“Emptied and Filled”

Book of Ruth 1:1-19

24th Sunday after Pentecost, 4, 2018

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

Rev. Martha Leahy

*But Ruth replied, “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.”*

*The Book of Ruth 1:16*

The Book of Ruth tells a story of emptiness and fulfillment. It was written about a lull in a time of war, as the ancient tribes of Israel and Moab had been fighting since the beginning of the recorded history of the Jews.

It all began with a spat about grazing rights between founding patriarch of the Jewish nation, Abraham, and Abraham’s nephew, Lot. To solve the dispute, they agreed to divide their territory and part company. Abraham chose land in Israel in the Jordan River Valley and Lot chose the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in Moab. And, as we know, things went downhill quickly from there for poor old Lot. So the descendants of both men became mortal enemies and spent the ensuing years raiding and plundering one another’s villages.

But there was a lull in hostilities at some point, and refugees from a famine in Israel fled to Moab to find food and shelter. Some Israelites from Bethlehem settled down and married into the Moabite tribe. And this is where we find our heroines Naomi and Ruth.

Naomi and Ruth’s story is sort of an *echo* of the Abraham story. Abraham wasn’t a native of Israel – God called him out of the Land of Ur in Iraq and told him he would become the founding father of a great nation. So, Abraham was *not* Jewish. Naomi *was* Jewish but she, her husband and her children were forced to leave Bethlehem to take refuge in the land of Moab. There she would meet the Moabite woman, Ruth, who would later marry her son. Then *Ruth* would be called out of *her* homeland to follow Naomi back to Israel and Bethlehem.

This seems to be a very familiar plot line in the Bible, one that is repeated again and again: the hero or heroine is called by God to travel from a distant land to a place they have never been before and may even fear. But, “Fear not!” the angels in the Bible always say. “God is with you!” And so it was with Abraham and now Naomi and Ruth. And we shall see what grand plans God had in store for Ruth and her descendants.

Ruth had been living a happy life with her Israelite husband and his extended family in their homeland of Moab. Through sad circumstances, though, Ruth’s husband, his brother, and his father all died. Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi, and two sisters-in law were all left widowed and homeless. This is because, in those days, wives were the property of their husbands, and when their partners departed this Earth, they were essentially unspoken-for and unprotected unless they could find a male relative to protect them.

So Naomi decided to go back to Israel where she had relatives. As the old saying goes, “Home is where you can go and they have to take you in.” She told the young widows to go back to their families and she prepared to leave. One of the women did as Naomi suggested but Ruth would not leave her.

“Don’t tell me to leave you or to turn back from you!” Ruth said to Naomi. “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.”

Something was telling Ruth to stick with Naomi. It may be she felt safe and at home with her. It may be she wanted to repay her for all her kindness. It may be Naomi resembled Ruth’s deceased husband, and Ruth was clinging to the last reminder of him that she had. Or there may have been some divine pushing on God’s part to keep the two women together for their journey to Bethlehem. We shall see.

But first, let’s talk about this divine pushing by God. When have we ever felt like we needed a change in our lives? When have we felt our job, our family situation, or a lack of purpose or vision had brought us to a crossroads? When have we *felt* all these things but didn’t do anything about them? When have we felt *something* – some force or presence or persistent voice – calling us to make a change? What happens to us over time when we resist this voice? What little part of us dies by degrees? Do we ever feel ourselves being called *to* something newor *away* from something familiar?

We have inner feelings that tell us what we need to do, and we need to learn to trust those feelings. As a culture, we learn not to be soft, not to show weakness, and to use our power of reason to convince ourselves that our lives are fine as they are, thank you very much. We provide for our families. We pay the bills. We join clubs, churches, and organizations that do good work in our communities.

But still we feel something is missing, something more we should be doing. Safety is good thing – we all want that for ourselves and our families. But sometimes God calls us to step outside our routines and take another path.

Very soon I will be stepping away from this church and into a future with many unknowns. I have been hearing this call for a few years now, and I can no longer ignore it. And this church will now begin a time of discernment about *your* call as well. You will mostly likely be asked this question by your interim pastor, *“What is God calling you to be and do?”* And then you will have the opportunity to let down your guard and really listen to the voice of God that has been speaking to you all along.

Be ready to soften a bit, to take down the protective walls surrounding your hearts. Be ready to admit and accept what you *feel* as the power and presence of God. We all know the familiar slogan of the United Church of Christ, “Never put a period where God has put a comma because God is still speaking.” Yes, that is *God* who has been speaking to you for a very long time. And now it’s time to listen, for God will lead you from *emptiness to fullness* if you allow God to do so.

Ruth was being brought to Israel, a foreign country to her, by Naomi. She was taking a risk and so was Naomi, for that matter. What if the Israelites didn’t accept Ruth? What if they turned her around and sent her back to Moab? Or worse, killed her? What if they punished Naomi for bringing an unclean person into their midst? After all Ruth’s tribe was one of their most ancient enemies. And, of course, for both of them as widows, daily living would be no piece of cake, unless they found a male relative to take them in. They didn’t know if they would find emptiness or fulfillment in Bethlehem.

But, Ruth - this stranger, this widow, this enemy, this outsider, this unclean Moabite - walks into enemy territory with absolute faith because she’s answering that persistent voice of God. Could it be God’s voice saying to Ruth, “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. You are my mine and I am your God?”

Happily, Naomi and Ruth find great fortune awaiting them in Bethlehem. Naomi will visit a relative of her husband’s, a man of gracious heart named Boaz, who will take her and Ruth into his home, provide a roof over their heads, and a job for Ruth working in his fields. Eventually Boaz will fall in love with Ruth and marry her. So, more players are added to this story of emptiness and fulfillment written by God.

Ruth and Boaz will have a son whom they name Obed. Obed will become the father of Jesse, who will become the father of the beloved Israelite King David. Jesus’ earthly father, Joseph, will be a descendant of the House of King David. And Jesus will be welcomed into the world and cared for by the man who carried the bloodline of Ruth, the outsider. Jesus will thus be a bridge between Israel and Moab, the symbol of the peace that is possible even between ancient, mortal enemies.

It’s an old, old story – people are called by God from a place of emptiness to a place of fulfillment. In this time of transition in our church, we will be called to travel from a place we know to one that may be new and different to us. God is calling each of us, as God has done over and over in Bible stories, to leave the familiar and venture into the unknown. God is counting on *us* to count on our *faith* in God, to accept God’s invitation to the place where our hopes and dreams will come true - a place of safety, acceptance, love, and peace - a place inside of us that was once empty, and will then be filled by the grace of God.

And in that place, we will hear the voice of God saying to us, “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. You will be my people and I will be your God.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L., and Taylor, Barbara Brown, Eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 242-247.

*Webster’s Dictionary of the Bible*, (Westminster Press, Philadephia, PA, 1970), “Lot” p. 568; “Moab” p. 626.

*Zondervan NIV Study Bible,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).