

# FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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June 27, 2021

A “Word Out” audio transcript



## Prelude

Improvisation on HYFRYDOL  
Paul Manz (1919–2009)

## Welcome

**P:** Welcome, this Fifth 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 in proclamation, spoken and sung; a time where you can be still, and know God is God.

We return this week to the last of our three-part sermon series on the Song of Songs. The song never appears in our Sunday readings. The poem was so controversial, in fact, that it almost never appeared in Scripture, either. Part of the problem is that the song never explicitly mentions God – or so it would seem. Having uncovered this poem’s vibrant and enthusiastic affirmation of creation’s goodness and beauty, as well as the way it recasts relationships after the Fall, we turn finally to the ultimate question: What might this text say about 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 Fifth Sunday after Pentecost


2 Timothy 1:10


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

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

*Repeat alleluia*  


**P:** Our Savior Jesus Christ has abolished death  
and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

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

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

Scripture Reading:

Song of Songs 8:5-7, 11-14

**A:** A reading from the Song of Songs:

<sup>5</sup>Who is that coming up from the wilderness,  
leaning upon her beloved?

Under the apple tree I awakened you.

There your mother was in labor with you;  
there she who bore you was in labor.

<sup>6</sup>Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm;  
for love is strong as death,  
passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.

<sup>7</sup>Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love  
all the wealth of one's house,  
it would be utterly scorned.

<sup>11</sup>Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;  
he entrusted the vineyard to keepers;  
each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver.

<sup>12</sup>My vineyard, my very own, is for myself;  
you, O Solomon, may have the thousand,  
and the keepers of the fruit two hundred!

<sup>13</sup>O you who dwell in the gardens,  
my companions are listening for your voice;  
let me hear it.

<sup>14</sup>Make haste, my beloved,  
and be like a gazelle  
or a young stag  
upon the mountains of spices!

**P**: Word of God, word of life.

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

## **Sermon**

*Paradise Revealed: A Glimpse of God in the Song of Songs*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Today we come to the last of our three-part series on the Song of Songs, a poem that never made it into our lectionary and *almost* never made it into the Bible.

While reasons for the Song's exclusion from the lectionary remain a bit of a mystery, the primary obstacle to its inclusion in Scripture seems to have hinged on an obvious, albeit "minor," detail: the text never mentions God.

Instead, it presents the reader with the thoughts and feelings of a man and woman who are “spellbound” (see Song 5:1b) by the attraction they have for one another. It is easy to see, therefore, why most people – at least until it was accepted into the Hebrew Bible – interpreted the Song as nothing more than secular love poetry. They read it at wedding feasts. Some even sang it in bars. Everything changed when the Romans overtook Jerusalem in 70 CE, laying waste to the city and destroying its Temple in response to a Jewish revolt. This left the people of Israel in a perilous situation. The Temple had been their central place of worship for over five hundred years. How could they maintain their faith without its cultic practices?

The answer that would make Judaism the first “religion of the book” in the history of Western civilization came from the rabbis, Israel’s teachers of the faith. They felt the best way to unify the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Temple’s destruction would be to combine all the texts they deemed sacred into a single volume. Their forefathers had thankfully initiated the process after the First Temple had been destroyed back in 586 BCE. All they had to do was determine which books still under consideration (i.e., about one third of what we call the Old Testament) would merit the designation of “sacred scripture.” Some options were easy. Others ignited rigorous debate, especially the Song. After all, as Barry Holtz explains, “it read like a collection of starkly erotic love poems with no spiritual content at all. What place would such an obviously secular book have in the Bible” (*Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud*, p. 178)?

Tradition tells us that Rabbi Joseph ben Akiva (d. 135 CE) saved the Song by opening the way to a totally different method of interpreting the text. The secular interpretation, which he condemned, merely took the words and deeds of the Song’s two lovers at face-value. Probe beneath its surface, as rabbis after Akiva would do, and the identity of its lovers becomes clear: the man represents God, and the woman represents Israel, the people of God.

The story, in other words, was “really” about God’s relationship with Israel. The prophet Hosea offered a similar comparison: he spoke of Israel as the wife of God. In his mind, however, the wife (Israel) had become unfaithful and so he chastised her for her infidelity to God. The Song, were we to read it

allegorically, pictures the love-relationship between God and Israel rather differently! Conflict becomes longing. Reunion (however fleeting) brings peace (see Song 8:10b).

### **The Way It Went**

Until the modern era, the allegorical reading of the Song prevailed among Jewish interpreters. Most Christians followed suit, albeit with slight modification: they replaced God (the male lover) with Christ and Israel (the female lover) with the Church. Even Martin Luther, who normally preferred the “literal sense” of Scripture, read portions of the text allegorically. Perhaps he too was “spellbound” by the Song’s allegorical meaning.

