

Oct 13

From Endings to Beginings

Ruth 1:6-18

When we are at a crossroad, we respond one of two ways. We look back and allow the experiences of the past to shape our decisions for the future. Or, we face the future unencumbered, believing that it holds unlimited possibilities. Our responses are never quite this definitive. They are often a blending of the two with one attitude being dominant. But, for sake of argument, let us look at them in their purest form because today we come to such a time of decision in the Ruth story, and we see both of these attitudes at play.

Naomi is the realist, looking back at her life all she sees is misery and loss. She is making the assumption that the future will continue on this same path. She saw her life as over. She felt that she was as good as dead. Naomi does not want to drag down her daughters-in-law. She releases them from the feeling that they should take care of her. She wants to repay their kindness by freeing them so they can remarry. For women of this day, marriage was how you found security. When they say they would rather return with Naomi to her home she comes up with a series of arguments meant to persuade them that they are better off going back to their mother's houses. They were all logical, showing that staying with her was a losing proposition. She ends her arguments by saying that she has no hope. She is so bitter that she is changing her name to Mara, which means just that. And, it seems, that she has decided to blame the Lord for bringing about the situation in which she finds herself. She says, "The hand of the Lord has turned against me." By implication, she wants her daughters-in-law to not be with one whom the Lord has turned against. Everything she says indicates that she believes the issues of the past are going to carry forward into the future.

Have you ever felt that way? Can you recall a string of unfortunate or calamitous events in your life and how you felt at that moment? It is hard to not be a Naomi, to feel like life recently has been bad, today isn't great and so I hold out no hope for tomorrow. You strive to not be sucked into that black hole of despair and you work at keeping others from being sucked in with you, but life feels hopeless. You put one step in front of the other, living in survival mode. We lose sight of the good news of our faith, which is

that we worship a God of new beginnings. We worship a God of second chances. Ruth's story reminds us that, in the midst of seeming endings, God is bringing people into our lives that can help us to find that new beginning.

Before we talk about Ruth we need to spend just a moment on Orpah. We should never blame Orpah for her response. Naomi noted how she had done more than was required and had been kind and loving to her. Orpah had been willing to go into the unknown as well. She was persuaded by Naomi that her future lay in another direction. And for her, that probably was the case.

In the Bible Orpah's leave-taking is never seen as negative. She has been persuaded by Naomi's arguments. She kisses Naomi good-by and vanishes, but we believe, blessed by God. Legend says that she remarried and had many sons. Ruth is not persuaded and clings to Naomi. Ruth's actions are never seen as prescriptive for the way all daughter's-in-law should behave. If this was the case then the book would become an oppressive instrument forcing women into futures they did not want.

Now let us look at Ruth's response. I had not realized until re-reading this story that Ruth's speech came with a bit of heat. In Hebrew, Ruth's speech has overtones of indignation, which our English translations miss. Ruth is indignant because Naomi is urging her to abandon her present loyalties. Instead of looking back, Ruth's speech is all about the future. Ruth states that Naomi's God is her God now, that Naomi is now her family. Therefore, where you go I must go and it makes me angry when you urge me to abandon these commitments. Her statements would have been interpreted as a pledge and, as such, it was seen as binding. Hence, Naomi no longer challenges her to go back.

When we think of what Ruth said, I see it sharing several things with Naomi and with us about how God is with us in challenging times.

She was a beacon of hope for Naomi who thought life was worthless and full of bitterness. Ruth's willingness to stand beside her was going to be pivotal for Naomi finding new life. Whenever you are struggling and life seems hopeless, realize that God

is sending someone to you as a spot of light in the darkness. I know this is true because I have experienced it so many times.

I think about how, early in my ministry, I was feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of being a pastor. I had gotten to know, slightly, another pastor in the community. One day, after a clergy gathering, he stopped by the office. He asked, "Is everything going all right?" He explained that he had noticed that I seemed a bit down. I mentioned to him all the stuff I was going through. In my head, I knew it was part of being a pastor and I also knew it wouldn't last, but right then things seemed pretty hopeless. How was I to get on top of all that I needed to do? He smiled and said, "We have all been there." He then prayed for me and I still remember a part of that prayer. He said, "Lord, Bill is in a tunnel, help him see the light." He then asked me one good thing that had happened that day. I could easily mention something. He said, "Focus on what is good, that is the light that will get you through the tunnel." For a few months he would pop in every couple of weeks. He became a beacon of hope. God does not want us to stay in the darkness. We have to work at staying there. Naomi tried to stay in a bitter and hopeless place but Ruth continued to share a message of hope, and that light overcame Naomi's darkness. God will do the same for us if we will be open to those messages of hope.

Ruth has a forward looking attitude that doesn't focus on the uncertainties of life. Naomi had given all the logical reasons for turning back home. Ruth will have none of it. Ruth's insistence that she stay with Naomi is striking. In moving forward, Ruth makes no reference to her uncertain future as a widow. That would be scary enough. But she would also be a foreigner. And, as Naomi pointed out, she had no hope of marriage and what would happen to her when Naomi died? Even though all of this is part of the future, Ruth says that she will stay by Naomi's side, accepting her people and her God, continuing her loyalty until death.

Her response is a reminder to all of us that when we are in the midst of challenging times that God is calling on us to lean into the future and trust that God is with us and that blessings will happen. Yes, there might be a lot of uncertainty but God is with us. And, as in the story of Ruth, the hope and support we need will often come to

us through the love and care of others. We have to be careful to not reject it, as Naomi tried to do that day at the border.

Ruth was not legally required nor customarily expected to remain with Naomi. Her speech must be understood as an act of “hesed.” Naomi made a common sense approach to the future. Reason alone could not justify Ruth’s decision to cling to Naomi. Her actions are governed by loyalty and love rather than logic.

Ruth’s loyalty provides a sense of hope, a future. Sometimes you find faith, hope and direction in unusual places. Part of the story of Ruth is learning to overcome suspicions and stereotypes and celebrate how God is at work. It is seeing that God is always giving us a future. We might find it in unexpected ways from unexpected people. But our God is one of new beginnings.

But it all begins by finally letting go of the past, trusting that God is with you, celebrating how others come to love and support you and ultimately realizing that there is always hope and possibilities.

Next week we will continue this story as we see how God’s blessings pour down on Ruth and through her on Naomi too. Ruth’s insistence on staying with Naomi will bring ultimately blessing for Naomi and Ruth. It will craft new beginnings not just for them but for a nation.