

Loving A Spouse; Caring for Creation

Song of Songs 4:1-3, 5:10-13

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Valentine's Day

How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful!

Your eyes are doves behind your veil.

Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead.

² *Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing,*

all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved.

³ *Your lips are like a crimson thread, and your mouth is lovely.*

Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand.

¹¹ *His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven.*

¹² *His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set.*

¹³ *His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance.*

His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh. (NRSV)

Valentine's Day doesn't come around on Sunday very often. The last time February 14 occurred on a Sunday was eleven years ago, in 1999, and the next time won't be until 2016. So I'm going to take this once-in-sixteen-years opportunity to talk about the love between spouses, using the Song of Songs as a guide. But I want to do it using a proposal that you may not have ever heard before. I propose that by stirring us to love our spouse, the Song of Songs also inspires us to care for creation. One gift we receive from reading the Song of Songs is that it expands our capacity to care for God's creation. How does this happen?

It happens through similes and metaphors. As you learned in your high school English classes, a simile is a figure of speech that compares two things using a word such as *like* or *as*. For example, if we say, "The grass in the front yard is like a green carpet," we are comparing grass and carpet to each other using the word *like*. Or if we say, "The call of a loon is as melodious as a fantasia by Vaughn Williams," we are using the word *as* to compare the music of a loon to the music of the 20th century composer Ralph Vaughn Williams.

The Song of Songs is loaded with similes. "I am black and beautiful, /

like the tents of Kedar," says the woman in 1:5. Using that word *like*, she compares the color of her skin to the color of Kedarite tents. The Kedarites were a nomadic tribe of Arabs who lived near the desert, raised flocks of black goats, and used the black hair of those goats to make their tents. The woman was therefore making an apt simile: she says her skin is as black and beautiful as the black goat hair tents of the Kedarites, glistening in the sun.

The man uses similes too; and while we're talking about goats we might as well choose one of his goat similes. In 4:1, the man is talking to his beloved woman and says, "Your hair is like a flock of goats / moving down the slopes of Gilead." Gilead was a hilly region east of the Jordan River where farmers grazed their goats. Picture what you might see from a distance when a flock of goats grazes its way down the side of a hill. As the goats forage their way down the uneven slope, I suspect you would see the outline of their backs undulating and rippling up and down against the hillside. So when the man compares her hair to those goats, he might mean to say that her wavy hair reminds him of waves of goats grazing on Gilead.

So much for similes; now to metaphors. A metaphor also compares two things, but without using words such as *like* or *as*. A metaphor is less explicit, less direct, than a simile is. When William Shakespeare said "All the world's a stage," (*As You Like It*, act 2, scene 7), he was implicitly comparing the world to a stage and human living to the life of an actor. When the opening line of Psalm 90 says "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations," the psalmist is comparing God to a house—in every human generation, God is a house in which we can live.

The Song of Songs also has lots of metaphors that make subtle comparisons. An example of subtlety comes in 2:1 when the woman says, "I am a rose of Sharon, / a lily of the valleys." Sharon was the name of a broad plain that stretched north from the town of Joppa and bordered the Mediterranean Sea. It was a fairly large area measuring 50 miles from south to north and 8-12 miles from west to east. Some of it was sand dunes that didn't grow much of anything, while other parts of it were fertile forests. The sometimes barren, sometimes fertile nature of Sharon makes it a little hard to understand her metaphor: does "a rose of Sharon" mean that she stands out like a solitary rose in an otherwise barren sand dune, or does it mean that she is only one of many other beautiful plants in a lush, well-watered forest? We don't know for sure, but that's the way metaphors work.

Most of the language in the Song of Songs is made up of similes and metaphors. For three reasons, it's important for us to understand how these figures of speech work.

The first reason is that similes and metaphors hide about as much as they reveal. Consider the line "Your belly is a heap of wheat, / encircled with lilies" (7:2). I'm stumped about how to draw with any kind of anatomical accuracy what such a belly actually looks like. I grew up on a farm where we raised wheat, so I know how heaps of wheat look; and I'm familiar with lilies of various kinds. But that doesn't give me enough information to draw, describe, or imagine what her belly looks like. A heap of wheat encircled by lilies? I'm lost.

