

As I've been spending time in the Wisdom Books of Scripture over the past weeks, I've had a couple guiding thoughts in mind:

1. First, rather than focusing on a particular passage, I've tried to look at the book as a whole and wonder: what does the presence of this book in Scripture communicate to us about God and life with God? What can we glean from it?
2. Second, what wisdom do these books have for us specifically in terms of living with joy, hope, and peace, in the midst of a world that seems so broken?

I began with Ecclesiastes and how this book can communicate to us the wisdom of not ignoring the *hevel* in our world. Hevel meaning vapor and speaking to the insubstantiality, the transience, the absurdity, the brokenness that touches our lives on earth. So not ignoring this but acknowledging and accepting the reality that there is both brokenness *and* beauty in our earthly lives.

I then moved to Job and talked about an approach for when life metaphorically punches us in the face like it did Job. In Job we see that ultimately, he was unwilling to accept simplistic, spiritual platitudes or theology that did not hold up to his lived experience. He continued seeking the Great Mystery we call God, being open, curious, asking questions, wrestling with difficult realities.

Next was Psalms and I see in this book permission to embrace our humanity, to not feel the need to repress or deny our emotionality, even when it's messy. That there is room for our humanity, for our hard-to-accept emotions and that we follow a God who embraces us in our humanity.

Then was Proverbs where I talked about orienting ourselves toward God and toward wisdom, recognizing that life is a journey, growing in wisdom is a process, and that we can see God as a gracious and patient parent, teaching and guiding us and even delighting in us as we journey.

And today, the last sermon in this Wisdom Books series, I'll look at the Song of Songs. This strange, erotic book that is unlike anything else in Scripture. Why is a book of erotic poetry in the Bible? And what can its inclusion communicate to us about God and life with God? That's what I want to ponder.

Song of Songs

So the Song of Songs is a short book of love poetry from an ancient context that focuses on 2 main characters, a man and a woman in love. And given its ancient context, it is not surprising to me that the two main characters are a man and a woman and that the book is set within the framework of heterosexual love. But I think it important to explicitly mention that we *can* expand this beyond the heteronormative context and Song of Songs can speak to and apply to *everyone* regardless of gender, orientation, relationship status or relationship structure.

So this book focuses on these 2 lovers who go back and forth for 8 chapters, poetically and sensually declaring their love and passion and longing for the other. The book begins and ends with expressions of desire, beginning with: **“kiss me, touch me with your lips; your love tastes better than any wine.”** (1.2 TIB) and ending with: **“Come away, my beloved, and be like a**

gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountain.” (8.14). And in between there is more of the same:

- “Come, take me; carry me off like some wild desert chieftain to his tent” 1.4 TIB
- “Like an apple tree among the wild trees, so is my lover among the young men. In his shade I take pleasure in sitting, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. He has brought me to the house of wine; his banner raised over me is love.” 2.3-4 CEB
- “Come, my love: Let’s go out to the field and rest all night among the flowering henna. Let’s set out early for the vineyards. We will see if the vines have budded and the blossoms opened, see if the pomegranates have bloomed. There I’ll give my loving to you.” 7.11-12 CEB
- “You have captured my heart...my bride! You have captured my heart with one glance from your eyes, with one strand of your necklace. How beautiful is your loving...my bride! Your loving is so much better than wine, and your fragrance better than any perfume! Sweetness drops from your lips” (4.9-11)

On and on they go declaring their love and desire for each other. And I’ll note that there is a mutuality emphasized in Song of Songs that should subvert patriarchal frameworks and serve as a model of mutuality in intimacy (Enns). So the book is this back and forth between lovers and is highly erotic and sensual.

That said, I also want to mention that the Song of Songs *has* been handled differently at different times by different people. The plain meaning seems to be about 2 lovers delighting in each other but over history many have also looked at this book as an allegory describing the love between God and the people of Israel, or between the Christ and the Church. And I think it’s possible and good to look at the book through different lenses, to see multiple layers of meaning. For our purposes today though, I focus on the plainer reading of the book as erotic poetry describing the love between the characters. So now that we have an idea of what this book includes and is about, what can it teach us? What can it communicate to us today in our context? And is there wisdom here to glean in terms of how we can live with hope, joy, and peace in the midst of a broken world?

