

# THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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June 13, 2021

A "Word Out" audio transcript



## Prelude

*Improvisation on TENDERNESS*

## Welcome

**P**: Welcome, this Third Sunday after Pentecost, to Queen Anne Lutheran Church. Wherever you are listening, whatever challenges you might be facing, we invite you into this space: one where you can hear the good news through proclamation, spoken and sung; a time where you can be still, and know God is God.

Today we leave the familiar land at the lectionary for an exotic one, as we celebrate creation in the first of a special three-part sermon series on the Song of Songs. Like the book of Esther, the Song of Songs never appears in our Sunday readings, even though it testifies to a kind of love that not only redeems creation, but also offers us a glimpse of God.

## Greeting


**P**: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

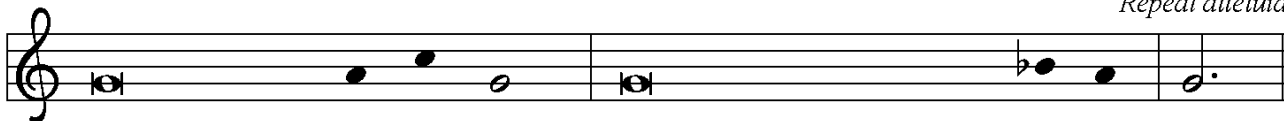
**G**: And also with you.

Verse for the Third Sunday after Pentecost


James 1:21


**G:**   
Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.

  
Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.

  
*Repeat alleluia*

**A:** Welcome with meekness the implanted word  
that has the power to save your souls.

**G:**   
Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.

  
Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.

Scripture Reading:

Song of Songs 2:10-15, 4:16, 5:1

**P:** A reading from the Song of Songs:  
<sup>10</sup> My beloved speaks and says to me,  
 “Arise, my love, my fair one,  
 and come away;  
<sup>11</sup>for now the winter is past,  
 the rain is over and gone.  
<sup>12</sup>The flowers appear on the earth;  
 the time of singing has come,  
 and the voice of the turtledove  
 is heard in our land.

<sup>13</sup>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.

<sup>14</sup>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.

<sup>15</sup>Catch us the foxes,  
the little foxes,  
that ruin the vineyards —  
for our vineyards are in blossom.”

<sup>16</sup>Awake, O north wind,  
and come, O south wind!  
Blow upon my garden  
that its fragrance may be wafted abroad.  
Let my beloved come to his garden,  
and eat its choicest fruits.

<sup>1</sup> I come to my garden, my sister, my bride;  
I gather my myrrh with my spice,  
I eat my honeycomb with my honey,  
I drink my wine with my milk.  
Eat, friends, drink,  
and be drunk with love.

**P**: The Word of the Lord.

**G**: **Thanks be to God.**

As we find ourselves emerging from the long winter of a pandemic, what reading from the Bible could be more appropriate than the Song of Songs, a love poem that celebrates vitality and desire through references to the joy of spring and the beauty of creation? Just listen to its words of jubilation from our reading for today. “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away,” says the beloved to his lover, “for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land” (Song 2:10b-12).

Wait to hear these words on a typical Sunday morning, however, and you will do so in vain. The Song of Songs never appears in the common lectionary, that is, the three-year cycle of readings from the Bible that we use in conjunction with other denominations for our Sunday services. This was probably due, at least in part, to the Christian sensibilities of its editors. The poem contains a plethora of euphemisms pertaining to sexual arousal and desire, including a reference to female genitalia (4:13) as well as the act of intercourse itself (5:5). Imagine the scandal that might ensue if an assisting minister read these from a lectern, or – worse yet – if a pastor explained them from the pulpit. Heaven forbid!

Better, it would seem, to restrict reading from the Song to weddings.

Long before the advent of the common Christian lectionary, rabbis of the Jewish faith expressed their reservations about the Song, too. Some felt it should be excluded from the Bible, and with good reason: the poem speaks neither of God nor of God’s covenant with Israel; it is simultaneously devoid of wisdom-sayings (i.e., the kind of practical advice for living a virtuous life that appears in books like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes). Perhaps its only saving grace was its authorship – or rather, its *perceived* authorship. The first line of the poem claims it was written by King Solomon, Son of David. This gave it credibility, the kind with which Christians would later invest the Book of Revelation insofar as they believed it was written by John, the disciple of Jesus (see Rev 1:1-2, 9).

Ultimately, while its attribution to Solomon certainly helped solidify its inclusion in the canon, what saved the Song from the scrapheap was the method early rabbis used to uncover its supposedly *hidden* meaning. On its surface the Song is a poem about desire that a man and a woman feel for each other. Plumb its depths, however, and you will discover that the man and woman represent God and the people of Israel, respectively.

