

Ruth (a second sermon)

Last week we looked at this book as a political protest – remember? This story (and it IS a story – you’re beyond thinking that everything in here is meant to be read as history, right???) Good.) This story was written at a time in Israel’s history when there was a fair amount of fear: They were a small country, surrounded by large, powerful nations. They were afraid of losing their culture, and so they made a whole lot of rules about foreigners – in essence trying to keep their bloodlines pure. Intermarriage was banned, for example, as was any contact with other religions, and so on.

Now I need to say that I *know* there is a whole other side to the story....I don’t want to caricature those who made the rules or whose fear led to these attitudes. And I do understand that when a society finds itself threatened, surrounded by a larger, stronger, more powerful presence....when you’re just plain scared that your kids will grow up not knowing their roots or their identity, it can result in a political discourse, and resulting decisions that might look different under other circumstances. Sort of like CBC’s introduction of Cancon....or the language laws in Quebec, or how we feel when our kids know all about American society from TV but can’t tell you who the Prime Minister of Canada is....

I’m just saying let’s not leap too quickly to judgment here, and truly we are not in a position to assess the threat they felt they were under.

That being said...it’s also true that members of their own society, prophets, poets, writers, were critical.... and *that’s* where this material comes from....does that make sense? We’re picking up on the religious protest against imperialism...the political resistance to an insular, protectionistic (is that a word?) posture – of the very people who were living in its midst.

So...into a political climate of fear and defensiveness, into an “us and them” mind set, into a religious posture of “don’t let your kids date unbelievers” – into that ...

Someone picks up a pen.... speaks a word of life

And it’s this story.

Simple, brilliant, and very effective.

To people who are fearful and contemptuous of foreigners
It says “let me tell you a story about a foreign woman.”
And the punch line is
“She’s your grandmother!”

Great eh?

There ARE no foreigners, in the end. No “us” and “them”
It’s US or nothing. Let’s choose US.

I really am going to get to the main point of this sermon, trust me ! I need to point out one other thing first though; did you notice that this story is very light on God language? It's a human story; no Divine intervention, no dreams or visions telling the characters what to do. They use their own brains, intuition, ingenuity and guts to make decisions about their lives.

This is a very WISDOM way of understanding life and God isn't it? We've been talking about the Wisdom tradition in Scripture all fall and here it is in spades....a story about human action in a human world; there are no clear right and wrong choices (Orpah decides to stay home, the narrator makes no judgment on that choice...while Ruth decides to go with Naomi..for example) life is complicated and human actions are the way that God is expressed. Not dramatic, just....real.

Also..the subtext is that God is in these situations and choices....AND, I daresay, the theological subtext is that we are to see the face of God in the relationships of these women. God as the one who accompanies us; God who says to us as surely as Ruth says to Naomi – “where you go I will go” – this is quite a subversive image of God, and I'm just going to leave it at that.

NOW we get to what I really wanted to say!

This morning I want to lift up this story again....let the light of God shine through this jewel or a story at another angle.

I want us to think together about accompaniment.

What does it mean to accompany someone?

This story of Ruth and Naomi is
Among other things
The story of accompaniment.

(READ RUTHS WORDS AGAIN FROM CHAPTER ONE)

A woman who walks with another, through a transition – a turning time.

What has your experience been with accompaniment?

Have there been times in your life when you really needed a friend...someone to simply walk with you –

And did you have what you needed?

If so, what was that like? What did your friend do that helped you through that time?

Can you remember a time when someone helped you see possibilities for the future that you couldn't see for yourself right then?

What did you need then, and how did that person respond?

And if you needed someone and *didn't* have that. Perhaps expected it from someone who let you down?

Perhaps NOW is a time like that in your life, is it?
A change, a transition, a heartache, a growing time?

Do you need someone to walk with you? Think specifically about what you need. A phone friend? An e-mail companion? Someone to go for coffee with, regularly? Someone to pray with you or for you/ Do you want to be listened to, are you looking for input, or just someone to be quiet?
Someone to touch you?
What about when you cry...what do you need from someone who accompanies you then?

God calls us in to real relationships with each other. Honest, reaching for a friend, sharing the stuff of our lives and being able to trust each other and ask for what we need.

That doesn't come easily does it? Church life has not always been the sort where you can come here and say what you need and be real. Sometimes we do that "how are you" "I'm great how are you" - we need so much more than that.

Last week was All Saints Day and it's true that we do have a growing awareness of those who will walk with us, giving us strength in a way that we can't explain but is nonetheless mysterious and true. So we are accompanied even when we feel abandoned by friends and relatives...

And of course the traditional answer of the church has been "what a friend we have in Jesus" and that is so true. So many people have felt God's presence in spite of being alone....and the poem footprints has become so popular because of that I think.

So...certainly we are not alone. God is with us in the Spirit of Jesus, who carries us when we cannot walk one more step. God is with us in the mysterious presence of those who have gone before us and who surround us as that great cloud of witnesses...
AND God is with us in the gift of one another. And that's the call I hold up today.

That call comes through in this beautiful story.
The call to truly, honestly walk with each other, speaking our truth, allowing ourselves to be listened into speech – accompanied by hope...

If you are at such a time now, a time when you need to be accompanied, when more than anything you need a friend to walk with you,
Think and pray hard about what you need, and who you need it from...and Don't count out the people you meet here Sunday mornings.

ON the other side of this...

Who are those you're walking with right now – the people in your life who need to be accompanied though a hard time? What kind of accompanier are you?

And just as an aside....Scripture is absolutely full to brimming over with stories that tell us – LOOK at the people with whom you walk....they are there for a purpose. Who walks with you right now? Who has come to walk beside you? The Bible says be alert – you may be entertaining angels unawares....and the face of the risen Christ is there among us on the road,just stop and listen to the footsteps beside you; you may hear the sound of angels' wings”

Just as it doesn't seem to come naturally for us to name what WE need and ask for help when we need it,

It's not as easy as it sounds to walk with someone during a hard time. Think of a time when someone you know was living through a transition....how was that for you? It's hard! We feel helpless...

Have you ever made a tough choice to be with a friend – paid a price of some sort to support that person? Would you do it again?

What do you need to learn, or practice, to be able to really walk with someone in a Christ-like way?

Who are the people in your life who are grieving? It's hard to watch someone hurt.

Naomi said “don't call me Naomi call me Mara” which means bitter.

How to walk with those who are bitter...in a way that ...is faithful? (Sometimes what gets in the way is our own stuff eh? We start giving advice, trying to make it better, telling our own stories of loss...filling in the silence with words...any words....do you notice those tendencies in yourself? It takes discipline and practice not to fall into that. Because those behaviours are all about YOUR need not theirs; right?)

What do you need to deal with yourself that will free you to not be afraid of someone else's pain?

As individuals and as a body, we need to really listen for the call of God from those who need accompaniment.

And we need to equip ourselves with the skills and compassion and wisdom and personal integrity.

So we can truly walk with each other in ways that bring new life.

Be ready to take a risk for a friend.

Be willing to go places we'd rather not go

Hear things it would be easier not to hear.

And open ourselves to the accompaniment of others when WE are the ones in need.

Whether you are Naomi

Or Ruth

There is life in process

And as we walk with each other

We will discover that there is Another who walks beside us

And always will.

Amen