

Holding On For Dear Life
Song of Solomon Chapters 7 and 8 (selected verses)
Luke 10:38-42

Focus: Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.
For love is stronger than death, fiercer than the grave.—Song of Solomon 8:6

Do not ask, Reader, how my blood ran cold and my voice choked with fear. I cannot write it: this is a terror that cannot be told. I did not die, and yet I lost life's breath . . .

“Hold fast,” my Guide said, “there is no way but by such stairs to rise above such evil.—Dante, *The Inferno*, Canto XXXIV.

First Scripture Lesson: Song of Solomon 7 and 8 (selected verses)

Our first Scripture Lesson, from the Old Testament, is from the Song of Solomon, also known as “The Song of Songs,” which means something like, “The Poem of All Poems.”

But despite that lofty title, you don't hear it read from in church much—except at weddings. And that's because it's a love song, actually a series of interrelated, alternating love songs, celebrating human romantic love, in this case, the love of a man and a woman, who take turns celebrating each other, as well as their love and desire for each other.

So when it's read at weddings, I can sometimes see the surprise on the faces of the bridal party: first, the widening eyes, then the sidelong glances; and then the barely suppressed smiles and giggles. The language is metaphorical, but still, you know what they're talking about in a PG-13 sort of way.

Sometimes, later, if I'm invited to the reception, a member of the wedding party, having already made a couple of trips to the bar, will come over to me:

“Er, excuse me, that reading? That reading from the Song of . . .”

“The Song of Songs.”

“Yeah, I mean what's *that* about? I mean . . . I guess I know what it's about, but what's it doing in the Bible?”

To which I've been known to reply, “Well, the church for centuries has seen it as a metaphor for the love between Jesus and us.”

Thereupon, looking like a wet blanket has just fallen on his head directly from heaven, he turns on a dime and heads back to the bar.

Now, I ask you: is it any wonder I don't get invited to more wedding receptions? I mean, it's true and all, but did *that* have to be the *first* thing out of my mouth?

I could have said, "Yes, it's beautiful isn't it? It celebrates the beauty and goodness and joy of human love—all forms of human love. And by the way, don't the bride and groom look beautiful over there? You know all forms of human love are a reflection of, and have a share in, God's love." And maybe *then* I could have slipped it in: "So for centuries the church has seen it as a metaphor for the love between Jesus and us."

Oh well: no matter what the church says, or what I have said, through the centuries: it *is* a love song, and it celebrates human romantic love; so it's got that crazy, you're-all-I-can-think-about, dream-about, sing-and-shout-about, I-want-to-hold-on-to-you-for-dear-life, for-your-dear-life, for-my-whole-life, forever-and-ever, crazy, wonderful hyper-focus of being in love.

Listen to what the man says to the woman in Chapter 7:

How graceful are your feet in sandals,
O queenly maiden!
Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
the work of a master hand.

Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon,
by the gate of Bath-rabbim.

O loved one, You are stately as a palm tree,
I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
and the scent of your breath will be like apples,
and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.

And when it comes to the I-want-to-hold-on-to-you-for-my-whole-life-for-forever-crazy, the woman can give as good as she gets. Listen:

I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.
Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.

There I will give you my love.
O my beloved.

O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me!

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.
For love is stronger than death, fiercer than the grave.

Second Scripture Lesson Luke: 10:38-42

Our Second Scripture Lesson, from the New Testament, also poses a challenge for reading in church but for very different reasons.

We've all felt put upon at times, like we're carrying more than our share of the load, doing more than our share of the work, while others are getting a free-ride. It happens in the church too. And it doesn't seem fair. And sometimes, when people hear this story, it sounds as if Jesus doesn't care at all about that unfairness, in fact, even endorses it.

But that's not true. This isn't a story about the distribution of work-load—fair or unfair. It's a story about what's most important and what we should be focusing on. The work will get done, one way or another, and we can do it as best we can, together. But we can't let it, or anything else, distract us from what's most important, what we should hold on to above all else.

As I read, see if you can hear it that way. Luke 10:38-42:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; [but] there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Sermon: Holding On For Dear Life

We've been going through hell lately. In Bucket-List Books, that is, and actually, it's been kind of fun.

Bucket-List Books is the on-Zoom reading group we started during the pandemic in which we read all those books—those big, thick books—that you've always wanted to read, always said you were going to read someday, but somehow never found the time or the motivation to read. So, with the pandemic giving us the time, and the group the motivation—not to mention the encouragement, insight and fun—there you have it: *Bucket-List Books!*

And as you may know, or may have guessed: over the past several weeks we've been reading Dante's *Inferno*.