How about you? Where do you stand? Are you drawn to the idea that the Song is about sexual rather than spiritual love? Or are you more inclined to agree with the way the rabbis who read it did so, not as a celebration of the delights and pleasures that accompany romantic love, but as the broad story of the relationship between God and His people?

Personally, I find myself seeking another option, a third option, one that validates the goodness of romantic love while simultaneously affirming that such love can teach us something about the love of God. Think about the implications this could have for your faith! Instead of perceiving God exclusively as a doting parent, a good friend, or even a cosmic butler, imagine God as a lover, the One whose presence you seek when you feel His (or Her) absence, the One who inspires the holy longing you have for something more, the horizon that calls to you and compels you to reach for it from the depths of your innermost being.

We could agree, then, that the Song remains *primarily* an account of romantic love. At the same time, perhaps such love could enable us to glimpse the nature of love itself, the Capital-L Love that brought the universe as well as each of us into being. As Robert Dentan says in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary*, “The tradition of the allegorical interpretation was not entirely wrong . . . there is a real analogy between such love as the song describes and the love of the spirit. It is only from a profound knowledge of human love, in

all its manifestations, that [people] can rise to an understanding of the love that unites God with [God's creation]" (p. 325).

What can the Song of Songs teach us, then, about the nature of *divine* love?

## Love Gone Wrong

Last week we heard a different take on the story of Adam and Eve. For generations, pastors, parents, and Sunday school teachers have taught many of us that the "Fall of Man" occurs when Eve succumbs to the temptation of the snake in the story by eating an apple she plucks from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, one of only two trees from which God forbade the couple to eat. Eve, in turn, gives the apple to Adam and "their eyes [are] opened" (see Genesis 2:17). A single transgression occasions their fall from God's favor and grace.

Signs of their fallen condition appear almost immediately. Adam and Eve lose the bliss of ignorance (the couple realizes their nakedness) only to receive punishment from God (Adam must now labor to produce his food and Eve will experience pain in childbearing). God then expels the human couple from paradise, an act that symbolizes perhaps our perpetual separation as Adam's children from God.

Another version of the fall from paradise appears, however, when we view the story from a feminist perspective. According to Genesis 2, God did not originally create a man whose name was Adam. Instead, God created *ha-adam* or "the human" from *adamah*, which refers to the dust of the ground. When God discovers that the human yearns for companionship, God causes it to fall asleep so that God can draw a helper from its side.

When the human awakens, he discovers something new. He not only has a partner; his body has changed. My use of the pronouns "he" and "his" signify the metamorphosis. God has introduced sexual differentiation by splitting *ha-adam* into *ish* which means man and *ishah* which means woman. The one has become two. In so doing, however, we have no reason to believe the woman was anything less than the man. Both came from *ha-adam*, the human – not one from the other. The arrival, moreover, of a helper, or the man's "partner," to

cite our translation of Genesis 2:18, suggests an egalitarian relationship between the husband and wife.

The other Fall in Genesis, we discover here, occurs not when the human beings have their eyes opened after eating the fruit of the tree, which, incidentally, would probably not have been an apple given the setting of the story. It happens when the originally egalitarian nature of the man-woman, husband-wife relationship descends into one of hierarchy as evident in the punishment Eve receives from God: “[your] husband shall rule over you” (3:17).

The introduction of a gendered hierarchy, in short, constitutes the fall from a feminist perspective. As one commentary puts it, “The man’s rule over the woman here is a tragic reflection of the disintegration of original connectedness between them” (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3 ed., p. 15). Whenever we witness inequality between the sexes, not to mention dominion, hierarchy, or submission of women to men in relationships, we encounter a distorted, corrupted, fallen expression of love, something to which even the writers of Scripture were not always immune (see, for example, Eph 5:22-24). The Song of Songs accordingly provided a much-needed corrective.

### **Love Made Right**

The Song defies patriarchal convention from the beginning. The woman speaks first, she speaks last, and she speaks more than her male counterpart. As Matthew Emler points out, “The Song of Songs contains the only unmediated female voice of the Bible. The woman speaks her mind. It is her voice that dominates the dialogue, telling readers what she wants and what she thinks of her love” (“For the Love of God,” p. 64). None of the other voices in the narrative, moreover, ever chastise her for expressing her desire. Her brothers along with the city’s sentinels may try to prevent her from exercising it, but unlike her lover, the chorus, and the narrator, none of them have a voice.

