

Song of Solomon 8:6-7  
"Love Is Strong As Death"  
April 17, 2022  
Pr. Josh Anderson  
Easter Sunday

Our sermon text this Easter Sunday in the year of Lord 2022 is found in Song of Solomon 8:6-7, though I'll also be making reference to our other readings this morning from John 11 and Romans 8.

Listen now to God's word as written by Solomon, who gives us this poetic account of the power of love over death.

*6 Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is strong as death,  
jealousy is fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
the very flame of the LORD.*

*7 Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.  
If a man offered for love  
all the wealth of his house,  
he would be utterly despised.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Let's pray...

Love is strong as death.

That's what the poet says in Solomon's song.

Love is as strong as death.

It's a lovely sentiment, a beautiful piece of poetry, so beautiful in fact, that it's one of the scripture passages that Ami and I chose to have read at our wedding 19 years ago, and perhaps some of you heard it read at your weddings as well.

But is this portion of the Scriptures just a lovely sentiment, just a nice piece of poetry, just a gratifying sentence to read at weddings to somehow try to communicate the power of love?

The problem with going around saying things like "*Love is strong as death*," is that our experience in this world seems to argue against its truth.

Because every time love comes up against the power of death it seems to lose.

Think of Adam and Eve, holding the broken body of their beloved son Abel in their arms.

Love is strong as death, Adam. Love is strong as death, Eve. What would they have said in response to that argument?

But we loved our son, they say. And now he is dead. So how is it that love is strong as death?

And the stories which complicate this piece of poetry continue, all throughout the Scriptures.

Think of the grief of Isaac at the death of his mother, Sarah.

Think of the tears of Jacob, when he buried the woman he loved, the woman he labored fourteen years for, his beloved wife, Rachel.

Think of David, lamenting and weeping at the death of his friend Jonathan.

Think of Jeremiah, weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem, and the death of so many of his loved ones, put to the sword by the Babylonians.

Again and again, we read stories where it seems as though love is not, in fact, as strong as death. Stories where death seems to triumph every time, no matter how deep the love, no matter how strong the affection.

I was personally confronted with this reality of the frailty of love in the face of death when my grandmother died and I traveled to Virginia to conduct her funeral.

My grandfather, who has now passed away as well, was a good man, a strong man, not given to outward displays of emotion. He was a combat veteran of World War II, and a man very much typical in every way of that remarkable generation of Americans.

I never asked Gramps this, but I suspect that he always assumed that he would go first to death, that he wouldn't be the one left behind by the woman that he loved.

But Parkinson's disease came for my grandmother, and it ravaged her body relentlessly until she died. And when she died, my grandfather was absolutely demolished by grief.

At the funeral home we had a few moments alone with my grandmother's body as a family before the service started and her casket was closed for the last time.

And all I can remember is my grandfather standing by the body of the woman he had loved and had been married to for 66 years, openly weeping, saying her name again and again, refusing to leave her side.

The love between my grandfather and my grandmother was one of the greatest love stories I have ever known, or will ever know.

They shared so much together - so many years, so much sorrow, so much laughter, so much love. And yet despite their love, in the end, there she was, dead, and there he was, weeping and alone.

So what does it mean that love is strong as death? What the Scriptures possibly mean by telling us such a thing in the face of so much grief, so much evidence to the contrary?

Well, it's just poetry, we might say. Poets will say anything, you know.

Maybe it's just something you say, a kind of platitude that speaks to the eternal power of love, the kind of thing you might find on a sympathy card.

It's wild you know, the kinds of things you find in sympathy cards. We'll say anything to try and fight back the horror of death.

One greeting card writer penned this quote designed to help men and women in their grief in the 1980s. Perhaps you've heard something like it.

It goes like this:

"Love lives on. Those we love are never really lost to us. We feel them in so many special ways—through friends they always cared about and dreams they left behind, in beauty that they added to our days, in words of wisdom we still carry with us, and memories that never will be gone. Those we love are never really lost to us—for everywhere their love lives on."

And then people put things like that on throw pillows and sympathy cards and little framed prints they hang on their walls.

I mean, maybe that's what Scriptures mean when they tell us that love is strong as death. Something like that.

Well, I hope not.

Because, I tell you, friends.

I don't want platitudes in the face of death. I don't want some vapid phrase like "love lives on" and "those we love are never really lost to us."

Because I have done too many funerals, I have buried too many people I love, I have seen too much death, I have shed too many tears, I have watched too many men and women weep inconsolably, including my own grandfather, to give them something like that to hold on to.

What I want is a love that is actually as strong as death.

I want a love that can raise the dead.

Because without that, friends, we are lost.

It seems to me that Solomon's poetic line, his statement, "*love is strong as death*," was hanging in the air when the Apostle John sat down to write the 11th chapter of his gospel, telling the story of Jesus for the generations to come.

You see John knew the Hebrew Scriptures. His gospel is full of allusions to the Old Testament.

And I think it is not unlikely that one of the reasons John recorded the story of Lazarus and Jesus is so that we would know what Solomon meant when he said "*love is strong as death*."

When John begins to tell his story, he wants to make sure that we understand that Jesus loved Lazarus - that he was his friend.

That Jesus knew this man's name. That he had shared meals with him, had laughed with him at table.

Lazarus was sick, John tells us, and his sisters sent word to Jesus, and their letter said this: *"Lord, the one whom you love is ill."*

And, as John tells us a few verses later, in case we have missed the point: *"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus."*

But Jesus, inexplicably tarried when he heard that Lazarus was ill. He did not hurry to his side to heal him. He waited, and after two days, he told his disciples those remarkable words, words we must remember when we think of our own death and the death of those whom we love.

