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in the spring. Nature evokes resurrection for us. Signs of resurrection all around!

This passage from the Song of Solomon is a great one for spring time. But, it's not spring. We are late into summer. Fall starts in only a few weeks. Labor Day weekend which we are having now sort of signals to us as the last hurrah of summer. And it's going to feel like summer this week coming! But before we know it, we will be pulling out the sweaters. The leaves will need raking. Apples and pumpkins and winter squash will be plentiful. The days will continue to get shorter and shorter and the nights longer and longer. Cloudy, rainy days are not far off. And the rains will switch over to snow before we know it. And we will settle in for another winter. We are not at the new start of spring but nearing the end of a maturing summer. So what can we do with this text today? How might it speak to us?

I am drawn to the location of the lover and the beloved. The lover is sitting in her house behind a wall looking out the window. Her beloved is out in the country, on the other side of the wall, jumping around. And he beckons her to come out, to go on the other side of the wall, and join him in the open country. This speaks to me. Maybe you resonate with this as well.

What walls are we sitting behind? What are the barriers that we have constructed or others have constructed for us that keep us contained? There are all kinds of walls, of barriers. I am thinking about the wall of habit and routine. We get into patterns of daily routines. Or should I call them ruts? There is the wall of familiarity. We confine ourselves to our little territory. We drive the same routes. Go to the same grocery store, the same cluster of restaurants, the same park, the same hair salon, the same fill in the blank. There is the wall of safety. What I mean is the self-imposed barrier that keeps us from engaging with cultures, peoples, religions or non-religions, political views, anything or anyone that is different, strange, other. We keep ourselves confined to what is safe, familiar, known, expected.

But on the other side of the wall of familiarity is a much bigger and wider world. It may seem to us a *wilder* world. And there is so much to see, to explore, to smell, to taste, to touch. And our beloved is out there

in that world. I hear him calling us to climb over our walls, whatever they are, and go with him into this wider world and explore together new sights, new smells, new tastes, new hands to hold and things to touch. See, God is not only with us in our homes of familiarity, routine and habit behind the wall. God is also out there, beyond, in the open country. And there is so much life out there to experience. Is not God calling us to come outside our homes of familiarity and to go exploring with God a much wider, bigger, diverse world? I believe God is doing just that.

So today we begin a journey. It is my hope that through these messages over these Sundays in September, that we can explore the wonder and diversity of creation. Both by being more observant of the familiar and opening ourselves to a wider view of the world we will delight in God's abundant creativity. And as we journey together with God, climbing over the walls and going out into the wider world, we will get a bigger picture of the responsibility we have as protectors and stewards of this beautiful world, the earth, our home. So arise, my love, my fair one, and come away with me.