The Song, in turn, defies not only patriarchal convention; it also defies every other book in the Hebrew Bible that denigrates a woman’s desire by equating it to everything from harlotry (Ezek 16:25) to aggression (Ezek 16:34) and to manipulation (Prov 2:16-19). “When the Shulamite,” that is, the female lover in

the story, “proclaims her desire in her own voice,” observes Rachel Adler, “that desire is neither gross nor demonic, but joyful and appreciative. Only in the Song of Songs is woman’s desire desirable” (*Engendering Judaism*, p. 134).

The affirmation of the female voice comprises the first in a long list of qualities that define the relationship she has with her Beloved. The love they share is always mutual and never coercive. Their speech overflows with complimentary as well as complementary praise. Even the desire they possess (or rather, the desire that possesses them) extends “to the entire playground of their bodies in relationship,” denying what Adler calls the “foundational assumption of male sexual dominance” (*ibid.*, 138).

The love we see in the Song operates dialectically. The word “dialectical” comes from the language of classical Greek. It was used by famous philosophers like Plato and Socrates. It simply means “conversation,” that is, moving back and forth between differing perspectives toward a resolution. We see this pattern when it comes to the way in which our two lovers interact with each other: one woos and draws, the other reacts and responds (Keller, *On the Mystery*, p. 99).

Such love, of course, need not be limited to a man and woman in a romantic relationship. An element of *eros*, which I normally translate as desire, exists in everything from friendship to the search for truth to the mystic who longs for the divine. Consider the words of Bernard of Clairvaux, the founder of Cistercian monasticism. “I am in love,” he says, referring to his desire for God. “I beg. I plead. I burn” (Kearney qtd. Bernard, *Toward a Theology of Eros*, p. 321).

Return with me now to the beginning. The man and woman of creation’s first paradise presumably experienced such love insofar as they lived in harmony with one another. Neither was dominant. The woman had a voice. But something happened. The man gained power over the woman and paradise was lost. In the story of the Song “love becomes the remedy for regaining paradise” (Fischer, “What’s Turning the Wheel?” p. 67). The love we witness is not only patient and kind, as the Apostle Paul would later say in 1 Corinthians 13; it is reciprocal, mutual, and non-coercive as well. It attracts the other which lies at the heart of love’s true power.



## The Love of God

When Paul gives an account of love's nature, he also testifies that "love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8). Our reading for today makes the same claim. In Song 8:6, the female lover anticipates the return of her beloved by declaring that "love is as strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame."

Notice how the female lover raises her experience of love, exquisitely detailed in the seven preceding chapters of the poem, to a general statement about the nature of love itself, as if she had suddenly become conscious of the Capital-L-love that had been coursing through her the whole time.

When our translation (the NRSV) renders the Hebrew word *shalhevetyah* as "a raging flame" in the last line of Song 8:6, it obscures a nuance in the original language. Tod Linafelt, a Hebrew Bible scholar, explains how. "Yah," he observes, "the last syllable of the last word of the verse, is a shortened form of Israel's personal name for God [Yahweh]" (Kearney qtd. Linafelt, p. 308).

The International Standard translation captures the meaning more clearly: "The flames of love are flames of fire, a blaze that comes from the Lord." The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* confirms the validity of the translation but with a caveat. The "flame of *yah*," it says, "is usually explained as a superlative: a 'Yahweh flame' of high burning intensity. However, it could mean that the fire of love is a fire of Yahweh, a participation in the Lord's white-hot love" (p. 465).

If we assume the romantic love of our two protagonists reflects as well as participates in the love of God, then several fascinating implications emerge immediately: first, the nature of such love is egalitarian, something we as Christians affirm in the doctrine of the Trinity and its talk of the divine persons as "co-equal" in their relationship with one another. God's love, secondly, contains an element of desire, something Martin Luther confirms when he speaks of the "great fire of the love of God for us" (Martin Luther's *Basic Theological Writings*, 2ed., p. 95), and something we should remember when we speak of the cross. There we witness the great lengths to which God will go in God's *loving search* for a lost and alienated humanity.

Third, as the Shulamite confirms in the final verses of the poem, while we may enjoy moments of gratification and union with someone we love or with God, we paradoxically remain ourselves, and the desire we have never ends. Could it be that even beyond the grave God overcomes the prospect of monotony and never-ending boredom by drawing us ever more deeply into the depths and inexhaustible riches of His being?

### **God is Love**

A fourth and final implication emerges today from our reading of the Song. When the rabbis equated the male lover in the poem with God, or when Christians equated the male lover with Christ, they both reduced God to the object of human love. The Song teaches us, however, that ultimately God is not an object of human love but Love itself, the love that draws the two lovers of our story together, the love that binds all things. Indeed, as Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains, “YHVH [Yahweh] isn’t a noun, but a verb: a form of the Hebrew word ‘to be’. . . . YHVH is an activity, be-ing itself rather than a being or even a supreme being (*Embracing the Divine Feminine*, p. 18-19).

