



“Saintly Stuff”

Scripture – Ruth 1:1-22

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Randall T. Clayton

Sunday, November 3, 2024

A few days ago, I received an article in my inbox whose title jumped out at me. “Nothing Is Fine.”¹ And I thought, how apropos for a time such as this. Yes, the sun reliably rises in the east and sets in the west; yes, there’s food in my pantry and prices have come down lately. The electricity works most of the time. I have a winter coat in my closet for when the days grow cold, and I have the freedom to travel, to read what I wish to read, and to worship my God. So, some things are indeed fine.

But there’s a lot that isn’t fine too. The last time I looked at the data, over 44,000 people, including more than 15,000 children have been killed in Gaza since October a year ago. The war of Russian aggression in Ukraine continues, destroying homes, villages, lives. The situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo is perilous to say the least, while people from Spain to western North Carolina have experienced devastating floods. Cancer eats away at people’s wellbeing and health. Hunger is a daily reality for many in our own nation and across the globe. And then there’s...this week. I think people all across the entire political spectrum have an unwelcome guest in their hearts and homes right now: anxiety about the election this week and what may happen after. At least I am experiencing that. Since everything isn’t completely right, we are left some days to wonder how we will make it through.

Surely Naomi also wondered how she would make it through given that little was fine in her life at the beginning of her story.

In the day of the Judges, when there was a famine in Judah, Naomi, and her husband Elimelech and their two sons migrated to Moab in the hopes of finding food, since Moab wasn’t experiencing famine. But were it not for a severe famine they would have never considered migrating to Moab, because Moab and Judah were enemies of each other. But hunger led them to flee across unsecured borders (I’m guessing without a shred of documentation either) perhaps not so much in search of a better life, but for a continuation of life itself.

¹ Blaedel, Rev. Anna, “Nothing is Fine” enfleshed.com, Oct 24, 2024.

They had no way of knowing how they'd be received in Moab. I don't suppose migrants ever do. But over the years that followed their arrival in Moab, as most migrants do, they began to assimilate into that culture so much so that Naomi's two sons married Moabite women. One son married Ruth, the other, Orpah.

At this point, in a culture in which single women were extremely vulnerable, having a husband, an heir, and a spare, Naomi would have likely felt about as secure as possible in Moab. But then Naomi's husband died. Soon thereafter Orpah's husband died, and finally, Ruth's husband died too.

Though all these deaths may seem odd, the Bible gives us no reason for them. Scholars suggest that Elimelech was likely a good bit older than Naomi so his death, while painful, may not have been totally unexpected. Scripture hints that the two sons were not the most robust of men either based on their names. One son's name was Mahlon, which actually means something like "weak" or "ill," and the other, Chilion, means "finished" or "spent." With names like this...

With husband, and sons 1 and 2 dead, Naomi was left in a very bad situation, especially since neither Orpah nor Ruth had had any male offspring either. Though she now had no means of support or security, grieving Naomi, did hold onto enough hope to make and enact a plan for their future. Having heard that the famine in Judah had ended, she decided to return there, hoping against hope, that just perhaps, maybe, there was some distant male relative who would receive her. Naomi also realized that her daughters-in-law should stay in Moab because they were Moabite, and thus, that's where all their relatives were. Perhaps one among them would provide for them.

As Naomi was on her way out of town, she realized that Orpah and Ruth were traveling with her – not part of the plan. "Look, I'm going back to my land, to my people, to the place of my God, but you two must stay here. Your place is in Moab and not in Judah with me. Your people are here; your past is here; and the gods you worship are here too."

But Ruth and Orpah said, "No, mother-in-law, we're going with you."

"Ridiculous. There's no security for you in Judah. You have a much better chance at life if you stay here. So, stay," Naomi commanded.

At this point Orpah saw the wisdom of Naomi's command and decided to turn around. But Ruth made a different decision. She latched onto Naomi, clung to her, followed Naomi. In so doing Ruth left behind her own kinfolk, the land of her birth, as well as her culture, traditions, and gods too.

"Where you go, I will go," Ruth said. "Where you build your home, I will make my home. Your complaints² will be my complaints. Your people shall be my people, your God my God. And where you die and are buried, that's where I will die and be buried too."

Make no mistake about it, her promise to Naomi was radical, all encompassing, and never ending. In good times and bad, plenty and want, in health and in sickness, in both life and in death as well, Ruth would cling to her mother-in-law. Without any promise of safety, leaving behind all that was familiar, and with

² The term sometimes translated "lodge" can also have the connotation of "complaint."

absolutely no guarantees about any kind of a future, she clung to her mother-in-law, migrating with Naomi from Moab to Judah.

By now, Naomi had been gone so long from Bethlehem in Judah that there was no certainty she would be welcomed back – after all, who would remember her? And, she had been living in enemy territory for a long, long time to boot, so she might be suspect. But, if there was a question about how Naomi would be received, there were bigger ones about Ruth’s potential welcome given that she was born a Moabite and had lived her entire life in that enemy nation. Yet Ruth threw caution, and probably good sense, to the wind, trusting that if she clung to her mother-in-law, somehow, some way, together life would emerge for both of them.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi was honest about her feelings. She told the women of the town that they should no longer call her Naomi, which means something like “beautiful,” but to call her Mara, Mara, which means “bitter” or “empty.”

