



## “On the Journey: Traveling with God Companions for the Journey”

Ruth 1:15-22a

August 1, 2021

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a journey in the most literal sense—a journey across the miles, from Bethlehem to the foreign land of Moab and back again. But in this relatively short book of the Bible, we also see the full trajectory of Naomi’s life, her life’s journey.

We find her in the beginning of the story with her husband and two sons, leaving their home and their country to escape a famine. They make a new life—a new start—in a foreign land, but tragedy follows. First, the death of Naomi’s husband. Then, her sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Perhaps there is hope for a time. They settle into a new normal, but the years stretch on. Ten years we are told. And this isn’t explicitly stated in the text, but I suspect that in that decade of marriage there is an unwritten story of infertility and possibly even pregnancy loss. Then Ruth and Orpah’s husbands die, and we are left with three grieving women, three childless widows, who—in this time and this setting of this particular story—have nothing to rely on but the mercy and kindness of those around them. They have no way of earning income or providing for themselves. They stand on the precipice of a life of poverty and extreme vulnerability. Orpah and Ruth are young and could potentially marry again, but for Naomi especially, the horizon is bleak.

We all have our own stories of loss. The death of a parent or a spouse. The deterioration of our mental or physical health, or the mental or physical health of someone we love. The loss of a job, the marriage that ended, the unsuccessful fertility treatments. Hope too painful to carry and too painful to let go. Our stories are all different, but if we’ve learned anything along

the way, it’s that while the journey of life and faith can be beautiful, it can also be so devastatingly hard.

If we’re asking, “Where is God?” it’s only a sign that we’re paying attention, a sign that we can see the chasm that sometimes forms between things as they are and things as they should or could be.

Where is God?

Naomi doesn’t so much wonder this as she believes she knows the answer to this question. God is there, in her mind, but God isn’t a source of comfort or strength but rather the actual cause of her suffering. “The hand of the Lord has turned against me,” she says to her daughters-in-law. She tells Ruth and Orpah to go, believing that there is still hope for the lives they may live, that they would be better off without her.

“But Ruth clung to her.”

Five simple words. *But Ruth clung to her*, deciding in that moment to bind her fate with Naomi’s, come what may.

Now it is Ruth who is leaving her homeland of Moab, journeying with Naomi to a foreign place for her, Bethlehem, with nothing—*nothing*—but uncertainty ahead. She promises, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Simple yet profound words of loyalty and devotion. It’s no wonder that these words are a favorite at weddings, though it’s not often that the full context of the story is shared. (Too many dead husbands in the story for a wedding, I guess.)

If you've not read the book of Ruth, I hope that you might after today. It's just four short chapters. When you do, I invite you to ask yourself that question that we all sometimes ask, "Where is God?" and to look for God in the story.

What I think you will find is that the people in the story have thoughts about God as they try to make sense of the events of their lives, as we all do. And there are various prayers and blessings that are spoken to God, but God as an active participant in the story is virtually absent.

But look closely.

Last week Reverend Chris Henry shared with us the story of Jesus sending out his disciples to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom and to heal. They are to take nothing for the journey, "No staff, no bag, no bread, no money—not even an extra tunic." They are to rely on God's provision alone.

It's been true in my experience, and I suspect yours as well, that God's provision often takes human form. Look closely, and you'll see it here in this story in a young Moabite woman who binds herself to Naomi as they journey together into an unknown future. "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

Ruth is promising to be there. She can't bring back Naomi's husband, or her own husband, for that matter. She doesn't have a money tree. She doesn't have a single solution to one problem they are facing or a Magic 8-Ball to know how it will all turn out. But she promises to be there.

I wonder who those people have been in your life, those companions on the journey who simply by showing up—simply by existing—embody the grace and provision of God, those who are that steadying presence when the ground underneath you keeps moving.

Some of us might first think of our immediate family. For some, that's our family of origin; for

others, this might also include a family created in early adulthood or later in life, and what a gift all of these relationships can be. But it is a hard truth of life that sometimes we are separated from one another, even those closest to us. The complexities of human life and the reality of human brokenness sometimes get in our way, whether for a little or a long while. Mental illness and addiction prevent us from being present with and for one another in the ways we might wish for or need. At some point, inevitably, we are separated by death.

But the good news amid all of that is that God continues to meet us, and God continues to provide. Whether for a moment, a season, or a lifetime, the people we meet on our life's journey help sustain us.

Perhaps you remember a teacher in your middle or high school years who was an anchor for you.

