

SONG 4

(TRANSLATED BY THE REV. DR. WIL GAFNEY)

Song 4

To a woman...

All of you is beautiful, my beloved companion;
there is no flaw in you.
With me! From Lebanon, my bride, come with me;
come with me from Lebanon.
Depart from the peak of Amana,
from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
from the mountains of leopards.
My heart is yours, my sister, my bride,
my heart is yours with just one of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.
How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much better is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils more than every spice!
" Honied sweetness drips from your lips, my bride;
honey and milk are under your tongue;
the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.
" A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a garden locked, a fountain sealed.
" Your limbs are an orchard of pomegranates
with all choicest fruits: henna with nard,
nard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon,
with every kind of frankincense tree,
myrrh and aloes, with all the best spices:
A garden spring, a well of living water,
streaming from Lebanon.

To a woman's beloved...

Awake, Zaphon, northern wind,
and come, Teman, southern wind!
Blow upon my garden
that its spice-scent might flow.
Let my beloved come to their garden,
and partake of its choicest fruits.

TEXT NOTES: BY THE REV. DR. WIL GAFNEY

In the Song the gender of the addressee is indicated by the binary Hebrew grammar. Rather than identify speaking voice (deductively) and reinforce the heteronormativity of the text, I identify the hearer leaving room for anyone to address her, in this case, as "beloved" Similarly in verse 16, I use the pronoun "their" for the woman's beloved. In Song 4:7, the endearment *ra'yat* is translated variably: "my love" (NRSV, KJV), "my darling" (JPS), "my dearest" (CEB), "my closest [one]" (Peshitta and LXX); its root meaning is "companion," with the sense of nearest/dearest and here, "beloved." *Bride from Lebanon" is missing the possessive " my" in verse & as is "bride in verses 9 and following. "Depart" in verse 8 is one of a set of homophonic verbs that can mean "look" as in KTV, form II, but fits better in its form I, meaning "travel" Verse 9 lacks a proper verb. The noun "heart" is conjugated like a verb, " you hearted me"; there is no basis for the problematic "ravish" of KJV and NRSV. The plural "branches" in verse 13 are here "limbs; human and arboreal. The orchard of verse 13, *pardes*, derives from Zoroastrian, scripture in the Avestan Languages, *pairidaēza* and the source of our word "paradise."

The weightiness of Lent is lightened a bit on Laetare Sunday, named from the historic introit meaning "rejoice." These weeks of penitent contemplation can leave one with a nearly unredeemable portrait of humanity. These lessons offer reason for rejoicing in contemplating God's good world of which we are a part and God's love manifest in creation and ultimately through Jesus.

The garden image that dominates biblical imagination is often Eden, the site of brokenness. Yet scripture also offers the garden paradise of lovers in which the scriptures of the first garden appear healed. The desire of the lovers is mutual and the ground is abundantly fruitful with no evidence of human labor; Phyllis Trible compares these two gardens in God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. The poet's emphatic speech in the Song defies grammar as poets are wont to do. (For a more poetic translation of the Song see Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: Love Lyrics from the Bible*) Indeed, God as poet of creation creates her own grammar. The psalm celebrates the Purity of creation as evidence of God's faithful love. The theological idiom of the Iron Age further characterizes God's actions that harm others as evidence of God's love for Israel, the fate of Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the psalm (verses 10, 15). Yet the inclusion of wider creation- the heavens and sun, moon and stars, and land and sea verses 5-9 point to an even wider love not limited by nation, tribe, clan, or kin.

The love the Epistle writer celebrates is similarly articulated in insider, communal terms, "beloved" addresses fellow believers, yet that great love of God is not limited to followers of the Way; The Epistle supplies the image of a God who gives birth to her beloved: "Everyone who loves is born of God" (1 John 4.7). The Epistle also leaves the image of God's love as not yet, not quite, completed, and extraordinary", dependent upon us in verse 12: Our love is part of God's love; God's love is not complete without our love for one another.

