



Calvary Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 4, 2024

Where Do We Go From Here?
Rev. Eyde Mabanglo

SCRIPTURE: Ruth 1:1-22

Elimelech Moves His Family to Moab

¹In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a severe famine came upon the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and two sons with him. ²The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. And when they reached Moab, they settled there.

³Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. ⁴The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, ⁵both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her two sons or her husband.

Naomi and Ruth Return

⁶Then Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland. ⁷With her two daughters-in-law she set out from the place where she had been living, and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah.

⁸But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back to your mothers' homes. And may the Lord reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. ⁹May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage." Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept.

¹⁰"No," they said. "We want to go with you to your people."

¹¹But Naomi replied, "Why should you go on with me? Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? ¹²No, my daughters, return to your

parents' homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? ¹³Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord himself has raised his fist against me."

¹⁴And again they wept together, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth clung tightly to Naomi. ¹⁵"Look," Naomi said to her, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same."

¹⁶But Ruth replied, "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!" ¹⁸When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more.

¹⁹So the two of them continued on their journey. When they came to Bethlehem, the entire town was excited by their arrival. "Is it really Naomi?" the women asked.

²⁰"Don't call me Naomi," she responded. "Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. ²¹I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?"

²²So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by her daughter-in-law Ruth, the young Moabite woman. They arrived in Bethlehem in late spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest.

SERMON

Intersectionality was first coined in 1989. It refers to the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination.

Intersection theory acknowledges that everyone has their own unique experiences of being the other that we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people like gender, race, class, but also education, neighborhood, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, political leanings, etc.

Even though the terminology emerged in our lifetime, systems of oppression have existed since the beginning of time...Today's story sets the scene by introducing us to the intersections of oppression in the lives of Naomi and Ruth. There is a famine in Moab—everyone is hungry. Everyone.

But Naomi and Ruth have intersecting complications in the midst of this famine because frankly they are women. In fact, they are widowed women. Which means they are grieving, poor, women. And we can add another intersection into our understanding their particular predicaments, and that is that they are foreigners, strangers in a strange land. They are vulnerable, unprotected, foreign, grieving, poor, husbandless women.

Today's story is an important lesson already in inviting us to see the many layers of social constructs that complicate the way we view, understand, accept, value, serve and love our neighbors. The human condition has been plagued with so many kinds of social famines, leaving us hungry for not only bread, but for compassion, kindness, justice, and mercy.

Have you, or someone you love, needed to navigate intersections of oppression and hardship in everyday life? Have you experienced famine in your heart, mind, or soul? Have you hungered for welcome, for belonging, for justice?

Thankfully, our scripture story helps us to laser focus on what can help us and that is to value walking together side by side. Because the resolution of this kind of spiritual famine is truly accepting God's abiding relationship with us.

The book of Ruth is often considered wisdom literature in the Hebrew scriptures. Like proverbs, psalms, job, song of songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth's story teaches about life, righteous living, and more importantly the true nature of our God.

The nature of God is abiding love. This is how we understand the phrase GOD IS LOVE.

When Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," I hear him say, "I am the word. I am eternal love. I am the voice, the spirit, the breath, the wisdom that spoke the world into existence. I am who I am. My name means God saves. My name means God with us. I am mercy. I am justice. I am an enduring, abiding, steadfast love for all"!

So, the life, the truth, the way of God is always a communal bond. And it is this communal bond in the story of Ruth and Naomi that unveils for generations of readers the loving kindness of God (The Hebrew word is HESED). Here are ancient scriptures that help us understand HESED:

Psalms 23:6

⁶Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalms 103:8

⁸The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

Psalms 136:1

¹Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! *His faithful love endures forever.*