The aunt, uncle, or grandparent who went out of their way to look out for you and to make sure that you had everything you needed.

The people you meet in AA or NA or in a grief group who may not be a part of your day-to-day life but understand what you're going through in a way that others can't.

As Jesus said in Matthew's gospel: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them." Wherever our paths cross, we have the capacity to be agents of God's healing and peace for one another. And if we pay attention, we see that happening in our lives.

I recently got to visit with one of you following a major surgery and an uncommonly long hospital stay. This person shared with me that when it was time to finally be discharged, they were invited to name a nurse who had demonstrated exceptional care. It turns out this was a nearly impossible task. They couldn't name one. When all was said and done, it was no less than five.

Jesus gets a lot of credit for healing in the Bible – as he should – but I'm thinking of the healing of

the paralytic as told in Mark and Luke. This paralyzed man is carried, whether by friends or strangers, we don't know. He's carried to Jesus, and when they can't get him through the front door to where Jesus is because it's so crowded, these companions make a hole in the roof. It is their faith and their persistence that make it possible for Jesus to heal the paralyzed man.

Yes, so often God's provision takes human form, embodied in those we meet along the way, in their physical presence. Is this not one of the cruelest facets of the coronavirus pandemic: the many ways that it kept us apart by necessity, especially in those early months when we knew so little and hope was so far away. Babies born and only their parents get to soak up that sweet newborn smell. Losses grieved in solitude. In some cases, loved ones passing from this life to the next, and we weren't able to be at their side. The chaos of children at home with no actual help. Those of us who live alone woke up to a world each day that felt unbearably small. Living "alone" took on a whole new meaning. Yes, we found ways to connect and to accompany one another virtually and in other ways, but we have learned the hard way, through our own experiences, what German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said while he was imprisoned: that it is "grace, nothing but grace" that we might, for any length of time, know the presence and companionship of another.

Let us thank God for this gift each day. Let us not take it for granted again.

Yes, so often God's provision takes human form. This continues to be the case in Naomi's story. If you take the time to read the remaining chapters on your own, you'll see that as the women begin again in Bethlehem, Ruth has a chance encounter with Boaz, a relative of Naomi's. Boaz helps ensure the women have protection and food in the short-term. And spoiler alert: eventually, through a couple of twists and turns, Boaz marries Ruth, and they have a child.

At the very end of the story, the same women of Bethlehem who saw Naomi return from Moab utterly destroyed marvel aloud at the faithfulness of God,

saying of the child, "He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him."

I want to be careful and very clear: Naomi has known an inordinate amount of loss in her life. This is not what we would call a 'happy' or a 'storybook' ending. Nothing can justify, validate, or wipe away the loss of Naomi's husband and her sons. They cannot be replaced, and these are losses Naomi will live with and carry with her forever.

And. We see in this story a woman who at one time had no hope. Who thought her life was over, because for all intents and purposes, it was. A woman who was resigned to a fate of poverty and total lack—total absence—of joy or meaning. And by the grace of God, this woman, over time, found new life and new hope through the people who met her and walked alongside her. Ruth. Boaz. And surely a host of others unnamed in this story. It is not a better ending—it does not replace the people she loved and lost—but it is unquestionably a story of new life where it seemed there could be none.

Isn't this the story of our faith?

A God who chose to be with us, who took actual human form, in all its vulnerability, and walked alongside us, ate with us, laughed and shed tears with us, and who did not turn away, even when it meant death on a cross.

Isn't this the story of our faith? New life where it seemed there could be none. An empty tomb. Love stronger than the grave; life stronger than death.

Yes, so often God's provision takes human form: the form of Christ, the form of the faithful friend, the distant relative, the nurse at the bedside (or nurses), the stranger at the grocery store, the people sitting around you in the pews. All companions on the journey.

I look at you, and I see this holy companionship here in the ways we uphold one another in prayer

and in song. I see it in our deacons quietly sending bereavement notes each month whenever we learn that someone in our church has suffered a loss, simply to say, “We’re praying for you, and we’re here for you.” I see it in our choir, in Dinners for 8 groups, in Bible studies, in our youth group, the food pantry, in coffee hour conversations... I couldn’t name all of the ways even if I tried.

Friends, we do not know what the road ahead will bring in our individual lives or in our common life. A new school year is nearly upon us, and a new season of life and ministry in this congregation. A pandemic continues to bring new challenges and uncertainty. The path ahead in so many ways is unclear.

But look around. We are not alone. We are on the journey together, and in this simple fact alone, we know that God will continue to provide. Amen.