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## Introduction to Song of Songs

When God created the world, he established a space in which he could dwell with human beings—or rather, he created a sacred space in which human beings could dwell with him. As we know, something went terribly wrong, and the human beings were exiled from the garden. Thus began the long journey in which God set out to rescue humanity and return us to the Garden. God's desire has always been that we once again dwell with him.

And truly, God never left his people. Here are only some of the ways he assured them of his presence. When God made a covenant with Abraham, the flaming torch passed through the halves of the sacrificed animals. God guided the escaped slaves through the wilderness with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, and he protected them from Pharaoh's army. God was present in the cloud at the covenant ceremony with Moses. God's presence filled the Tent that was his Tabernacle, and then his presence filled the Temple too. But as things had gone wrong in the garden, so, too, they went wrong later for Israel. Israel was disobedient again and again. The Temple was destroyed, and Ezekiel saw the glory of God leave the Temple.

One way of reading the Song of Songs is as inspired reflection on the creation story in Genesis. With this perspective, we can understand that human beings are "sacred space." According to one scholar, the "third temple" God will create will somehow be within human beings. And of course, this vision for us is prefigured in Jesus.

In the fullness of time, Jesus, who is God, came to dwell with humanity. The church has long understood Jesus' body to be the Temple that would not be destroyed. At Pentecost, he poured out his Spirit on the Church and on each believer. At that moment, we too became the new Temple. Marriage imagery reveals the intimate nature of the sacred space where God and human beings dwell together.

God's love is passionate and personal. It is also the most powerful creative force in the cosmos. His love transforms ordinary married life and love into a sacred space, a space Pope Francis calls the "temple of marital communion" where God dwells.

"The Lord's presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes. Living in a family makes it hard for us to feign or lie; we cannot hide behind a mask. If that authenticity is inspired by love, then the Lord reigns there, with his joy and his peace. The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures. In that variety of gifts and encounters which deepen communion, God has his dwelling place. This mutual concern "brings together the human and the divine," for it is filled

with the love of God. In the end, marital spirituality is a spirituality of the bond in which divine love dwells.” *Amoris Laetitia* 314.

The following meditations on the Song of Songs invite us as married couples to enter into the world of love and symbol. Our ordinary lives, so full of regular ordinary stuff that is transformed by God’s grace, reveal to the world the beauty, wonder, creativity and healing power of God’s own life. We participate in the “love song” which is God’s song, his longing to be one with the bride on whom he has spent everything to win her for himself.

The famous Jewish rabbi Akiva (AD 40–137) said the Song of Songs is the holy of holies of religious literature because of the way it speaks of God’s love for his people as well as the love of a man and woman—the lover and his beloved.

As you would savor a fine wine or a sweet dessert, take your time with the selected passages and the meditations. Allow yourselves to move back and forth between your love for your spouse in all its delight and your relationship with the Lord as individuals and as a couple. Enjoy the dialogue between lovers. Delight in the language of physical beauty, sexuality, fullness of femininity and masculinity, gift of self, passion, and personal love. Allow yourselves to rekindle your own love for each other in all its richness—eros, agape, and friendship.