The rabbis found a way, in short, to rescue Solomon's Song by interpreting it *allegorically*, that is, as a story containing two levels of meaning. One was vulgar, profane, the kind you might hear people "merry with wine" singing in taverns. The other was sacred, spiritual, aesthetically pleasing, as well as a profound testament to the love God has for God's people, which the two lovers in the story represent.

In the end the strategy worked. The Song of Songs became, after the Book of Esther, the only other text in the Hebrew Bible that never mentions God. It did so, however, by replacing the female protagonist with men. Now that God was understood as the male lover, "the male heroes of Israel's faith [became] the objects of God's desire" (Linafelt, "Biblical Love Poetry...and God," p. 336). The rabbis banished the woman from the garden that she and her lover inhabited intermittently throughout the Song. Only men could remain.

### **Giving the Song a Second Chance**

Much has been lost by allegorizing The Song of Songs as well as by excluding it from the common lectionary. Most of us have neither read it nor heard it. Even the title mystifies us, probably because we fail to see the connection it has with other sayings in Scripture. Christina Bucher of Elizabethtown College clarifies its meaning. "In Hebrew," she writes, "this book is *Shir ha-Shirim*, which we translate rather woodenly as 'the Song of Songs.' But like the biblical expressions 'king of kings,' 'vanity of vanities,' and 'holy of holies,' this construction is a way in Hebrew to express the superlative. *Shir ha-Shirim* means 'the best of all songs,' 'the song above all other songs,' 'the most sublime song'" ("The Allure of God," p. 12).

So powerful was the Song's magnetism due to its language as well as the insight it offers into the phenomenon of love, that Akiva, the rabbi I mentioned

earlier, famously declared that all the ages of history are not equal to the day when God revealed it to Moses at the top of Mt. Sinai. Yes, you heard that correctly. Akiva could only explain the Song's great stature by attributing it directly to God rather than to the wisdom of a man, even Solomon! His interest alone makes me curious. What specifically did he see in the Song that inspired such enthusiastic praise?

I chose to bypass the lectionary and feature the Song as our reading for today, however, for another reason. I believe this poem can teach us something about how to view and treat the world around us. Lift its veil and you will find a lost paradise, one that affirms – in keeping with the first chapter of Genesis as well as the Psalms – the goodness of the world around us. I also believe the Song can teach us something about the equality of the sexes or indeed of any two partners in a mutually affirming love relationship, something I will discuss next week. And I believe that once we see the equality of such love, the Song can offer us a glimpse of the God the New Testament *identifies* as love (see 1 John 4:8, 16).

Let us begin, then, at the beginning when God, the breath, the wind, the spirit, sweeps across the waters of primeval chaos and draws something out of not-quite-nothing.

### **Is Creation Truly Good?**

We know what the Bible says. The first chapter of Genesis has God pronounce the world “good” after each stage of the creative process. When God completes the process, God sees “everything that he had made,” including human beings, and declares it to be “very good” (Gen 1:31).

The Psalms confirm the goodness of the natural world. Why? Because God created it. “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” we read in an older translation of Psalm 19:1-3, “and the firmament [or dome] showeth the work of his hands. Day unto day poureth forth the story, night unto night announces the knowledge. There is no speech, no language! Their voice cannot be heard! But their music goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” These words reflect a conviction held by ancient philosophers like

Plato, that the movement of the spheres (the planets, the sun, the moon, and the stars) generates a harmony of tones that reverberate throughout the cosmos. All we must do is listen.

Intuitively, of course, we all know there is more to the world than glory that inspires praise. It can also produce terror.

“Many years ago,” writes the theologian Paul Tillich in a sermon called “Nature, too, Mourns for a Lost Good,” “I stood on a jetty with a well-known psychologist looking at the ocean. We saw innumerable small fish hurrying toward the beach. They were pursued by bigger ones, who, in turn, were chased by still bigger ones. Aggression, flight, and anxiety offered a perfect illustration of the old, often-used story of the big fish devouring the small ones, in nature as in [human] history. The scholar, who, in many discussions, had defended the harmonious structure of reality, burst into tears, saying, ‘Why are these beings created if they exist only to be swallowed up by others?’ In this moment the tragedy of nature forced itself upon his optimistic mind, and he asked, ‘Why?’”

This story should compel us to ask why, too. Over 99% of all the birds who have ever flown through the air, of all the mammals who have ever hobbled across land, and of all the fish who have ever swam through the sea, have gone extinct. Mother Nature can be brutal and unforgiving. She is not just “red in tooth and claw,” as the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson described her. She is also a cannibal who devours her young (Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, p. 258).

