

Sought By An Exuberant God

A sermon on Song of Solomon 2:8-13 and James 1: 17-27

*Let's take a moment and be still together
in the presence of the God
in whom we live, move and have our being,
Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word.
Silence in us any voice but your own,
that, hearing, we may also obey your will
May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight
O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

Have you ever noticed that your mind interprets everything going on around you as reflecting what's going on within you?

Just this week I was in the car and this song was on
- Jim Reeves' "Look Behind You, I'll be There."
And I was listening to the lyrics,

*If you ever change your mind
And you find that you still care
It won't be to hard to find me
Look behind you I'll be there*

I immediately hear the song resounding with such clear precision
an expression of God's love for us and presence in our lives,
even his respect for our choices in going astray
while still always ready to welcome us back.

And the next verse

*When your bright light starts to dim
And your thought return to me
If you're really through with him, dear
Look behind you there I'll be*

And I'm starting to wonder who this "him" is,
but the imagery with the Lights and remembering the light,
it all still seemed very much like the sentiments of God

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and then there's the third verse:

*Like a story with no ending
Like a song that's never through
There's no use in my pretending
I'm lost without you*

And all of a sudden I realized that I had been reading all that God-stuff into this song, because while that's very expressive of the human side of the relationship, I don't think that God is necessarily "lost" without us. Anyhow, that's the interpretive lens you look through when you spend your time immersed in books of spiritual writings.

Jim Reeves may not have had quite the same situation in mind in writing that song, but when it comes to the God part, I don't think I'm so far off. The first reading this morning from was from Song of Solomon which is usually classified as love poetry if not erotica. Well, ancient erotica, some bits don't translate that well into the twenty-first century.

The point is that it is in the Bible, though literally about two lovers in pursuit of one another, it's in the Bible because it is also about God and us.

Another, better, preacher could probably better explain how our human love and marriage in particular is the icon, the microcosm, the symbolic reality of how God relates to his beloved creatures, and how we can know him and experience him more fully through playing that out in miniature. I can tell you is that I'm sure that exists, I know it does if I believe the consensus of all those spiritual masters I read. But I don't exactly have a lot of experience in that area.

I can also tell you that as a metaphor it is not perfect, and it is far from the only relationship that can tell us more about God.

The relationship that jumped out to me was that of man and dog.

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C. S. Lewis brilliantly illustrates how dogs are to us what we are to God, going into how dogs can be hard to love until they've had a bath and been house-trained, and learn to sit and stay, but how people gladly put their dogs through such things because they love them and want to live together with them harmoniously. It's a beautiful metaphor if you're dog person.

But I also can see God as a dog in certain ways -
one way anyway that the reading from Song of Songs calls to mind.

All too recently, my family has lost a couple of beloved family pets.
First our little pug dog passed away on Mother's day, May 13,
then my brother's boxer mix on July 20th.
And in some measure of consolation,
the vets provided us with a copy of the "Rainbow Bridge,"
this poem telling of doggie heaven.
The last couple of stanzas happily report that:

*The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing;
they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.
They all run and play together,
but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance.
His bright eyes are intent. His eager body quivers.
Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass,
his legs carrying him faster and faster.
You have been spotted,
and when you and your special friend finally meet,
you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again.
The happy kisses rain upon your face;
your hands again caress the beloved head,
and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet,
so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.
Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together.*

And when I hear the reading from Song of Solomon,
that the worship leader just read,
that is the very image I have in mind.

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The text compares the beloved with a deer bounding through the fields,
eyeing you through the window,
but I just see I a wagging tail
bounding towards it's master and best friend,
begging with an expression that says,
"Let's go for a walk!"
For there are figs that need to be sniffed,
and he wants to share them with us.
And that's God.
God who knows and recognizes you,
runs to meet you, and invites you to go on with him.
For there are buds on the fig trees to see,
the singing of birds to hear,
and the grapevines smell really good.

Can you imagine greeting God like that?
Could you imagine God greeting you like that?

Often in Sunday School we'll tell the kids how great God is,
how he is better than all of our favorite things.
Even better than pizza.
I know, it's hard to believe.

What I find harder to believe is that God thinks the same of us.
Well, perhaps not that we're better,
but more desirable than all else.
He loves us.
He loves us with the excitement and anticipation
of a dog jumping joyfully at the promise of a walk.
And you're invited to go along on that joyful walk:
"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

Going on that walk with God shouldn't be taken lightly.
This relationship God wants to have with us can be
... intense ... even as it can even be rewarding.

The New Testament lesson I read a couple of minutes ago
tells us even more about what sort of a thing it is to be Christian.

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James was one of the early Christians,
and wrote this letter to be distributed to various other Christian communities
way back in the year 48 (nineteen hundred and seventy years ago).
One of the chief things James is trying to get across to his fellow believers
is something that Christians have struggled with for centuries.
How our actions and God's actions work together.

God gives good gifts.

James had been talking about this just a few lines
before where we pick up this morning.
He says "let no one say when he is tempted
'I am tempted by God;'
for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one;
but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."

James insists that whatever comes from God is good,
and God should not be blamed when things go wrong.
For God does not wish evils on anyone
but can use all situations to further his purposes.
James actually says that you should
"count it all joy...when you meet various trials,
for you know the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."

God gives good things,
and even trials are meant to strengthen and to teach.
And to teach through experience, as well as through listening.
James exhorts us to be doers and not just hearers.
It doesn't work so well to just listen, even,
I'd say especially, if you agree with what is taught.

If there is that disconnect between what you believe and how you live
you'll end up just hating yourself.
Happiness and self-worth come from acting
like the sort of person you would want to be.

But it starts with hearing,
and James urges Christians to be quick to hear,
but slow to speak and slow to anger -

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both of which would impede the hearing.
It's hard to listen when angry.

The ancient Christian commentaries heavily emphasize
or rather clarify the words James gives about anger.

Righteous anger can be a thing,
but even when anger seems justified it can be spiritually dangerous.
In other words, you may well have good reason to be angry,
but that doesn't make it good for you.

Still, slow to anger does not mean never angry -
The idea instead is not to be controlled by anger.

Gregory the Great puts it this way:

*"A diseased mind has no control over its own judgement,
it thinks that whatever anger suggests must be right...
we must be careful when we get angry not to let it develop
into an uncontrollable fury"*

For whatever its worth, Evagrius- and Egyptian monk from the 300s -
in explaining how to deal with troublesome thoughts
advises getting angry at the thought,
or at the demon who gave you the thought,
first before even praying or talking back to the thought.
That would be anger used properly.

What it comes down to is that in our relationship with God,
we strive to be like him, especially as exemplified in the life of Christ.

This is not an angry God of wrath that James speaks of, but a God of light,
who spreads that Light generously towards us to draw us back to himself.
Once again, we see a God who *likes* these human creatures He made.

Who is eager to be close to us,
should we decide we want such closeness.

James is speaking to fellow Christians and so assumes this is the case.

But as St. Augustine said:

*"Neither I nor any other preacher can see into your hearts...but God is looking.
Standing behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice."*

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Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.