

Season after Pentecost

Summer Sermon Series: Jacob Wrestles with God

July 12/13, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 146; Ruth 1

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen

It is somewhat remarkable that this much loved book of Ruth made it into the Bible at all. Two of the three main characters come to be revealed as strong, smart women in an overwhelmingly patriarchal culture and nation. Yet there's more reason to wonder how the book of Ruth made the cut. The story is set in the "days when the judges ruled". A time after the people of God had fought their way into the Promised Land but still faced dreadful battles with surrounding nations. They also engaged in persistent battles with their own faithfulness to God. It was a roller coaster ride of a time. The people would stray from God, get in trouble with hostile neighbors and cry out to God for mercy. The Lord would then raise a leader, called a judge, who would help lead the people out of the latest military and political fix. Not long after one of these rescues it would be noted: "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.. all the people did what was right in their own eyes." And the pattern would repeat yet again. It was the time of mighty warriors and heroes like Gideon, Deborah and Samson. In the midst of these high profile leaders and epic national struggles, we have this book of Ruth concerned with the domestic lives of "everyday people leading everyday lives of love and hardship and hope."¹ There are no dramatic acts of God like the plagues or parting the Red Sea or angelic interventions. And perhaps most baffling of all is Ruth is a Moabite, a foreigner, descendent of one of the nations Israel often called an enemy.

There are theories to explain the inclusion of Ruth. Most scholars believe the story of Ruth was not actually written down until after the Israelites had lost their kingdom, gone into Babylonian exile and then returned to rebuild Jerusalem. This was a time when leaders Ezra and Nehemiah were warning the Israelites not to marry foreigners and divorce spouses who were not Hebrew. It was their thinking that the downfall of Israel had come because the Hebrews had been too lax about their faith and too willing to let the gods and practices of other peoples compromise their devotion to the one true God, Yahweh. The answer, they thought, was to circle the wagons, keep apart from foreigners as much as possible and remain faithful to the rituals and rules of Judaism. The story of Ruth was a challenge to this way of thought. Here was Ruth, an Arab woman, a Moabite, who "demonstrates to our Jewish ancestors what the loyalty of God is like."² Some say Ruth was a way to balance the anti-foreigner attitude and remind our ancestors that God's

dream of saving the world was much more inclusive — starting with a chosen people so that all might know the Lord of all.

Next to that theory for Ruth's inclusion is a simpler notion — Ruth shows that the God of all creation is concerned with the mundane affairs of humankind, with everyday life, the inconsolable grief of an older widow.... and the broken heart of a young woman who has been unable to have children and who has now lost her husband.”³ In other words, the book of Ruth shows that God cares about us; our daily lives, choices, feelings and problems. The Creator of the universe stands with us in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, saying, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” The book of Ruth pulls us into the story of the hurts and hopes of people like you and me — native or foreigners ---- and tells us God stays with us; God can work in the muck of painful circumstances and emotions to lead us to live again and abundantly.

The story begins like the stories of many refugees. Naomi, her husband and their two sons were natives of Bethlehem in Judah. There's a famine in the land so they cross borders in search of food and the chance for a better life. They go and settle in Moab, a nation often at odds with the Israelites. Tragedy strikes when Naomi's husband dies. Her two sons marry local Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. In ten years, tragedy hits again as Mahlon and Chilion also die. Now there is a household of three widows, a picture of hopelessness. Widows without sons to support them, had to either remarry or throw themselves upon the uncertain generosity of a community for their survival. Naomi finds herself a widow in a region in which she is a foreigner with no status and no real history in the community. She decides her “only viable option was ...to return to her hometown and hope there would be a place for her somewhere among her relatives. And thus she and her two daughters-in-law set out for the land of Judah.”⁴