The Bible, we discover, contains both views of nature as well as a third: it speaks of nature’s glory, as we see in Genesis and the Psalms; it speaks of nature’s tragedy, as evident in the Apostle Paul’s observation that nature groans and throbs with pain because of sin and death (see Rom 5:12, 8:19-23), and it speaks of its salvation, as when God symbolically descends from heaven to earth, destroys death, and makes all things new (Rev 21:1-4). Tillich lists the three of these attitudes in the sermon I cited a couple moments ago.

I believe the Song offers a fourth perspective on nature, however, that Tillich missed, one we urgently need to hear and reclaim insofar as we contribute to

the tragic element of nature by destroying our planet through climate change: the Song reveals to us nature's beauty.

### **What a Beautiful World**

The Song conveys the beauty of the world by tantalizing us with what J. Cheryl Exum in the *Women's Bible Commentary* calls "a feast for the senses" (p. 248). It appeals to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. Consider our reading for today. In just a handful of verses the author introduces us to images of flowers in springtime after the rains have come and gone, of fig trees bursting with fruit, of vines and vineyards in blossom. The poet calls us simultaneously to the sounds of creation, to the "voice of the turtledove [that] is heard in our land" (Song 2:12). After the beloved subsequently compares the lips of his bride to nectar and speaks of milk and honey under her tongue (Song 4:11), the poet draws our attention to a setting to which the woman and man will refer over half a dozen times over the second half of the narrative: namely, the garden.

You see it in our reading today. In response to her beloved, the woman calls out to the north and south winds, saying, "Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits" (Song 4:16). This verse provides one of several examples in the poem where the woman uses a *double-entendre*, that is, a term or phrase open to two interpretations, the second of which comes "daringly close" to indecency.

Remember now what I said about the editors of the lectionary! The point in excluding the Song from our Sunday readings may well have been to avoid situations like this, where a pastor might be tempted to speak with impropriety from the pulpit by awkwardly explaining the reference to his (or her) parishioners. In this case, however, I will spare all of us by leaving the bride's reference to her garden up to your imagination.

What, then, is the primary, or first, meaning of "garden" in the poem? Is it just an ordinary garden, or does it have symbolic value? Consider a parallel in the New Testament for an answer. Unlike Matthew and Mark, who refer to the place of Jesus' betrayal and arrest as Gethsemane, John tells us these things



took place “across the Kidron valley . . . where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered” (18:1). John also observes that Mary Magdalene, upon her encounter with risen Christ, mistakenly identifies him as the gardener (20:15). Ponder this. Why would John associate Jesus with a garden before and after his death? Because through him, God, with whom John says Christ was present as the Word “in the beginning” (1:1), has begun the work of a *new creation*, a new paradise, a new garden, a new Eden.

The writer of the Song, I submit, is doing the same thing, albeit with one major difference. For him, human beings can regain paradise, they can return to the Garden of Eden, not through their belief in Christ, but in and through the delights of egalitarian, non-coercive romantic love. When God, arguably the speaker in the last line of Song 5:1, says “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk [or spellbound] with love,” love “becomes the remedy for regaining paradise” (S. Fischer, “What’s Turning the Wheel? The Theological Hub of Song of Songs,” p. 67.).

The German poet and philosopher Johann Herder summarizes the Song’s message exquisitely: “*Als Gott den Menschen im Paradiese schuf, ward Liebe sein zweites Paradies,*” which is to say, “When God created mankind in paradise, love became his second paradise” (*ibid.*, 68).

## **Remembering Our Vocation**

The Song of Songs offers us a fourth way of seeing nature as well as an incredible affirmation regarding the prospect of regaining paradise through love. Unfortunately, as we will learn next week, something went wrong in the Garden of Eden, something that lurks like sin at the door (Gen 4:7) of every intimate relationship – something the Song will seek to correct.

For now, as we emerge from the long winter of a pandemic, let us celebrate the beauty of creation and the joy of spring so vividly portrayed in today’s reading. Let us give thanks, for this is a *season* the Lord has made, and let us remember the responsibility we have to care for the garden as Adam did (Gen 2:15), doing our best to preserve the beauty of God’s creation that comes to us in everything from the sound of turtledoves to blossoms on the vine. Amen.