Take another example. In 5:15, the woman says "His legs are alabaster columns, / set upon bases of gold" (5:15). By referring to his legs as alabaster columns, she suggests they are strong and sturdy legs. But this metaphor gives us no tangible information about their anatomical appearance. Are his legs long or short, hairy or smooth? We don't know. So by its very nature, metaphorical language tends to be somewhat imprecise, vague, and fuzzy. The metaphors drop a veil before the bodies of the woman and man, discreetly hiding what these two persons truly look like. The metaphors are highly erotic, but they also keep the book from becoming pornographic.

Second, the open-ended nature of metaphorical language allows us to read the particular body of our own beloved into these texts. I, for instance, can—and I regularly do—imagine the particular body of my wife when I read the descriptions of the woman. The point, however, is that metaphorical language gives you enough latitude to do the same with your spouse. You can read into these poems whatever body type your spouse has—whether it's an ectomorph, a mesomorph, or an endomorph—or using another series of names for body types, whether your spouse has the body of a ruler, a cone, a spoon, or an hourglass. The metaphors of the Song of Songs are open enough to welcome all types of human bodies as recipients of covenantal love.

The third thing we can emphasize about the nature of metaphorical language is that it allows us to make connections between two different things. To say it another way, metaphors "map" one thing onto another thing. In the Song of Songs, the woman and the man most often map God's creation onto the body of the beloved. That is, they make connections between the body of their beloved and the plants, animals, and geography of God's creation.

Consider these descriptions of the man:

“My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms / in the vineyards of En-gedi” (1:14).

“As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, / so is my beloved among young men” (2:3).

“My beloved is like a gazelle / or a young stag” (2:9).

In these lines the poetess maps three different parts of creation onto the body of her beloved: henna blossoms, apple trees, and gazelles.

Or note these lines addressed to the woman:

“O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, / in the covert of the cliff” (2:14).

“Your two breasts are like two fawns” (4:5).

“Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes, / that have come up from the washing” (4:2).

Here the poet maps fauna—doves, fawns, and sheep—onto the body of the one he loves passionately.

In other lines of the book, these inventive lovers also map features of Palestinian geography onto each other’s bodies: his body, for example, reminds her of the En-gedi, an oasis on the west coast of the Dead Sea (1:14); while her hair reminds him of Gilead, a hilly region east of the Jordan River (4:1).

These metaphorical connections invite us to savor creation as we savor the body of the person to whom we are covenanted. If the body of my beloved reminds me of the glory of flowers and fruit, trees and fields, will I not be motivated to care for the creation that my lover so wondrously evokes? If the person I love passionately reminds me of “flowing streams from Lebanon” (4:15), then I will likely have some passion for protecting and preserving those streams from Lebanon. If the cheeks of my love remind me of a pomegranate, then I will have a reason to care about the survival of pomegranate trees. If the man I love more than any other man runs like a gazelle, then I will certainly be interested in living my life in such a way that gazelles will continue to thrive in the wild.

The Song of Songs teaches us to make connections between our spouse’s body and the bodies of creation. If we cherish one, then we should also cherish the other. The similes and metaphors attract us to the beauty of creation through the beauty of our beloved’s body. This metaphorical language summons us to care lovingly for God’s creation. In effect, the Song of Songs draws a seamless connection of care

among the human, plant, animal, and geographical bodies in creation. Then it entices us into this seamless connection of care by means of our own particular romantic and covenantal love. To put this as simply, clearly and personally as I can, if I truly love my wife, and if she reminds me of the rolling hills of southeastern Pennsylvania, or the scent of a hyacinth, or the stateliness of a blue spruce, or the friskiness of a newborn calf—or whatever metaphors of God’s creation I choose to use—then I will have compelling motivations to care about the earth the way I care about her.

The Song of Songs therefore implies that love and care for an intimate other is of a piece with love and care for creation. Once this connection is clear in our minds, new opportunities open up for extending and deepening the love we have for our covenanted other. For example, maybe you’d like to write your own love poetry that compares your spouse to some of your favorite things from God’s creation. If you like this idea, then create metaphors using things in this part of the world. You may not be familiar with henna blossoms, but what fruits and flowers do you know? Use those to write your poem.

Or you might start caring for creation in new ways. After making love with each other, maybe the two of you want to go outside and plant flower bulbs together, or write a letter to your congressional representatives advocating for the passage of a particular bill that would benefit some aspect of creation. If you’re not already recycling, maybe you could start now. If you’re not yet using fluorescent and LED bulbs in your home, then you could begin this coming week.

Whatever you choose to do, accept the summons of the Song of Songs: to care for the one you love, to imagine connections with creation, and to care for this earth that God has made.