Instead of speaking, therefore of God as a being “out there” to whom we submit ourselves, say, in obedience, the Song teaches us indirectly what 1 John 4:8 names directly, that is: God is love. When we experience intimate, egalitarian love we should remind ourselves that something of God exists in that, just as something of God existed in the pre-fallen partnership of Adam and Eve. When we love our neighbor as ourselves, we should remind ourselves that something of God exists in that, too. 1 John captures it perfectly. “No one has ever seen God,” its author writes, “[but] if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (4:12).

Today we conclude our three-part series on the Song of Songs, a love poem that may have never made it into our lectionary, but at least, thank God, made it into our Bible.

Amen.

# Hymn of the Day

# Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

st. 1, 2, 3

ELW 631

1 Love di - vine, all loves ex - cel - ling, Joy of heav'n, to  
2 Breathe, oh, breathe thy lov - ing Spir - it in - to ev - 'ry  
3 Come, Al - might - y, to de - liv - er; let us all thy  
4 Fin - ish then thy new cre - a - tion, pure and spot - less

earth come down! Fix in us thy hum - ble dwell - ing, all thy  
trou - bled breast; let us all in thee in - her - it; let us  
life re - ceive; sud - den - ly re - turn, and nev - er, nev - er -  
let us be; let us see thy great sal - va - tion per - fect -

faith - ful mer - cies crown. Je - sus, thou art all com - pas - sion,  
find thy prom - ised rest. Take a - way the love of sin - ning;  
more thy tem - ples leave. Thee we would be al - ways bless - ing,  
ly re - stored in thee! Changed from glo - ry in - to glo - ry,

pure, un - bound - ed love thou art; vis - it us with  
 Al - pha and O - me - ga be; end of faith, as  
 serve thee as thy hosts a - bove, pray, and praise thee  
 till in heav'n we take our place, till we cast our

thy sal - va - tion, en - ter ev - 'ry trem - bling heart.  
 its be - gin - ning, set our hearts at lib - er - ty.  
 with - out ceas - ing, glo - ry in thy per - fect love.  
 crowns be - fore thee, lost in won - der, love, and praise!

Text: Charles Wesley, 1707–1788  
 Music: HYFRYDOL, Rowland H. Prichard, 1811–1887

## Prayers of the Church

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

*A brief silence.*

**A:** God of hope, the ministry of your church extends across borders, from nearby neighbors to far and distant countries. Accompany all those who labor eagerly in service of the gospel, that through your good news all might experience transformation. Lord, in your mercy,

**G:** hear our prayer.

**A:** Almighty God, we give you thanks for the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land that provides our food. Guard all species of plants and animals from harsh changes in climate and empower us to protect all you have made. Lord, in your mercy,

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

**A:** Righteous God, we pray for nations and their leaders. Give them a spirit of compassion and steer them towards a fair distribution of resources; that none among us would have too much or too little. Lord, in your mercy,

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

**A:** God of healing, your touch has the power to make us whole. We pray for those suffering from physical or mental illness. Embrace those who are sick. Surround them with your unwavering presence. Lord, in your mercy,

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

**A:** We pray for this assembly and all those gathered together in worship. Revive our spirits, renew our relationships, and rekindle our faith, that we might experience resurrection in this community. 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:** We give thanks for the faithful ancestors in every age whose lives have pointed us towards you. Envelop them in your love, that we may be reunited with one another in the last days. 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.

**C**: **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.

**C**: **Amen.**

## Dismissal

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

**C**: **Thanks be to God.**

## Postlude

HYFRYDOL from *Three Preludes Founded on Welsh Hymn Tunes*  
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

### About today's music

The tune HYFRYDOL is of Welsh origin, meaning “delightful, beautiful, sweet, melodious” – an apt choice for a Sunday focusing on texts from the Song of Songs. Today's prelude on HYFRYDOL is one of Lutheran organist Paul Manz's (1919–2009) many sprightly hymn-based pieces, likely first improvised for worship and then later written down. Today's postlude, by the lauded English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), is the third of a collection of three pieces on Welsh tunes likely composed shortly after World War I. One writer describes this piece as “a very thick-textured setting of the tune (difficult to play, especially for those with small hands) above a constantly moving pedal part that romps over two octaves...”. This piece is new to me for today's service, and as I practiced, I found myself thinking of the piece's relentless momentum as a musical representation of the protagonist of the Song of Songs pursuing the beloved.

—Cantor Kyle



Queen Anne

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✧ *In Worship Today* ✧

Pastor	The Rev. Dr. Dan Peterson
Cantor	Kyle Haugen
Lector and Intercessor	Jacqui Darroch

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