Micah 6:8

⁸No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Hesed is what held the Israelites all through the wilderness into the Promised Land, and then through hundreds of years of them turning their back on God and returning, again and again. And before that, *Hesed* is the voice God spoke into nothing and made life. *Hesed* is the breath of God that animated human Spirit, and formed in God's own image, like the belongingness within God's own self Father, Son and Spirit, a new creature of belonging, a new community of life to whom to belong. *You belong to me; I belong to you. My precious creation, my life, my love. And I will stop at nothing to cherish you in this belonging; I will never leave you or forsake you. I am the Lord your God. (Kara Root)*

SOURCE: <https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2015/09/jan-richardsons-best-supper-available.html>

Today's sermon title is the fourth question in our winter sermon series called ***neighbor love***. The question is "where do we go from here"? –undoubtedly, this is a question among the women while starving in Moab. And somehow the answer is **relationship** – to walk, travel, venture forward, and hope side by side like our own walking together as a church, as human siblings, as neighbors, as those who walk humbly with our God...as we return to Bethlehem.

Guided by the nature of God, revealed in the stories of scripture, we walk. We practice hesed. We watch for hesed. We celebrate hesed. As we travel.

Again, from Kara Root: "And in the divine sense of humor, or direction, or both, God chooses *this story* – the lives of these women, to remind God's people, both then, and also in future generations who they are and what defines them.

"Later on, when they'd forgotten what life is really about and who they were supposed to be, and sought to remove foreigners from their midst to maintain their pure identity – God use this story, the lives of these women, to remind them that what makes them the people of God is not their bloodline, their security, their wealth or their knowledge. It isn't their leadership or good manners or connections or power, and it isn't their piety. They did not earn this, and they certainly don't deserve it.

"What makes them God's people is nothing less than the incomprehensible belongingness of God. It is *Hesed*. That God is a relentless belongingness kind of God, and they are to be God's radical belongingness kind of people.

"You are MY people and I am YOUR God. I am God because of you. And I am God in spite of you. You are mine, and I am yours. And my Hesed moves within and between you, but also beyond and outside of you.

"And just in case you forget, or maybe because you will quite often forget, it is really important that the person who carries forward THIS part of your story, who reveals the Big Picture, is none other than Ruth, the ordinary, widowed, Moabite foreigner."

Ruth marries in Judah and gives birth to a son (SPOILER ALERT). They named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse. The father of David. The city of Bethlehem literally means the city of bread. We know it today as the city of David, the birthplace of Christ.

- Hesed is Ruth's devotion to Naomi. It is her inclusion in the inclusive genealogy of Jesus...even though she is a Moabite woman.
- Hesed is Boaz protecting Ruth, providing her grain, and marrying her to give her hope and a future.
- Hesed is Naomi acknowledging and trusting God's steadfast faithfulness and thereby finally overcoming her pain and bitterness.

Kara Root writes: "God claims you and me and us and this world in a wide and fierce embrace of unending belongingness, of unshakable *Hesed*. So much so, that in Jesus Christ God said *I will go there with you, Long will I be with you, There will never be anything, no matter how great or small, that can separate you from the love of God, you are my beloved.*

We are pulled by Christ right into the very heart of God.

"So right where we you, no matter where you are, every day, you belong to God.

And right there, every day, you are invited to Be. Long. with the ones God has put in your life. And the ones into whose life you've been put.
This is how God is with us; this is where Jesus is."

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is ... that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living."

To follow Christ is to be...LONG...to follow...LONG...to travel...LONG.

If we identify with the marginalized (hungry, grieving, widowed, poor, foreigner, outcast, alone), then we can travel in hope together...we can go and walk together...we can just be—neighbors...long!

If we can identify with those who have not had to suffer due to the circumstances we were born into or stumbled upon, then we must consider ways for our accepting others as God's kin, and thereby our kin, walking alongside all, and sharing our resources, including our hope in Christ.

Jesus who still walks with us long - forever, feeds us long - forever, loves us long - forever and forgives us long - forever.

Where do we go from here? We walk with Christ...and with others.

Jesus invites us to walk humbly with him. To walk in a Heseid belongingness. Jesus invites us into a long obedience in the same direction...to be his disciple—long.

May it be so.

