

“Faith”

August 30, 2020

St. Paul’s UCC Church

Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Ruth 1:19-22

So [Ruth and Naomi] went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “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?” So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Ruth 4:13-22

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 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.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

I don’t think I fully realized it at the time, but early 2005 was a pretty hard year for me. Back in 2005, my world was kind of dark.

On the surface, things were going well for me: I was engaged to a fabulous person named Matt, I was a good student, I had a lot of friends. Yes, on the surface, things looked pretty darn good for me.

But, the truth was, it was a dark time. For much of that year, I had struggled to see the path my life should take. I knew I wanted to serve a church; but I didn’t know where, or what kind of church. Rural, or urban? Large, or small? Should I be an associate pastor, or a solo pastor? And then there was the whole being-married-to-another-clergy-person thing. Since Matt and we were both ministers (or, in my case, a soon-to-be minister), we had little idea as to how to proceed as a clergy couple. Who should take the lead, vocationally? How do we do this whole dual-minister thing, anyway??

Back in 2005, I felt a little stuck. And I was having a hard time finding my way in the dark.

I'm preaching today on the book of Ruth – one of my very favorite books in the whole Bible. Today I'm mostly drawing from Ruth, chapter 4, the final chapter in a story about someone finding her way in the dark.

A quick review of what's gone on so far:

At the beginning of the book, back in chapter 1, we meet Naomi, who is a Hebrew woman. When we first meet her, Naomi is living in the foreign land of Moab. She's in Moab because of a severe famine in her homeland, Judah. But her husband Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi and her two sons behind. The sons marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. But then the sons die, leaving the three women – one Jewish mother and two Moabite daughters-in-law – to fend for themselves, alone.

Years pass, and one day, Naomi hears that the famine in her homeland of Judah is over, so she packs her bags and prepares to leave. But her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, want to go with her. Naomi isn't having it; and eventually convinces Orpah to return home. But Ruth insists on staying with her mother-in-law. Ruth loves Naomi too much: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

Despite this beautiful covenant that Ruth makes, Naomi is still bitter. When she gets to Bethlehem in Judah, listen to what she says: "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..."

Naomi is in a dark place. But slowly, things start to look up. Her daughter-in-law Ruth meets this guy named Boaz, who just happens to be related to Naomi (ding ding ding!), and Boaz and Ruth fall in love.

And all that brings us to chapter 4, the last chapter of the book of Ruth.

In chapter 4, Ruth and Boaz get married. There is much rejoicing! Then they have a son, which was considered – back in the day – the greatest blessing you could hope for.

I included the end of chapter 1 in today's readings because I wanted to be reminded of the very bad state Naomi was in right as she and Ruth are taking off for Judah. Back in Moab, and even when she gets to Judah at first, Naomi can't find her way forward. The path is far from clear. Things are so bad for Naomi that she even wants to change her name to "Mara," which means bitter! Because she feels so lost. Because she doesn't know what to do.

But in the darkest days of her life, Ruth was there, right there beside her. In those dark days, Ruth made a covenant with her; Ruth promised never to leave her alone. Not everybody gets to be loved like that. It's a real gift! But at the time, in her darkness, Naomi couldn't see it. She is not able to see the blessing right in front of her.

Fast forward to the end of the story, to chapter 4. Listen to the song the women sing to Naomi: "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 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." ... Did you hear that? Did you hear what the women are singing? The women sing about the blessing of the son that Ruth and Boaz have, yes. But did you catch what they are singing about at the end? "Your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons..." What is the greatest blessing here? The women get it. The son is nice. The son is a blessing. But Ruth... Ruth, faithful, courageous, loving, hard-working, sticking-with-you Ruth. She is the greatest blessing of all. And she has always been there. And finally, Naomi can see it.

I want to be clear: I am not passing judgment on Naomi here. The intention of this sermon is not to say, "Oh my gosh, would you look at how blind Naomi is? If she could have only had more faith, or been a better person, then maybe she would've seen the blessing of Ruth all along the way." There is no judgment of Naomi here. Quite the contrary; I mean, how many times in my life has my pain or confusion or doubt been so thick that I'm not able to see what's right in front of me? More than I can count. Naomi is so human. Her pain is blinding. Her life is dark. I know what that's like. Maybe you do, too.

Back in 2005, I was really struggling. I wanted to trust that God was leading me somewhere good, but I was having a hard time seeing it.

But eventually, the darkness started to lift; eventually things became a little clearer. Matt and I started talking to a lot of churches (I mean, *a lot* of churches!), trying to trust that we would find two that were within a reasonable distance of each other. We had a lot of conversations with churches all over the country, and eventually, lo and behold, two congregations started to emerge: both in Des Moines, Iowa (we had to look on an old-fashioned map to remind ourselves where, exactly, Iowa was located).

Matt and I got married; I was ordained; and a few months later, we both received calls to those churches in Des Moines. We moved out to Iowa. And those first churches we served were exactly where we needed to be. And we were so grateful. We both started to see that even in the darkest, most uncertain days, God had been with us, all along.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris quotes a novelist who writes that faith “is not synonymous with certainty... [but] is the decision to keep your eyes open.”¹ Sometimes, our blessings are right in front of our noses. But because of our pain, because of our grief, because of our doubt, we can’t see them. It’s just too dark. So what I try to take from the Book of Ruth, from the story of Naomi, is this simple assurance: *Just because I cannot see it, doesn’t mean it’s not there.* I am blessed, and so are you. Even in dark places. I have everything I need in this moment, and so do you.

If you are having a hard time seeing it this morning – if things in your own life are a little dark these days – God has a way of sending somebody to find you in your darkness, to walk with you through these days, to remind you: You are blessed. You have everything you need.

We may be in the darkness, but we are not alone. And together, by the grace of God, we can open our eyes, and start to see.

Thanks be to God!

¹ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 169.