Jesus said to his disciples: *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."*

Jesus was like this about death. It's not that he didn't grieve death's power. He famously wept for Lazarus when he saw Mary's tears for her bother.

But Jesus was also shockingly casual about death.

He once went into the house where a man and a woman were grieving possibly the most painful loss of all - the death of their child. He just went in, told everyone to stop crying, sat down next to the little girl's dead body, took her cold hand, and told her to wake up. And she did.

Another time, he interrupted a funeral procession - just walked out into the street, put his hand on the bier carrying the a man's body out for burial and made them stop for him and then said to the dead man, as though he thought the corpse could somehow still hear his voice: *"Young man, I say to you, arise."*

And Luke tells us that the dead man sat up and began to speak.

And so, when Jesus said to his disciples, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him,"* it wasn't out of character for him. That's how he often talked about death.

Indeed, Jesus was simply acting like he believed that what Solomon said was true. That Love was, in fact, as strong as death.

That wasn't just a bit of poetry in Jesus' mind. To say *"Love is strong as death"* wasn't a platitude for Jesus.

It wasn't something we should say to make ourselves feel better, because our loved ones continue on in our memories.

No, Jesus had no time for that kind of thing. He didn't want the memory of his love for Lazarus to continue on in his mind.

He wanted his friend, warm and breathing again. He wanted to see Lazarus' eyes light up and to feel Lazarus' arms around his neck.

And so Jesus went to Bethany to show us all that when Solomon wrote *"Love is strong as death"* a thousand years before that that was was Scripture. That was prophecy. That that incredible statement was absolutely true.

And, above all things, that those words were about him and the love that he had for every man and woman whom he had made his own.

*"I am the resurrection and the life,"* Jesus said to Martha, that's who I am.

And then he went with Martha and Mary, to the tomb.

And there, after the stone had been rolled away, Jesus stood outside and peered into the darkness of death. He did not flinch. He did not turn away.

No, he spoke the *name* of the man whom he loved, so that we would all know, beyond the shadow of a doubt that those words "*Love is strong as death,*" are no platitude for those who are loved by Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*"Lazarus,"* he cried out with a loud voice. *"Lazarus, come out."*

And Lazarus obeyed. He walked out of the tomb. He had fallen asleep, but Jesus had come to awaken him.

It was a glorious moment, a holy unveiling for all who had eyes to see that the words spoken by Solomon had been true, that they actually meant something, that death wasn't stronger than love after all.

Or at least that death might be stronger than most loves, but it was in no way stronger than the love of Jesus.

But then, not too much later, the one who had raised Lazarus from the dead was himself put in a tomb.

They killed him, you see.

This man who loved so fiercely, whose love had the power to triumph over death, to call his friends out of their graves.

They crucified him, nailed him to a cross and left him to die. And die he did. Just like every other man who ever lived.

And you would have been right to wonder, well, maybe love is strong as death isn't so true after all. Maybe it's just something people say.

But then, early on Sunday morning, a woman named Mary came to the garden where they had laid his corpse, only to find the tomb empty.



She was weeping. The tears were in her eyes. It was still mostly dark, the sun was just rising, and in the shadows she saw the form of a man.

“Where is he?” She said. “Do you know where they have taken him?”

And then, he said her name.

Just as he had done for his other friend at the tomb, weeks before. He spoke the name of this woman whom he loved.

“Mary,” he said. That’s all he said. But it was enough. She heard his voice, and she knew. She knew it was true.

*Love is strong as death,  
jealousy is fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
the very flame of the LORD.*

*Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.  
If a man offered for love  
all the wealth of his house,  
he would be utterly despised.*

And beloved, I am here this morning to declare to you that the words of the poet are in fact true.

There is one whose love is as strong as death, whose jealousy is as fierce as the grave.

There is one whose flashes of love are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.

There is one whose love many waters cannot quench, and neither can floods drown it. If a man offered all the wealth of his house for this man's love, he indeed would be utterly despised.

For the love of Jesus the Christ cannot be bought or sold, it can only be given and received.

For he is the firstborn of dead, he is before all things, in him all things hold together.

And he says to you, this Jesus who loves you with this kind of love says to you, even today:

*Fear not! I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*

That is what the man who loves you says.

And it is because of strength of this man's love, beloved, and the way that it is proved forever by his resurrection from the dead that the Apostle Paul would have the audacity to remember the poetry of Solomon and story of Lazarus and what happened in the garden with Mary on the first day of the week and then offer these words like a battle cry against all the darkness that has ever been:

*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Notice what Paul says there. He doesn't say that nothing, not even death, will be able to separate us from the love of God in some generic way.

No, he says that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that is because of the resurrection.

It is because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that no matter what comes, no matter who dies, no matter what we suffer, we can comfort ourselves with these words - which are not in any way platitudes - but a solemn promise verified by the risen body of Jesus himself:

*Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*For his Love is strong as death,  
His jealousy is fierce as the grave.  
the flashes of his love are flashes of fire,  
the very flame of the LORD.*

So do not be afraid, beloved.

For you are loved by one whose love is strong as death.

And he has made this promise to you:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*

And that means that no matter what happens, no matter how much you lose, no matter what you suffer, no matter what grave they put your body in, one day The Risen Christ will come to your tomb and he will call your name.

Just as he did for Lazarus. Just as he did for Mary.

His voice will speak your name. And you will live.

This day, we say:

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

But what we mean when we say those words is this:

There is a man whose love is as strong as death.

And that man has made me his beloved.

And one day, he will say my name. My name. He will say my name.

And I will live.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of Holy Spirit. Amen.