Dating from the early 1300's, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, is an epic poem (right up there with Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*) not only written in Italian, but that makes Italian Italian, that is, establishes Italian not as mere vernacular variant of Latin, but as a language in its own right: earthy, eloquent, rhythmic, rhyming, soaring.

It opens in the middle of things, with Dante in the midst of one of literature's most famous—and ultimately, most fruitful—mid-life crises:

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself in a dark wood—so dreary, so rank, so arduous a wilderness! How I came to it I cannot rightly say when I first wandered from the True Way.

But it looks like there's a way out: a road rises in front of him. He can see it . . . **BUT** he can't take it: ferocious beasts—a leopard, a lion, a wolf—block his way. And so: terror and despair.

But then who should show up but the ancient Roman poet, Virgil? Or rather, the shade or the spirit of the ancient Roman poet Virgil, who says to Dante: "I have been sent by heaven, I *can* get you out of here, but we have to go down before we can go up."

And so they go down through hell, and then up through Purgatory to Paradise. Hence, *The Divine Comedy*: *comedy* because, ultimately, a happy ending; *divine*, because ultimately authored by God and ending in vision of, and union with, God.

But along the way, before they get there, and especially on the journey through hell, Virgil proves to be not just Dante's tour guide but also his traveling companion, friend, teacher, mentor, and spiritual director; and even more, his protector, his rescuer, and his deliverer.

And in Bucket-List Books, that was fun.

It's kind of like an Indiana-Jones or Harry-Potter movie: yes, it's scary: there's darkness and dangers, perils and pitfalls, terrifying manifestations of evil: giants, monsters, demons, and yes, snakes. But there's also excitement: things happen, sudden, unexpected, amazing things, and our heroes face it, face it all—and sometimes run from it—as best they can. It's an adventure, and well, it's fun—a good story.

And through it all, Dante holds on to Virgil for dear life.

At one point they're stuck: a bridge is out (apparently this happens in hell as well as here on earth) and these awful winged demons are hot on their heels. So Virgil says to Dante, "Hold on to me":

Seizing me instantly like a mother wakened by a midnight noise takes her child in her arms, my Guide and Master bore me on his breast, as if I were not a companion but a son.

And so together, with Virgil acting as the toboggan, they slide down—"faster than water through the narrowest sluice"—down the steep, deep, devastated ravine, down to the next circle of hell.

And later, to get to the lowest circle of hell, they have to catch a ride in the hand of one of the gruesome giants that stand as a kind of fence around that level. Virgil says to the paralyzed-with-fear, Dante:

"Come and I will hold you safe."

And so Dante tells us: "And he took me in his arms and held me clasped."

And once they reach the lowest circle of hell, to get out of there, and to get out of hell altogether, they have to climb over the enormous body (far bigger than that of the giants) of the six-winged, three-faced,

eternally sinner-chomping Satan who stands frozen in a lake of ice (yes, ice, the deepest depth of hell is a frozen wasteland, another brilliant touch on Dante's part).

"A terror," Dante says, "that cannot be told. I did not die, and yet I lost life's breath" . . . So Dante clasps Virgil around his neck:

"Hold fast," Virgil says to him, "there is no way but by such stairs to rise above such evil."

And through the long, laborious, exhausting climb, Dante holds on to Virgil for dear life, or rather, Virgil holds on to Dante for *his* dear life. And then at last: "a sight more wonderful than anything—some of the loveliness revealed to men by heaven—we could see the stars again."

They could see the stars again. And *we* can see Dante and Virgil's love as a metaphor for the love between Jesus and us: He is our traveling companion, friend, teacher, mentor, and spiritual director; and even more, our protector, our rescuer, and our deliverer.

And that is what Jesus is saying to Martha: "Hold on to *me* for dear life."

He says this to her, not because he doesn't care about the kitchen work or who does it, or what's fair or unfair, but because *she's* worried and distracted by it—distracted by the busyness of everyday life—to the point where she can no longer see what's important, which is *his* being there. And yes, of course, the mundane, day-to-day tasks are also important; it's important that they get done, and be done fairly and well. But they're not the most important thing.

What is the most important thing then, you ask?

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Again, what is the most important?

One of the scribes came near and asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. '

And the second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.'

All true, but it's easy to get worried and distracted, to direct our best energy, our hearts, our love—our first love, our true love—to other things, and so lose sight of the most important things.