What Can Song of Songs Teach Us?

In sitting with this text what comes through for me centers on the role of pleasure, even sexual pleasure, in our lives and in our spirituality.

1. Pleasure is good and ‘of God’

The first thing I will mention is that I think the inclusion of the Song of Songs in scripture and what we see in it, communicates to us that *pleasure and desire are good*. It is something that is ‘of God’ or ‘from God’ or however we want to put it to mean that God is pro-pleasure, the Creator of pleasure.

Christine Gudorf, in her book ‘Body, Sex, and Pleasure’ talks about pleasure, even sexual pleasure, being a “pre-moral good” (p. 90). This is to say that pleasure, in and of itself, is ordinarily a good before we, in her words, “morally evaluate its role in any particular situation.”

(p. 114). So before we discern whether a specific situation or action is morally good or not, we begin with the understanding that pleasure itself is *not* immoral but is fundamentally good. Then we can go on from there to discern whether a person's actions in *pursuing* pleasure are morally good or not. But we start with the foundational understanding that pleasure is good even if we sometimes misuse or abuse it (Gudorf, p. 114).

So I see in the Song of Songs permission to embrace pleasure as good, to celebrate and delight in our humanity, our physicality, our sexuality. Pete Enns states that the Song of Songs reminds us that "being human is not a problem to solve. Our bodies, emotions, and longings are not things to apologize for. They're part of God's good creation."

There is an article I have kept with me for years from theologian Dorothy Lee entitled "Pleasure: A Biblical Perspective." I've printed some copies of it for anyone interested, they are in the foyer. But in it she states, "We need to discover anew in scripture the God who is the creator of joy and the giver of joyful gifts." (p. 21) and later, "The pleasures of our daily lives--eating, drinking and sexuality--are gifts of God which are to be received with the same joy and freedom in which they are given. Pleasure and play are not antithetical to God. They are part of God's nature revealed in Jesus and communicated to us through the Spirit of joy and love." (p. 30).

I believe Song of Songs communicates to us that pleasure is good and something to be enjoyed and celebrated. Not something to be avoided or feared which brings me to my next point.

2. Rejecting pleasure is perhaps equally an abuse as is misusing/overusing

I think it accurate to say that rejecting God's good gifts and pleasure is perhaps equally a distortion of God's intention as is abusing those gifts. I will again point to Dorothy Lee who says that Christ-Followers "have sometimes preferred the role of moral guardian and been more concerned to stem the abuse than to facilitate the enjoyment of God's gifts." (p. 19). And she clarifies that it isn't that taking ethics seriously or that campaigning against abuses is wrong but just that we should understand that "there are more ways than one of distorting God's gifts." (p. 20). She says, "God's gifts are equally 'abused' through neglect and fear. Moreover, a theology of pleasure challenges forms of spirituality which identify God only in suffering and painful human experience. Alongside this latter perspective, we need to develop a spirituality which sees play and pleasure as equally God-revealing. In the pleasures of eating and drinking, in the joy of sexual passion, we need to discover the God who is joyful and extravagant, the God of play and passion, the God of love and celebration. Our caution and timidity, as much as our moralism and hypocrisy, need to be challenged by such a spirituality. Where God's gifts are neglected out of fear and mistrust, God's own generous and life-giving self is neglected. We end up with a distorted image of God and a narrow, self-limiting understanding of human life." (p. 29)

This is all to say that we as Christ-Followers have sometimes seen the abuses of pleasure and God's good gifts in the world and have swung the pendulum too far the other way where we neglect and avoid enjoying God's gifts out of fear, we may over-indulge in or abuse them. We can overcompensate and overemphasize the reality of suffering and struggle which are indeed part of life and part of the spiritual journey of following the Christ, but are not the only part. And so the presence of the Song of Songs in scripture is an important reminder of the value of

pleasure. Pete Enns says it well, “The Song insists on delight in the midst of a canon that often leans heavy on struggle, lament, and moral instruction.”

