

October 15th: Go

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Before we dig a little deeper, let’s pray together.

Faithful God,

There are moments in our lives when we come to a fork in the road and we must make a decision—we must make a choice that will alter our future. Rather than approaching these moments with anxiety and fear, teach us to approach these moments with courage and faith. Bless us with strength and fortitude on our

path. Guide us in our journeys this week, wherever they take us, and remind us that you always go ahead of us, behind us, and alongside us as we travel. Amen.

As a teenager, I had a lot of questions about the Bible. I annoyed my youth pastor with all kinds of inquiries about how it was written and by whom, followed up by investigations into theological debates like inerrancy vs. infallibility, and objections to the patriarchal tone and culture that seemed to infuse the biblical writings.

And as I got older and moved away from evangelicalism and its stricter interpretations of scripture, I learned that I wasn't alone in my frustrations. I learned that many people, including faithful Christians of all types and tribes, lament that so little of our common story is told from the perspective of marginalized groups. I learned that many people have an issue with the fact that our Bible is often centered around men and their stories—and it leaves little room for narratives about women and their ancient experiences. As you can imagine, I think this is a more than fair criticism, especially because there are only two books in our entire scripture that are named after their female characters—and two out of sixty six is very poor odds.

Which is why I think it's even more important that we dig into these stories of women and take them seriously. It's why I believe that hearing these narratives and incorporating them into our spiritual journey is important—because they speak to us in a radically different way that has the potential to transform us as disciples. When I entered into pastoral ministry, I knew that it would be important to share these stories from the pulpit—so this morning we turn to a story that I think has the power to empower us for great things.

Today we encounter the Book of Ruth, which is often lumped in with the Old Testament texts of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. Now, this makes some sort of sense—these stories do happen in the same general time frame and within the same general culture, but I think Ruth is markedly different from those other books, and I'll tell you why. Those other texts are

often referred to as “historical books,” focusing on chronicling specific historical moments or tracing the reigns of kings or other leaders. And all that information is certainly valuable—but Ruth is not a queen or a formal leader. She’s not participating in a major revolt or conquest, and she doesn’t rise to national prominence in any sort of way. She’s an average person, dealing with everyday circumstances, navigating challenges and difficult situations like an average person would. And to top it all off, she’s not even an Israelite. Strictly speaking, she’s not a member of God’s people, she doesn’t descend from any of the twelve tribes of Jacob. She’s a Moabite, residing in the land of Moab, which had long been an enemy or at least an adversary to the Israelites. She’s an outsider.

So why read the Book of Ruth? Well, I’m biased, because Ruth was the first Old Testament book that I learned to translate when I was studying Hebrew, but I also think it’s worth reading because Ruth’s story has perhaps some of the most profound wisdom that I think can be found in all of scripture. I think that within its pages lies deep courage, unyielding loyalty, and faithful perseverance, all of which are qualities that I think we could do with learning more about.

Ruth’s story opens with this information about her family-to-be: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man’s name was Elimelek, his wife’s name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.” But tragedy quickly strikes. Verse 3 tells us that Elimelek died, leaving Naomi all alone with her two sons. After this, Naomi’s two sons marry Moabite women, one named Orpah, and one named Ruth. Ten years later, tragedy strikes again, and the two sons die as well, leaving all three women as widows.

After a decade in a foreign land, Naomi makes the brave choice to return to her native land of Israel. Verses 6 and 7 say, “When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her

daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.”

But on the road, Naomi seems to have different plans for her daughters-in-law.

She tells them, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” When both protest, she repeats herself, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”

At this point, Orpah decides to remain in her homeland of Moab, but Ruth is not put off by Naomi’s bleak statements about the future. She makes this famous declaration: “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

Within this speech, there’s the most memorable line in the entire Book of Ruth: “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay.”

Somehow this phrase got turned into a line that’s often included in wedding vows, or used as an inspirational quote you might see on a sign at Hobby Lobby. But that’s not what Ruth means at all. Ruth’s words are not tied to marriage or vaguely farmhouse style home decor—this speech was a statement

of profound courage and loyalty. It's a statement of deep connection, relationship beyond the kinds of labels that our society deems important.

Ruth the Moabite, binds her life together with Naomi the Israelite—two people from different nations, different cultures, different histories, different lands, different experiences. These two women are brought together by life's difficult circumstances, but Ruth tells Naomi that she isn't leaving just because times got tough. Ruth gives up the ability to stay with her biological family, she gives up the ability to marry another member of her tribe to secure her financial and social future, and she does this because she believes that her story is irrevocably intertwined with Naomi's. Ruth is willing to travel with Naomi and begin a new life, because she is so convinced that it is the right path for her future. She makes this pledge, because she trusts that whatever lies ahead of her is better than what she is leaving behind.

So our verb for today and the week ahead is a simple one: go.

In the spiritual sense, this could mean a lot of things. It could mean: be on the move. Be willing to move to new places and to encounter new environments. Have new experiences, interact with different people. Step away from a life that is no longer serving you or step away from a situation that is no longer right for you. Have the courage to travel down an unknown path. Serve in a capacity that pushes you outside of your comfort zone.

Now that might sound pretty abstract, so here are some tangible suggestions that you might be able to put into practice this week:

Go to that City Council meeting to speak on behalf of someone.

Go to that event that supports a local non-profit.

Go to a community clean up day in the park.

Go to the farmer's market and learn about sustainable agriculture.

Go to the protest and join your voice with others who are fighting for justice.

Go to the soup kitchen and serve a neighbor their daily bread.

Go to an educational lecture to learn more about an issue facing your neighbors.
Go to a local school and see what needs local families might have.
Go to your supermarket and buy groceries to donate to the food pantry.
Go to the street corner and offer a kind word to the person holding a sign.
Go to a nursing home and bring flowers to the residents.
Go plant a garden to bring beauty into a small corner of the world.
Go call a friend who is going through a hard time.
Go drop off a meal to new parents in your neighborhood.
Go share hope with someone who is in the depths of despair.
Go start a ministry that God has placed on your heart.
Go live into your purpose, the reason that you get out of bed in the morning.
Go form a relationship with someone who looks, thinks, acts, believes, or votes differently than you do.
Go intertwine your story with someone else's.
Go bind your life and your happiness up with the life and happiness of others.

Whatever God is calling you to do: just go. Just go. Go today. Don't wait. Don't wait for the moment when everything is just right. Don't wait for the perfect timing, don't wait to be asked, don't wait until you feel fully equipped, don't wait until you're no longer scared.

Our wise friend Ruth shows us that the act of going is an act of faith. It doesn't have to be a journey of a hundred miles, it doesn't have to be a huge step, it doesn't have to change your life forever, you just have to go. It doesn't have to transform the entire world, but before you can even transform the world a little bit, you have to go.

My friends, let's go together. Amen.