Although that’s where the text for today ends, if you keep reading through the book you see that as the two women clung to one another in those difficult and anxiety producing times, they discovered together what they needed to survive, and even to thrive, setting in motion a lineage that would become Jesus’ ancestors.

“No man is an island,” proclaimed John Donne,³ and I think the story of Naomi and Ruth is a vivid reminder of that truth, because it was only as Naomi and Ruth traveled together and worked together, that they found what they needed.

In a world in which partisan divides are deep and wide, in a world and a season when anxiety abounds, and in which some days it feels as if little-to-nothing is fine, perhaps the only way we can make it through whole is to cling...to cling to one another, even to cling to and with those who may be on the opposite side of the fence, clinging to each other trusting that what unites us is far more important than what divides us. This story pushes me to ask, am I, are we, willing to cling to one another even though we do not all believe alike, even though our hopes may be different or our backgrounds dissimilar? If we are, then perhaps we will find peace even in anxious and difficult times.

And I wonder as well, are we willing to cling to Jesus as Ruth clung to Naomi, to cling to Jesus even when Jesus calls us to journey into a new and different future? To cling to him even when his love for us invites us to love those we may not even really like? Are we willing to cling to Jesus and the hope he offers, even when God’s ways are mysterious and seemingly hidden? If so, we may open ourselves to finding enough hope and peace to make it through difficult seasons of our lives.

A few weeks ago, when I was in Minnesota, I spent some time in the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, looking at the art that adorned that sacred space. Serenaded by the sound of the organist practicing Holst’s *The Planets* on the large instrument in the balcony, we studied the architecture of the sanctuary and viewed paintings and sculptures that adorned the walls and chapels. As I recall, there were lots of depictions of saints. St. Paul, John the Baptist, Peter, Boniface, Anthony, and so on. Perhaps somewhere in that magnificent cathedral there was a statue or a painting of Ruth or Naomi, but I don’t recall seeing

³ Donne, John, 1572-1631. *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. Cambridge, [Eng.]: The University press, 1923.

one. Yet, on this day set aside to give thanks for the saints in our world and in our lives, I give thanks for Saint Ruth and Saint Naomi.

St. Naomi... Surely nothing felt right in Naomi's eyes. In fact, one writer says, she probably felt that God must have had some sort of "private vendetta against her," and yet, she remained hopeful. And with Ruth by her side, as we can see in the rest of her story in the book of Ruth, she schemed to make her hopes a reality. Bitter? Yes, she was. But hopeful too.⁴ It's saintly stuff to cling to hope when little seems hopeful. Saintly stuff, to seek to work to make our hopes for real life become a reality both for ourselves and for others around us.

And St. Ruth...Ruth clings to the one who needs her love and her support, being willing to risk everything so that Naomi would have someone by her side. Ruth doesn't try to "fix" Naomi, doesn't tell her that she's wrong to be bitter, doesn't judge at all. Ruth just holds on to Naomi, walks with her, supports her, and helps her find her way. That's saintly stuff too – clinging to others, holding on and standing beside even when it would be easier to let go.

Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Where you die, I will die.

As St. Ruth clung to St. Naomi, may we cling to Jesus, because you see, Jesus clings to us. He clings to us in sickness and in health, in good times and bad, in joy and in adversity. And may we also become saints for each other by "clinging to one another and embodying God's loving kindness."⁵ Maybe the only way to make it through anxious times is by holding on...holding on to Jesus and holding on to one another. So hold on. Don't let go.

⁴ Howell, James, "Between Text and Sermon, Ruth 1:1-18, Interpretation, issue date and page unknown to author of this sermon.

⁵ Tate, Jessica, Between Text and Sermon, Ruth 1:6-22, Interpretation, April 2010.

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All Saints Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, the One from whom all things come and our destiny when our earthly life comes to an end, we give you thanks for your stunning creation and for the precious gift of life.

Loving God, the eyes of the world are on our nation. We pray for a peaceful election, the end of hateful words, and no more threats of violence; knowing that your way is the way of justice and peace.

Today, we express our deep gratitude for the saints who graced our lives and now live eternally with you. We remember parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers, wives and husbands, children, teachers, and friends.

As we pause to recall the saints of our lives, we give thanks for
the ones who brought out the best in us...
the ones who encouraged us to be determined and never give up...
the ones who supported us when life weighed heavy...
the ones who disciplined us when we strayed...
the ones who forgave us when we were harsh...
the ones who prompted us to pursue a spiritual life...
the ones who taught us the vital importance of honesty...
the ones who were generous with us and inspired us to nurture a generous spirit...
the ones who loved us even when we were not all that lovable...
the ones who made us laugh...
the ones who comforted us when life was harsh...
The ones who helped us discover our purpose...
The ones who challenged us to work for a just cause...
The ones who showed us how to find real happiness and true joy...

Everlasting God, we give thanks for those who died during the past year whom we now remember and name: [The names were read]

Mighty God, as we remember our loved ones – sometimes brilliant and sometimes baffling, but so important to us – we express our gratitude for the special ways they touched our lives and for the part of them that will continue to live on through us.

And now joining our voices as one, we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, **“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**