Of course, the everyday tasks of life don't have to be—in fact, shouldn't be—a distraction. They can—and should be—as God intended them to be—done for the glory of God and the good of all. In doing the everyday tasks of life, our hearts, our love, our first and our true love, *can* and should be directed to God and neighbor.

And if you want to see what this looks like . . . Well, it happens in lots of different places and lots of different ways, more than I can possibly name or imagine, including here in the church: Go downstairs and watch John Gummel and his kitchen crew in action or John or Brent or Jason or Rachel or Holly rehearsing their choirs or Jenne and Mary and the whole ID Ministry crew doing their thing—there, and in many, many other places, you can see everyday things done for the glory of God and the good of all.

But it's all too easy to get distracted: to lose sight of what's most important. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; [but] there is need of only one thing."

And it's not just the everyday *tasks* of life. An even more insidious distraction is the distraction of our everyday selves. It's all too easy to become pre-occupied with ourselves—what we want, how we can get it, and how we are perceived—it's all too easy to become so self-absorbed that we no longer see what's really important:

"Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out all the glory of the world and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self." (George Eliot, *Middlemarch*)

And so we become captive to our own accustomed way of looking at things and lose sight of the truth. We become preoccupied with our own well-being, or what we take to be our own well-being—our own comfort status, power, and reputation—at the expense of our neighbors and everyone else.

And the inevitable result of all such distraction, sooner or later, is our own dissatisfaction ("Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in you") and our own loss: ("Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her").

Or, as Dante put it, "so dreary, so rank, so arduous a wilderness . . . I woke to find myself in a dark wood—How I came to it I cannot rightly say when I first wandered from the True Way

But those last words, "I woke to find myself" point to one possible benefit of a crisis, any crisis, mid-life or otherwise, individual or collective. A crisis *can* wake us up, wake us up to how we've been living our lives for far too long, wake us up to how we've misdirected our love, and how it has left us feeling dissatisfied and lost. A crisis can reveal our hearts to us—and perhaps, God willing, it can also change them.

For example, look at the present crisis—the trying and troubling times—in our public and political life: What does it show us about ourselves, and the orientation of our hearts?

Which is our first love, our true love: the truth **OR** our own way of looking at things, as reinforced by our biases, media habits and political, cultural and tribal predilections?

Which is our first love, our true love—our neighbor **OR** what we take to be our own well-being—our own comfort status, power, reputation, and self-image—with no regard for our neighbor or anyone else?

Which is our first love, our true love?—Justice, kindness, and humility, **OR** Getting our own way, and sticking it to others if for no other reason than our own self-aggrandizement?

Look at the present crisis in our public and political life: what do you see? I have to tell you, at times, it looks to me like we're going through hell, and it's not much fun. And we too are facing our monsters and our demons—to name only a few, arrogance and sloth; fear and despair.

That we can no longer attend public events, even Fourth of July celebrations, safely; that our children must go to school in armed fortresses; that we are no longer capable of self-government—to accept these lies and others like them is to fall into the hands of an arrogance that says we know the way things really are, and a sloth that keeps us from thinking they might be otherwise. To accept these lies and others like them is to fall victim to a resignation that says that things will be this way forever and a despair that says they cannot be otherwise.

But we are not alone in facing these monsters and demons: As a mother wakened by a midnight noise takes her child in her arms, so our Guide and Master bears us on his breast, as children. “Come and I will hold you safe.”

“Hold fast,” he says to us, “there is no way but by such stairs to rise above such evil.”

Things might, and can, and should be otherwise. God willing, we can change.

Which is why *The Song of Songs* speaks to us. The lovers’ love is a metaphor for the love between Jesus and us. And the words of the Song of Songs promise the ultimate and eternal fulfillment of that love—in joy.

*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.
For love is stronger than death, fiercer than the grave.*

And if an ultimate and eternal fulfillment of that love in joy is bound to be, then a partial, proximate, fulfillment here and now is possible. In other words, God is with us here and now, and we can do better. God willing, we can change.

But sometimes you have to go down before you can go up. And in those times of crisis, as we seek to escape the dangers all around us and to breathe in again life’s breath, Jesus says to us the same thing that Virgil said to Dante, and the same thing that he said to Martha: “Hold on to me for dear life, and I will hold on to you for your dear life.”

Hold on: We will see the stars again.

And one of the best ways I know to hold on, as well as to stay focused on what’s most important, and not get distracted, is prayer. So will you pray with me?

Gracious Lord, our traveling companion, friend, teacher, mentor, and spiritual director; our protector, our rescuer, and our deliverer, save us from the evils around us, and hold on to us for our lives as we hold on to you for our dear life. Amen.