3. Part of the ‘mission’ of God and our responsibility as ambassadors is to reveal God as the Creator of pleasure

And the last related point I want to speak to here is that I think the Song of Songs and the value of pleasure that we can see in it, can speak to our role in the world as Ambassadors and representatives of the Christ. This is the terminology used in 2 Corinthians 5:20. Christ-Followers reveal God to the world. So if we believe that God is pro-pleasure, that love and desire and sexuality are good gifts from God to be embraced...this should impact how we show up and reveal God in the world.

What I mean is described by Dorothy Lee again, who says, “We are called to present God to the world, not only as an ethical being who stands over against all forms of human oppression and all distortions of creation, but also as an extravagant, joyful being, who stands for passion and intimacy which is joyful, self-affirming and self-giving. We need to be careful of presenting only God the moralist, the ascetic, the puritan, without giving a thought to God the lover and giver of abundant life.” (pp. 29-30).

She seems to make the point that God is not only anti-oppression but also pro-pleasure and this can be embraced in our lives. And I would suggest that these go hand in hand and that justice and pleasure can be connected. Author Adrienne Maree Brown wrote a book called ‘Pleasure Activism.’ In it she argues that pleasure and activism (or the pursuit of justice) go together. She states, “**Pleasure** is a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment. **Activism** consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society. **Pleasure activism** is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy. Pleasure activism asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this.” (Brown, p. 13).

I see in Brown’s writing the recognition, as I have spoken to before, that love for others and love for self are interconnected. That our personal flourishing is tied in with the flourishing of others. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors *as* ourselves (Matt. 22:39) I see in this not just a command to live out but also a recognition that there is an intricate connection between the two, between loving others and ourselves. That we are better able to love others when we love ourselves and one contributes to the other. And so the pursuit of pleasure and joy, the celebration of God’s good gifts, is part of our pursuit of justice for the world. Brown also states, “I have seen, over and over, the connection between tuning into what brings aliveness into our systems and being able to access personal, relational and communal power. Conversely, I have seen how denying our full, complex selves—denying our aliveness and our needs as living, sensual beings—increases the chance that we will be at odds with ourselves, our loved ones, our coworkers, and our neighbors on this planet.” (Brown, p. 6). Or, put even more simply by her: “When I am happy, it is good for the world.” (Brown, p. 14).

Now, of course this idea can be misused. Some will see in these words a justification to not care about anyone else and simply pursue their own pleasure at the expense of anyone around them. But just because these words or this idea can be manipulated or abused doesn't make it wrong. Love for others and love for self, I believe, go hand in hand. Justice for others and our own well-being are tied together. We are all in this together as one interconnected Community of Creation seeking God's Shalom for all.

So Song of Songs, this strange, sensual, erotic book in the Bible that seems to celebrate overt and intense sexual passion between lovers can be an important contribution to our theology, to our understanding of God, to our understanding of our role as Ambassadors of the Christ in the world. It can communicate to us that pleasure is God's design and part of what God invites us to experience ourselves and contend for in the lives of others. Yes, suffering and struggle is part of the human experience in this life and part of our faith journeys. But so too is joy and pleasure. There is both brokenness *and* beauty in our earthly lives, struggle *and* joy, pain *and* pleasure. But as we go about our lives in a world where it is easy to focus on the brokenness, where it can be difficult to hold onto hope and joy, let us remember the wisdom of the Song of Songs and that part of God's invitation to us is to feel the freedom to embrace joy and pleasure and to work towards a future where all members of our Community of Creation can experience the joy that Creator offers.

Benediction:

The Wisdom Writings of Scripture: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, comprise a unique section of scripture. These books provide a realistic view of life in a broken world but also remind us of the beauty inherent in creation, in ourselves, in life. As you go from this place I invite you to look for the many ways God has imbued your life with beauty, joy, and pleasure. May you experience God as the Giver of every good and perfect gift. Go in peace to discover anew the God of pleasure.

Readings:

1. Song of Songs 1:1-4 and 8:6-7
2. Song of Songs 2:1-7

Resources:

Brown, Adrienne Maree. (2019). *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press.

Enns, Pete. Pete Ruins Song of Songs. The Bible for Normal People podcast. [\[Bible\] Episode 313: Pete Enns - Pete Ruins Song of Songs](#)

Gudorf, Christine E. 1994. *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics*. The Pilgrim Press.

Lee, Dorothy A. *Pleasure: A Biblical Perspective*. Pp. 19-33