The evangelist articulates God's love in singular incarnational woman-born terms. We rejoice on this rejoicing Sunday because God's love is made manifest in and through creation, in and through humanity, and in and through Jesus. We return to

our Lenten devotions and disciplines secure in this love and convicted of our call to complete God's love in loving all who, all that, she loves.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

Alice Hunt

The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs--meaning, the most magnificent of all songs--demonstrates, perhaps more clearly than any other biblical material, the multivalent complexity and beauty of the Bible. On the face of it, the book--often called simply the Song--seems to have no religious connection, never mentioning God. Yet the book explores love--intimate, life-giving, provocative, mutual, erotic, dynamic, engaging, complex, longing, passionate love-- and perhaps reveals that fully intimate relationships are a way of experiencing God, at once both immanent and transcendent. Ancient writings were often attributed to people whose legendary name might lend the book credibility, and the Song is no exception: its authorship is traditionally ascribed to Solomon. The book's enigmatic form has led readers to make various suggestions about its genre, some seeing it as a series of love songs akin to Egyptian love poetry, others seeing it as including songs for recital at a religious ceremony such as a fertility festival or a marriage celebration. Earlier Christian interpreters read the book as allegory, revealing God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the Christian church.

The book continues to be used liturgically, read by some contemporary Jewish congregations at the end of the festival of Passover and by others prior to Sabbath. Today's Western, Eurocentric philosophical way of reading often creates expectations for linear, documentary narratives that disclose characters involved in, and controlled by, a singular plot and clear imagery. The Song demands more from its readers, however. It portrays robust passion between clandestine lovers, often desperate to spend time together despite societal pressures. The book moves among a variety of speakers. The female lover speaks most often, answered by her male lover or by a chorus of females, daughters of Jerusalem, who encourage, cajole, voice concern, and celebrate with the female lover. Shifting in mood, intensity, theme, and setting, the Song craftily calls for examination of societal structures and still offers glimpses into the most intimate moments between the lovers. Innuendos--vineyards, clefts, gardens, locks, and hanging fruit, to name a few--permeate the Song. Many of the metaphors and allusions are inaccessible to today's readers, creating wonder over the apparent literary artistry of the writer. The Song gives voice to females in a way unlike other portions of the Bible, which often reflect successful attempts to silence or control female expression. The speech and thoughts of women dominate the book. For example, while most biblical references to going to one's parents' home literally translate as "my father's house," the Song twice finds the woman speaking of going to "my mother's house." The Song also seems to be countercultural in other ways. The Song addresses a wide variety of what we today consider justice issues. What are the implications of having dark skin? The woman proclaims, "I am black and beautiful" (1:5), and her lover agrees wholeheartedly. Who and what is considered beautiful? The woman defends the appearance of her small breasts against the teasing of her brothers, and her male lover continually extols her

incomparable beauty. Does society have the right to decide who can love each other? The lovers often find themselves seeking each other but thwarted by interruptions. Even their supporters, the daughters of Jerusalem, sometime succumb to society's notions of appropriateness. The lovers must meet in private, even though the woman longs to have a public relationship. And the Song reveals possible undercurrents of class struggle. Perhaps a young man from among the elite has fallen in love with a poorer, less privileged young woman. In this way, the Song could be interpreted as a form of resistance literature. Other evidence of oppression appears throughout the book. The sentinels' question, beat, and perhaps even rape the woman as she wanders the city streets at night searching for her lover. Concurrently, the Song magnificently displays the complexity of human life, both individual and communal, for even as the female's voice is freely heard, society seeks to control intimacy, social interaction, and notions of beauty. Near the end of the Song, readers get a glimpse of the intended conclusion, if there is one, in 8:6-7, from which all can take courage in the face of oppression. Love is as strong as death; passion is as fierce as the grave. Love rages as flame. Water cannot quench it, floods cannot drown it, money cannot buy it. In the end, nothing matters but love.

I am a white, Protestant, upper-middle class, straight female who has been privileged with opportunities and choices. My social location with regard to race and ethnicity often goes unlabeled and, perhaps even more often, is considered normative. My racial context as privileged and unlabeled leave me, I believe, an extra responsibility to name contexts around me. Issues of gender remain omnipresent for me as I struggle to give voice to assumptions and values that often silence women. Recognizing My own context and the contexts around me feeds my interpretation of the Song of Songs.