# Hymn of the Day

# *Touch the Earth Lightly*

ELW 739



1 Touch the earth light - ly, use the earth gent - ly,  
2 We who en - dan - ger, who cre - ate hun - ger,  
3 Let there be green - ing, birth from the burn - ing,  
4 God of all liv - ing, God of all lov - ing,



nour-ish the life of the world in our care:  
a - gents of death for all crea - tures that live,  
wa - ter that bless - es, and air that is sweet,  
God of the seed - ling, the snow, and the sun,



gift of great won - der, ours to sur - rend - er,  
we who would fos - ter clouds of dis - as - ter—  
health in God's gar - den, hope in God's chil - dren,  
teach us, de - flect us, Christ re - con - nect us,



trust for the chil - dren to - mor - row will bear.  
God of our plan - et, fore - stall and for - give!  
re - gen - er - a - tion that peace will com - plete.  
us - ing us gent - ly, and mak - ing us one.

Text: Shirley Erena Murray, b. 1931

Music: TENDERNESS, Colin Gibson, b. 1933

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## Prayers of the Church

**A:** Let us come before the triune God in prayer.

*A brief silence.*

**A:** Holy God, you plant the seeds of faith in every nation. Enliven your church, so that the good news of your grace may root and grow throughout the world. Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** **hear our prayer.**

**A:** Creator, even the trees, shrubs, and flowers delight in your goodness. From the depths of the soil to the highest mountain, bring forth new plants. Restore growth to places suffering drought. Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** **hear our prayer.**

**A:** Judge of nations, we pray for our leaders and those in power. Grant them the ability to regard those under their charge with humility, dedicating their lives in service to others. Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** **hear our prayer.**

**A:** Divine comforter, you show compassion to those in need and provide relief to those who call on you. Bless all who suffer, especially people trapped in cycles of poverty and homelessness. Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** **hear our prayer.**

**A:** Sovereign God, this house of worship belongs to you. We give thanks and pray for our church musician and all who help lead worship. We dedicate to you the joyful noise that comes from this place; the cries of children, the melody of voice and instruments, and the songs from our hearts. Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** **hear our prayer.**

**A:** For whom or what else do the people of God pray?

*A silence is given so that your prayers may be offered.*

**A:** Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** **hear our prayer.**

**A:** God, we give thanks for our ancestors in the faith who are now at home with you. We look forward to that day when we are reunited in your new creation. Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** **hear our prayer.**

**A:** We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your abiding grace.

**G:** **Amen.**

### **Lord's Prayer**

**P:** Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray.

**G:** **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come, your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread  
and forgive us our sins**

**as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.**

**Amen.**

### **Announcements**

**P:** We thank you for joining us for this service. If you would like to hear other services or access the newest edition of *the Quill*, our newsletter, we invite you to go to our website at [queenannelutheran.org](http://queenannelutheran.org).

### **Benediction**

**A:** Let us bless the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

**P:** Almighty God, the Father, † the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
bless and preserve you.

**G:** **Amen.**

## Dismissal

**P:** Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

**G:** Thanks be to God.

## Choral Postlude

*Sung by Northwest Repertory Singers*

*Arise, My Love*

Tom Walworth (b. 1977)

Arise my love, my fair one, and come away  
For 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.

Oh, my dove in the clefts of the rock,  
In the coverts of the cliff  
Let me see your face, let me hear your voice,  
For both are comely and fair.  
Oh, that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth,  
For your love is better than wine.

You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eye,  
For Love is strong as Death.  
It burns like a blazing fire, burning flame.  
Many waters cannot quench Love  
Neither can floods drown it.

Set me as a seal, as a seal upon your heart,  
As a seal upon your arm.  
Make haste, my beloved come away,  
Arise my love, my fair one, and come away.

*– Song of Songs, adapted by Tom Walworth and Ellen Barber Walworth*

## **About today's music**

Today Pastor Dan begins a series of sermons on the Song of Songs. Our choral postlude, "Arise, My Love," mines several of the most beloved passages from this book for use with an original melody that has the character of a folk tune (a difficult feat for a composer). This beautiful piece is by Tom Walworth, who is the director of orchestras at Thomas Jefferson High School and Lakota Middle School in Federal Way, and principal cellist for Rainier Symphony (some of you might remember Tom as a guest cellist at QALC for Reformation Sunday 2019). Tom is also the bass section leader and a charter member of Northwest Repertory Singers, the community choir I direct. As part of my first season leading the ensemble, I conducted a performance of "Arise, My Love" featuring Dr. Maria Sampen from the University of Puget Sound as violin soloist. The May 2019 concert recording seemed like the perfect complement to our focus on Song of Songs this month.

—Cantor Kyle

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✘ *In Worship Today* ✘

Pastor	The Rev. Dr. Dan Peterson
Cantor	Kyle Haugen
Intercessor	Susan Evans

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