

“A Love that Saves”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
All Saints’ Day  
November 4, 2018

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Ruth 1:1-18  
Mark 12:28-32

Today I want to invite you on a journey, at least for a little while, with two women who would be worth traveling with for some time. Their names are Ruth and Naomi, and they are migrants. A migrant is a traveller who moves from place to place out of necessity. Ruth and Naomi travelled not only from Moab to Bethlehem, but also from emptiness to fullness, from bitterness to hope, and ultimately from death to life. By journeying with them for a bit this Sunday morning, I hope that we can gather with them some of what is needed to sustain us on our own difficult journeys.

The journey goes in two directions. We begin first in Bethlehem, a village in Judah. Bethlehem in Hebrew means “*House of Bread.*” Ironically, however, there is a famine in Bethlehem. The first tragedy of the story is needing to leave home because there is no food. So, Naomi and her husband Elimelech and their two sons must migrate to Moab to find food. In Moab, the second tragedy occurs: Naomi’s husband dies. Her sons find Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. Then, the next tragedy occurs: Naomi’s sons both die, and Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth are all left widows. Naomi figures there is nothing left for her in Moab, so she begins her journey back to Judah and Bethlehem, where she hears the famine has ended.

Strangely, despite all the tragedy that happens in the first 13 verses of Ruth, the tradition looks at this tiny book of the Bible as a testimony to hope, love, and faithfulness. How do we move from such a place of despair to a place of fullness?

Now our migrant journey begins. Let me remind you first that the word migrant, or the care and concern for migrants, is not a value that belongs to the Democratic party. It is not a value that belongs to the Republican party. Care and concern for the migrant is a deeply *biblical* value, which you hear repeated throughout the Torah, echoed in the words of the prophets, and evident in the interactions of Jesus. Let us be migrants too as we follow Ruth and Naomi from that place of despair to the place of fullness.

For any difficult journey, you need supplies. For those of you who immigrated to the United States, or for Americans who have lived in another country for any length of time, you know that there are the physical supplies that got you through in a strange land. When I studied for a semester in China, I know that my Sony Discman, a CD Walkman with headphones and a few favorite CD's got me through long, homesick nights spent puzzling over basic Chinese characters. But in addition to physical supplies that are necessary for a difficult journey, there are other things one needs that do not fit into a suitcase or a knapsack, but are carried in the heart.

### **What we need: Courage**

The first thing that the story of Ruth can teach us to carry on any difficult journey is courage. When Naomi set her face to return towards Judah, her widowed daughters-in-law began to follow her. Naomi instructed them to turn back, asking "Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?" Indeed, a widow in biblical times had neither income nor social standing, since both financial and social power came from their husbands. Orpah did as Naomi instructed, and returned to her mother's household where she could be cared for. It was the safe thing to do.

However, Ruth had courage in a future she could not yet see. She boldly bound herself to Naomi, traveling into an unknown future. Because Ruth

had courage, she was able to meet Naomi's emptiness with generosity. In verse 13, Naomi warns, "It has been far more bitter for me than for you." In fact, a couple verses later when the two arrive in Bethlehem, Naomi tells those who knew her long ago, "Call me no longer Naomi (which means 'Pleasant'), call me Mara (which in Hebrew means 'Bitter'), for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me." I imagine there are some of us in the congregation who have lived through grief who know how it feels to be *Mara*. But in the face of bitterness, Ruth has the courage to bring energy, her hope, and her companionship, even though she would enter Bethlehem even more vulnerable than Naomi; since Ruth was a young woman unattached to a man, she would have been an easy target for harassment. Added to that, Ruth's ethnicity as a Moabite would have marked her as an outsider in Judah. Although the Moabites were part of Abraham's extended family, it was believed that the Moabites descended from Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughters; because of that story, as well as arguments over territory, the people of Judah looked down on Moabites. Indeed, Ruth had to have great **courage** to make a journey such as this.

### **What we need: God**

"Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people now, and your God my God." In Ruth's speech to Naomi, she offers her trust in God-- even though to Ruth this is a foreign God. We can only wonder what made Ruth so willing to leave behind the gods of her family, to follow the one God whom Naomi worshiped. What did Ruth see in Naomi's practices of faith, prayer and praise of God? Or did Ruth perhaps see something in Naomi that reflected something of who this God was and is?

For any difficult journey we make, the power of having God journey with us can be the most important thing you can hold in your heart. I don't know about you, but sometimes I get frustrated with my own limitations. Whether as a pastor or as a parent, I am constantly humbled by the challenges I face each day. I know I cannot do it all. But when I carry God in my heart

on my journey, I am reminded that it does not all rest on my shoulders. Knowing God journeys with me helps me to dare the impossible, even when I know it is beyond the limitations of what I myself can do. By carrying God in my heart, I know that God will sometimes carry *me* when I am weary and heavy-burdened.

### **What we need: Love**

When any of us suffer grief or loss of someone we loved dearly, we experience a shifting sense of self. It can become very hard to remember *who* you are when a beloved someone who helped to define you dies or the relationship changes. For example, after the death of a parent or a spouse, or the loss of a pregnancy, or a painful divorce, or even the loss of a pet who had once filled the home with joy, the question often comes, “how can I still be the person I thought I was?” And in many ways, you may *never* be the same person.

As for Ruth, this shifting sense of self may have made it too hard to return to her home and live the way she always had. So instead, she chose to find her identity not only through herself, but through another. She really had nothing left to lose, so why not choose love? The Hebrew bible celebrates Ruth as someone who showed *hesed*, which means steadfast love, and offered that love as a model for what we should offer to God. The outcome of that love was for Ruth a future that went so much beyond her moment in history, for the Bible remembers Ruth not only as the great-grandmother of King David, but also as the ancestor of Jesus.

I have lately been drawn to a Korean word: “Woori,” or “uri”. I have noticed that around here, there is a bank and there is an insurance business named “Woori.” The term, I know from some Korean friends in seminary, means “we, us, or togetherness.” But I also understand that it carries more cultural weight than these words mean in English. I asked Hyung Kune Shim from our church to explain this to me. He said that traditionally in Korea, instead of saying “my house” or “my family,” people say “our house”

and “our family.” He pointed me to an article that spoke of an American who had just arrived in Korea to teach English. While eating lunch with her new colleagues, one of the teachers started talking about “Our husband.” She wondered whether she misheard, or whether her colleagues shared one man as their husband when one of her new friends explained, “In Korea, we often say ‘our’ or ‘we’ instead of ‘my’ or ‘I’.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, Hyung Kune explained to me, with increasing Westernization influencing South Korea, the language has become more individualistic, so this value of “uri” is slowly changing.

But Ruth’s approach to Naomi has that sense of “*uri*” togetherness, of seeing their lives and futures bound up in one another. Our church’s senses of community is at its best when we know that our lives and futures are bound up in one another and in God: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” I actually believe that this sense of togetherness offered both Ruth and Naomi salvation, pulling them both out of the pits of despair and into the new life that awaited them in Bethlehem. In that difficult migration from the place of grief and emptiness, steadfast love brought them on a journey that led to hope and fullness. It brought them to Bethlehem, the House of Bread. And indeed, it was a **love** that brought them from death to a life that really is life.

Love.

“Two things,” Jesus said. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Babe, “How the South Korean language was designed to unify” on *bbc.com* December 18, 2017.

Whether you can only see the week ahead and need something to sustain you on that journey, or are looking at a lifetime, may you be blessed to travel with courage. May you carry God in your heart, and find that God can sometimes carry you, too. And may you be blessed to offer and receive a love so powerful that it shapes not only the journey, but also where the journey leads us.

Amen.