Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and guide our will, that we may walk in your ways, today and always. Amen.

“The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands, behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.’”

Those lines are from Song of Songs, a collection of love poems about a young man and woman pursuing each other through flowery meadows and lush valleys. Song of Songs has been called racy, steamy, erotic. It contains zero references to God. If we’re being honest, we might wonder why it’s even in the Bible.

I’ve got a theory—about the Bible and Song of Songs’s place in it. Let’s start with the Bible part.

On one hand, the Bible is not one book. It’s a library of books containing many different genres or categories of literature. The books in that library do not speak with one unified voice. Rather than offering internal consistency, the Bible offers a variety of perspectives. Think of it this way: the books in the Bible are in conversation with each other and sometimes in *tension* with each other. (By the way, this view of the Bible is not my original opinion. It represents a common view among theologians who are not fundamentalists. Now let’s turn to my theory.) . . .

Instead of thinking about the Bible as a library, what if we thought about it as an album—an album of love songs? This album features a couple of recurring characters: humanity as the fickle, inconstant lovers; and God as the heartbroken but steadfast one, offering to take us back, again and again. Sometimes we *do* get back together . . . but then the humans wander away again, and God resumes the vigil of the jilted, waiting by our window, singing the next song.

If you buy my theory—if you think of the Bible as an album of love songs from God to us . . . then the Song of Songs is the Bibliest of all the books. Yes, I made up that word: the Bibliest of all the books.

Song of Songs takes the emotional truth of the Bible and draws it up to the surface: love is the spiritual force that powers the universe. (Repeat: Love is the spiritual force that powers the universe.) Here’s one way to think about that power, according to James Finley, a faculty member at the Center for Action and Contemplation: God loves us into being. If, at the count of three, God would cease loving us, we would disappear. If, at the count of three, God would cease loving the universe into existence, the universe would disappear. All of life is the love song that God sings. So of course our Bible should have a book that is an ode to love.

Song of Songs also answers the profound question that runs through the Bible and any life of faith, *What does God want?* Connection, says the poet. Deep relationship. “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

“Arise”—I love that word, especially when God uses it to raise someone from the dead. For example, see the passage in Luke where Jesus brings the widow’s son back to life. “When the Lord saw [the widow], he was moved with compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not cry.’ Then he came forward and touched the casket and the bearers stopped.” (What a pregnant moment that must have been. Can you imagine?) And Jesus said . . . ‘Young man, I say to you, arise!’”

Or see Acts 9:14, when Peter raises the disciple named Tabitha. “Peter put all [the grieving widows] outside and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, ‘Tabitha, arise.’ And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up.’

The word “arise” is not magic, of course. As Song of Songs shows us, it is an expression of love. I would say divine love is the magic, but that would be selling it short. Divine love is the miracle. Divine love is strong enough to overcome death—sometimes a physical death, but more often a spiritual death.

A spiritual death happens when you lose all hope. When you are . . . mired in misery. Sunk in the quicksand of shame, or bitterness, or self-hatred.

A spiritual death happens when you feel utterly alone, locked in the prison of self, and all you can think to do is lash yourself, like Paul in our epistle today. “[N]othing good dwells within me,” says Paul. “I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

In those lines, I hear desperation. Shame. I see a man who feels stuck and cannot see a way out . . . Some might call this a kind of death. Some might call this hell.

This makes me wonder about the speaker of the poem from Songs of Songs, this woman who has been waiting for her beloved. Before she hears his voice, I think she feels stuck, too. I can picture her sitting at a table, all gloomy, sighing, holding her chin in her hands. Her eyes are unfocused as she wanders the lonely halls of her mind, another kind of hell.

What makes me think of her this way? *The fact that her beloved gives her a weather report*: “The winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth” and so on with the vines and the fig trees and whatnot.

None of this should be news to her. She has *win*dows. So why *does* he give her a weather report? Because he senses that she has been sunk inside herself so deeply for so long, she doesn’t even realize the season has changed. Apparently, it has been spring for a *while*, but until she hears the voice of her beloved, she has been hibernating in the winter of her spirit . . . the prison of her self . . . the grave of her loneliness.

“Arise, my love”—at his voice, she looks up and sees that she is not alone. In the same way, Paul looks up from his self-flagellation at the end of our epistle to remember *he* is not alone. “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Here’s the thing about rescue: it almost never looks like God-as-firefighter, kicking in the smoldering door, slinging your unconscious body over his shoulder, and charging through the smoke into the sunshine. Rescue almost always looks like the Beloved at the window, calling softly to us, hoping we’ll look up.

As James Finley puts it: Love is never imposed; it’s always offered.

You might think of the offer as an invitation. Sometimes the invitation sounds like, “Arise and come away.” Sometimes it sounds like, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Your beloved knows what you need and sings the invitation that fits your heart.

Or you might think of the offer as a gift. Like an invitation, a gift only works when you accept it.

Frederick Buechner, theologian and writer, says, "the grace of God means something like: ‘Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It’s for you that I created the universe. I love you. There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it . . . Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too.”

There’s a saying about preaching, and it goes like this: Imagine that someone has slipped into the back of the church, and they are at the very end of their rope. What can you say that will save their life?

Talk about pressure. But it’s a good pressure, a clarifying pressure. In closing, here is what I want to say to the lost, the stuck, the desperate. Here is what I want to say to all of us with our fickle hearts: Don’t listen to me . . . Listen for the invitation. God is always at your window, even when you think you’re alone in the world; even now, God is singing to you, calling out that word of love and resurrection, the ever*last*ing offer of rescue: Arise.