

Texts: Ruth: 1:1-22; Matthew 5:3-9

Subject: Naomi and her daughters-in-law

Theme: Where Home Is

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2022; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some of you will know that I consider Bob Marley one of the greatest songwriters and performers of the last century. His songs, which are so often centered in love and unity, joy and peace are filled with lyrics that come from his faith, passed down from his mother. His songs drip with scripture, from the Hebrew Bible, especially the Psalms. (We hosted an evening of worship here a few years back with music from Bob Marley and the Wailers.) So many of his songs lifted up those who knew the struggle for equality, freedom, and liberation, and his popularity continues, more than 40 years after his death. As I was reading the book of Ruth this week I couldn't help but think of the songs and lyrics that proclaim God's promise of loss, deliverance, hunger, abundance, loyalty and love. "Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)" was one that popped into my head. "Could You Be Loved?" was another. "Good Times, Bad Times" - no, that's Led Zeppelin - they're great too. Over the next few weeks we'll hear these recurring themes as we hear this unique story from scripture.

There are artists that stick in our minds because they have something to say that resonates with our own life experiences. Have you ever been hungry? Have you been affected by inequality? Have you seen politics divide and people suffer? I have. Their words and arrangements entice us to imagine and stir our creativity. Think of Handel's Messiah, or Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon. Music can change our mood and open

our eyes to new ideas. Is there an artist or a song you put on when you need to relax or recover after a busy day or to keep you energized on a road trip?

The Book of Ruth is a short story that has done things like that for people of faith for thousands of years. It teaches us about God, opens our minds to see how the Lord works in human struggle and who God includes in the ongoing journey of freedom and peace and love. Like the music we love and the songs that continue to resonate in our lives and connect us to the world around us, the story of Ruth and Naomi can speak to each of us in so many different ways.

The story begins by introducing us to a dead man, Elimalech, who is from Bethlehem in Judah. He's known as an Ephrathite, which is an older name for the city and native inhabitants of Bethlehem. Bethlehem, in Hebrew, means "house of bread." In Arabic, it's "house of meat." Ephrathah, in Hebrew, means "Fruitful." So we've got bread, meat, and fruit. But we've got a problem. There's not enough food. There's a famine in the land, and Elimalech and his family, wife Naomi and their two sons have to move to Moab. The people there were often known to be enemies of Israel, through they were distant relations, Moab was a son of Lot. They were just on the other side of the Dead Sea where along the shore it was green and good for farming. So when the food became scarce, it sounded like a good place to go. But then, a triple tragedy strikes for the family, Naomi's husband Elimalech and the two sons died. Naomi is left without anyone able to provide for her, and her two daughters-in-law must decide their next step.

"Should [they] stay or should they go?" (a classic song by the Clash) is the question. Where is home?

Where is our home? Back in 2008 we saw the mortgage market collapse and the economic downturn affected tourism and more in our city. Las Vegas was one of the most hard hit cities in the U.S. as home prices in our city dropped 62 percent from 2006 to 2012. People were leaving town in record numbers. The foreclosure rate peaked at 9.6 percent by 2010. So many here in our valley are “from” other places, and have chosen to make their home here. It’s rare to meet the Vegas native. Home for many of us might be where we were born and raised, maybe where we’ve spent the most time, or where we decided we wanted to live. But more than that, ‘home” is where you find the people you love and with whom you will spend your life. We have a lot of choice in that matter.

I wonder about the choices people makers here sometimes. As I speak to folks in need of help, and many of the guys here in the neighborhood who are trying to get back on their feet, I hear their stories. They want to get a bus ticket somewhere else, or buy an RV, or will get off the street after they do this thing or that. They have a plan, and it’s all gonna work out. Others are just trying to get to the next day. There are injuries, the pain of just living on the street and walking around all day has worn them out. They are harassed and beaten, sick and so often alone, that they have nothing left but despair. What can I offer but a little food, some help, clothing, a prayer. It’s a constant reminder that our choices cannot save us. We cannot always reason our way of our circumstances.

For Naomi and Ruth, going home was more about surviving. If they went back to Naomi’s homeland, she might be able to rely on a family member to help her and take her in.

Ruth's home was Moab, and to run home to her mother's house would have been the easiest, the safest, the wisest idea. But she chose to stay with her mother-in-law - to cling to her. Why? Was it out of commitment, duty, or habit? Was there a reason she'd rather not return to her family in Moab? We don't know for sure. but she demonstrates an uncommon, unexpected, maybe undeserved loyalty to Naomi and vows, “

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge,
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

She tells Naomi, “I'm staying no matter what happens. We've been through so much already, and I'm going to be by your side for the next chapter and the one after that and this is our life together now.” Imagine this story being told thousands of years ago, passed down from generation to generation. It would have been funny, if it wasn't so terrifying. What would this woman's life be? Reliant on strangers who might abuse her, or treat her as an unwelcome outsider, she'd have nothing and no one to protect her. She could have no realistic expectation of safety or care. She put herself at the mercy of the people in her new home, and would accept this new reality, even if it meant her death.

Where is God in this story? Naomi speaks of the Lord:

“Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

God has dealt harshly with her. Her life was *fruitful*, but now has become *bitter*. Now she's home, but she's empty. This story of love and loyalty and loss might seem dramatic but it's a story that has been told and retold for so long because it resonates with our lives. When we have lost so much, how do we survive? How do we avoid becoming *mara*, becoming bitter by the circumstances of our lives and the pain of the

world? When we have suffered tragedy after tragedy, and live in a constant state of grief, how can we know that, like Bob sings, “everything’s gonna be alright.”

I used to think that if I could just make the right choices I could avoid the perils of life. We try, don’t we? We want to find the path of least resistance to get the places we want to go, but then...life happens. Things happen beyond our control, like changing relationships, we lose a job, natural disasters occur, and the ground beneath our feet seems to shift and we have to go a different way. Sometimes we make a choice and hope for the best. We entrust ourselves to another way, and decide we will accept the outcome, until we have to choose again.

If you have had that experience of losing a loved one, or now find yourself in declining health, or have suffered heartbreak, you can imagine a bit of what these women had to go through. Maybe you’ve tried to do the best you can to rebuild, but something’s just missing. There is a holy one who hears you. Maybe you’ve been angry at the universe and at God for *bringing calamity* on you - that’s ok too - the One Who Makes a Way can take it. You can come home. Home is the place where they can’t kick you out, where they have to accept you, where you belong no matter what. God *is* where home is. God is the one who has given us everything in Jesus Christ, who died and is risen for us and for the whole world to bring us home again, to be with us through every tragedy, to love us and restore us to wholeness in Him. The promise is still good. Especially when you feel broken and beyond help, unsure and unable to go on, God is calling you home.

We don't hear God as an active character in this story, but as the one behind the scenes, and while Naomi hopes that the Lord would deal kindly with her daughters, she feels that God has "brought [her] back empty," She's not sure where God is. She does the only thing she knows how to do and heads for Home. But we end this first chapter on a positive note. It draws us in and keeps us here to listen for the rest of the story. There will be a time for redemption. *It's now time for the harvest.*