

Where Do We Go From Here?

Ruth 1: 1-22

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May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

There was a famine in the land. A family of four moved to another land to escape its clutches. The husband died. The two sons married foreign women. The two sons also died. The wife was left with two daughters-in-law in a strange country in a patriarchal society where to be man-less was to further threaten your very existence. None of these sentences disclose the trauma, the heartache, the grief behind those who lived them.

The famine, death and dislocation led to a choice for these three surviving women. For the wife, Naomi, the prospects were especially dim because of her age. Her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah might not fare well if they left their homeland and had to find new foreigners to marry. Putting her foreign daughter-in-law's livelihoods ahead of her own, Naomi encouraged them to stay behind and find new husbands.

If this first chapter of Ruth were written in the year of our Lord 2021 it would begin, "there was a pandemic in the land." History books may record it as such, but we know, having lived it, that this description does not suffice to describe the ripples and shockwaves this virus has wrought in people's lives. In your life and my life.

No one of us could describe the scope and damage the pandemic has caused- especially since it is not yet over! But just as the famine in the land that disrupted the lives of Naomi and her family led to life that held far more than misery, so we have seen more than calamity in this Covid era. What good can come out of a famine? What good can come out of a pandemic?

From Pastor Lauren, I learned of a phrase coined or conveyed by Bob Griggs that describes another side to what we have experienced in this pandemic- "collateral benefit." Would you turn to your neighbor or on Zoom say out loud- collateral benefit? Would you even go as far to say with me- there has been collateral benefit in this pandemic?

We are accustomed to the phrase "collateral damage" describing the women, children and innocents often counted as the unfortunate cost of war or conflict. The phrase "collateral benefit" is especially satisfying in contrast to the term "collateral damage."

If the pandemic has shown us anything it is how interconnected we truly are. We have little choice about how the aerosols that emanate from our orifices can affect another simply by being in the same space together. The air you breathe can affect the air I breathe. We have renewed awareness of how the choices we make with each thing as simple as breathing in and out can impact another person. Wearing masks, sanitizing, quarantining- are all choices that acknowledge our connection to each other is a real thing. At a cellular level we cannot escape being entwined each to the other.

What the pandemic has also revealed are choices about how we connect. From your testimonies, I have heard about the collateral benefit of connection in this pandemic. Facilitating small groups on Zoom, these cameras bringing us together in worship, the vigilance of our Covid Task Force have all conspired to the collateral benefit of keeping us connected to one another in this time. So many of you have told me about the collateral benefit of the breakout rooms following worship and how you have met people you may never have talked to had those rooms not been randomly set up week after week. Others of you have testified to the extra time with grandchildren on Zoom, reunions of far-away friends, books read that have long sat on shelves. In my home in Arlington, the alleyway that all of our homes back up on has become neighborly, multigenerational and a place of regular gathering (Halloween, New years, 50th birthdays...)- all because of the pandemic.

To acknowledge this does not dismiss the hardships that have accompanied this time. But it is important to recognize there have been benefits too.

The pandemic showed us we are stuck with each other, but it may also provide us the opportunity- the collateral benefit- to choose how we connect.

When Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to stay behind and remain among her Moabite relatives, the two daughters-in-law initially refuse. Though tugging at her heart, Orpah saw that her own longevity had a better chance by parting company.

But Ruth would have none of that. She poetically pledged to remain with Naomi being faithful to her marriage vows not only of husband but his kin too. Ruth chooses not only to stay with her but covenants *how* she will remain by her side.

Where you go, I will go;
 where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
 there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
 and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

Ruth, in so professing, outlines not *where* we go from here, but *how* we go from here. She is adamant that she will not abandon her mother-in-law. But Ruth goes a step even further in laying claim to Naomi as family once and for all. She is willing to take on a new people, a new land, a new religion even, to remain connected. Where the chapter opens with a famine in the land, it ends with a barley harvest and the potential for a new story for Naomi and Ruth.

A collateral benefit that Naomi could not see at the time of her husband and sons' death was the faithfulness, the loving kindness, the commitment of her daughter-in-law Ruth. What the narrator in this story tells us is that the faithfulness, loving kindness and commitment of Ruth mirrors how God is in our lives as well. Akin to Ruth, God is a covenant-making, promise-keeping presence in our lives.

Like Naomi, we might not always recognize the ways God is working in a situation. Naomi whose name means "pleasant" or "sweet" renames herself "Mara" which means bitter. And she holds God responsible for the hardship and grief in her life. Ironically, she states her bitterness all the while faithful Ruth stands by her side refusing to abandon her. It's tough to be Ruth! If you read to the end of this short book, the women of Bethlehem who welcome Naomi and Ruth back to town eventually point out how God gifted Mara with Ruth. In response Naomi reclaims her name and thankfully "pleasant" replaces "bitter." Ruth's clinging pays off for them both. This too is God's doing!

In this sermon series we have been encouraging curiosity, raising questions, wondering together. Today as we ask the question Naomi and Ruth faced- where do we go from here; we learn it does not have to be that big a question. Sure, it sounds like a grand question making one think we are on the precipice of a great adventure. But it may be as simple as pointing us to the next promise made, the next person to bring into the circle, the next collateral benefit to recognize.

In two weeks, this congregation will decide on a new Senior Minister leader to join you on the faith journey. Let us resolve today that *how* we go together matters as much as *where* we are going. When we ask, where do we go from here, let us not forget to also ask with whom and how shall we go. The journey matters as much as the destination. May the covenant that binds us together, much like Ruth's promises to Naomi, guide us along the way. Amen.