But soon Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth to return to their mother's homes. They are young enough to remarry. She has no more sons they can marry. She frees them of any obligation to stay with her. She blesses them for dealing so kindly with her and prays the Lord will grant them security with new husbands. Perhaps Naomi is also thinking that returning to Bethlehem with several Moabite women in tow may not be such a good idea. Moabites are not of the Hebrew faith, they are foreigners who have often warred against Israel. Whether Naomi is thinking of herself alone or her daughters-in-law, she realizes her hometown may not welcome or accept these Moabite women. Both young women resist Naomi's practical advise but eventually Orpah agrees. Ruth, however, clings to Naomi and says the words repeated at countless weddings, though they were originally said from daughter-in-law to mother-in-law:

“Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (Ruth 1: 16)

Naomi has no reply. The two women set off in silence. When they arrive at Bethlehem, she announces to her kindred that she is no longer Naomi, which means “sweet” but “Mara” meaning “bitter.” She tells them “I went away full but the LORD has brought me back empty.” She says this with loyal, faithful Ruth standing there beside her, not introduced or acknowledged. Was Ruth stung by Naomi’s words or somehow wise and compassionate enough to respect Naomi’s right to grieve?

“Why would Ruth be willing to go with Naomi to a country she’d never been to, where she would likely not be welcomed or treated kindly, where she herself could have no status, no power, no apparent resources?”⁵ The simple but not so simple answer is love. A love that cares about the quality and dignity of another woman’s life. This love she has for Naomi does not diminish who Ruth is nor does it limit her choices. Rather, this love Ruth has for Naomi empowers her, strengthens her to be and do more than she likely thought she was capable. In Ruth’s days your family, country and gods were dictated by birth or marriage. As a woman you didn’t get to make choices. But here is Ruth making a choice. “Your people will be my people. Your God my God.” Loving like God loves is freeing and powerful.

Ruth’s persistence also shows us something about what can happen when we find ourselves in those terrible times of loss or despair. As Joan Chittister wrote: “Just when we think we have nothing, just when it feels that we have not one good thing left in the world, [we learn] that what we do still have is ourselves. We have, deep down inside us what no one can take away, what can never be lost either to time or to chance: we have the self that brought us to this point — and more.”

“We have gifts of God in abundance, never noticed, never touched, perhaps, but a breath in us nevertheless and waiting to be tapped. And more, whatever we have developed over the years in the center of ourselves — the grit, the hope, the calm, the bottomless pulsating, irrepressible trust in the goodness of God despite the turns of fortune — is there now to be mined like gold, scratched out and melted down, shaped and shined into a whole new life.”⁶ It may not be the life you once had and wanted. It may not be a life you ever imagined. But it will be a life that is worthwhile and a future in which happiness is possible. Ruth seems to understand this first ---- that out of heart-breaking loss and grief rebirth is eventually possible. Maybe that is why she had the patience and strength to simply walk with Naomi in her loss and see to her care. Tapping that grit, hope and trust in God that she may or may not have known she had, Ruth chooses to leave behind what was and go with Naomi toward the unknown, trusting her God.

Ruth made a choice. A journey takes place. Naomi arrives at Bethlehem, with Ruth by her side at the beginning of the barley season. Ruth and the harvest are both signs of hope and promise, which Naomi does not seem to recognize yet as evidence that is God is with and for her. How about you and I? What signs of God's hope and love do we notice? What roads can we choose towards life? Amen

Linda M Alessandri 7/12/14

ENDNOTE

1. John P. Rossing, "A Faith, A Farm and A Family" Daring to Hope C.S.S. Publishing Co., 1993, 1-55673-615-0

2. Sid Burgess, "Running on Empty, Arriving on Full" November 02, 2000 posted on goodpreacher.com

3. Burgess

4. King Duncan , "A Long Line Of Love," Collected Sermons, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20

5. Molly Baskette, 'No Saints' Day'" Sunday, November 1, 2009 posted on www.goodpreacher.org

6. Joan Chittster, "The Story of Ruth: Moments of Loss and Faith" as posted on www.goodpreacher.com.