

# JOURNEYS' ENDING - NAOMI COMES HOME

## Eastertide

Ruth 1:1-22

A Sermon Preached by  
**Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz**  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington 98125  
May 6, 2018

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

**Ruth 1:1-22, selected verses, paraphrase<sup>1</sup>**

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his sons. ... And Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died ... And then her two sons died. And Naomi was left alone with her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth from the country of Moab.

When Naomi heard that God had considered God's people and there was food again in the land of Judah, Naomi and her daughters-in-law set out for Judah. But Naomi turned to Orpah and Ruth and told them to go back to their mother's home. Orpah turned back but Ruth would not go. Instead she promised Naomi wherever she would go, she also would go; wherever she would lodge, she also would lodge.

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?" Naomi said,

    "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.

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Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

I want to circle back to nine months ago, back in September we began a nine-month journey as a congregation talking about migration. We started last fall talking about what you need to leave to get ready to go. In Advent we went. We spent a long season in the winter in Epiphany and Lent in that in between time when we wondered if we were going anywhere. And then in this Eastertide Season we end in the next two weeks about talking about the journey's ending. We invited you at the beginning of the series to write a letter to yourself about where you hope to be – wanted to be today -- on this May Sunday. Some of you may receive those letters this week.

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible, Old Testament, paraphrase.

## JOURNEYS' ENDING - NAOMI COMES HOME

This Sunday is particularly for all of us whose journey didn't go as planned. For all of us whose journey may not be going as planned. Now, for some of us that could be is very simple as I was doing my normal drive to church and I came down to turn left into 16th Avenue Northeast to discover that you can't anymore. Or it could be as complex as the marriage fell apart. It could be as seemingly simple as I didn't pass the test or as complex as I didn't get the job. Maybe it was I didn't make the team. Or maybe it was that you made the team and now you're finding out you don't want to be on the team. Whatever it is, this Sunday is for you if you've had a journey or are in a journey now that hasn't gone as you planned or hoped or wanted it to be. And the rest of you can just listen in today, can just listen in. And you might remember, "I remember that time when the journey didn't go as I wanted it to." And just even hearing those words "the journey didn't go as I wanted to; it just didn't work out" may bring forth some feelings as it does in all of us and perhaps a memory as well. And perhaps during this time if all you know is you get to touch some grief, know this. that the grief you touch and the tears you may feel are indeed the beginning of where the healing journey begins.

But also hear this: This is not a hopeless sermon and it's not a despairing text. There's two things in it that we don't fully understand, as we can't when the journey hasn't gone as planned. But we will hear this: we will hear that sometimes in the dark sticks left when the fire has gone out that someone is writing a new story in the ashes of your life. And we will hear eight little words that we do not understand but that make all of the difference. In this time of lostness when the journey did not work out as planned, it was the time of the barley harvest. Will you join me in prayer.

God,  
We come today as we are.  
Open us to hear, to taste, to see,  
and to know again your Word of life. – Amen.

Once upon a time and a long, long time ago, it was the time of the judges. That is to say it was a time of political chaos when there was no king in Judah and people were left to do as they pleased. And in that time of political chaos it was also a time of environmental chaos and there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem. In the city of bread there was no bread. And in that time of crisis and chaos [*Naomi*] and her husband Elimelech and their two sons set out on a journey in search of food as immigrants always will do, to go and find where food is.

Well, they went to like the worst place you could imagine going. They went off to Moab. Which for us today would be like you went off today to go to Syria perhaps. Or go to make your home in Kabul or Baghdad. What would you be thinking? But you know it's desperate people that go to desperate godforsaken places in such times and they go, because they go with the hope that even in that place I might find some sustenance, I might find some life, even there in Moab. But all that happened in Moab was Elimelech died. And their two sons died. And Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah: three vulnerable women without security without status. But sometimes – and perhaps this is happen to you in godforsaken places in your life in godforsaken times – you too hear something of the word of God and the word of life

And the word of God came to Moab and Naomi heard it. She heard that God is taking pity on God's people and that there was food again in Bethlehem. And so she turned to take the long journey home, Orpah and Ruth with her. But Naomi soon turned and said, "Go back to your mothers' homes.

## JOURNEYS' ENDING - NAOMI COMES HOME

There is *nothing* with me." And Orpah turned and she went home to her mother's house. But Ruth clung to Naomi and she said, "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. Your God shall be my God," binding herself to Naomi. Two women wandered in to Bethlehem. It had been years since Naomi had left and this journey was coming to a close in a way that she had not dreamed, had not fantasized, had not thought it was going to be. And she wandered into the city square and her family and her friends did not recognize her.

Have you ever been on a journey where you came back and people didn't recognize you? What the heck happened to you? And Naomi, she didn't recognize herself. She said, "Don't call me Naomi anymore. Just call me Mara. Call me bitter. Look what God has done to me, look how the journey went in the way that it wasn't supposed to go."

David Vasquez Levi was sitting around through the group of immigrant women in the Yakima Valley and reading with them the Book of Ruth. And when they came to the Scripture passage for today, one of those immigrant women around that circle that night began to weep. And through her tears she said, "*That* is my story." She said, "I was deported once. I was put in a big plane, flew off to Guatemala City, where I got on a little city bus that took me up into the mountains. And the bus left me off in the middle of the day. It was market day, and everybody was there. And I stepped off the bus. And people looked at me.

Everybody had imagined that I'd gone north, to make money, raise my family, have a good life. And here I was coming back defeated. I didn't recognize myself. I wondered where in the world was God in all this. She'd lost everything. She sold off all of her land to pay for the coyote to bring her on the dangerous journey across the border. And now she had nothing.

As people will do in times like that, some people began to wag their fingers and say, "You never had it in you." And "What were you thinking!?" But of course the most cruel finger wagging that we ever get is that that we do to ourselves. What the heck *was* I thinking? Did I have it in me? Was I strong enough? Why couldn't I have made it work out? And why, *why* did I dream, why did I fantasize that I could? And we attack ourselves even, even with that beautiful part of ourselves that dreams and fantasizes.

What you do with your pain? I don't know what to do with mine often. I mean I know how to numb it out. I know how to push it away. I know how to try to forget it. I know how to try to be so busy that it doesn't catch me. But I know what it's like not to know what in the world to do with my pain.

But if there is one piece of hope in this story it is *this* piece of hope. When the journey is gone is you didn't want to go, you didn't want it to go, you didn't dream that it would go, didn't fantasize that it would go, and all you feel is the shame and the guilt and the betrayal that it didn't work out. To begin the journey to healing you got to grieve. You got to let in the pain and the grief. And *that* in that place is the beginning of transformation.

But there's something more in it. You can't just grieve. But you've got to share your pain and your grief with somebody else. You got to be real in your life. You got to show up in your life. Naomi showed up in her life and all that she was and all that she didn't have. All she knew was that she was

## JOURNEYS' ENDING - NAOMI COMES HOME

a mess and empty. But Ruth saw something very different in Naomi. She didn't see "mess and empty"; she saw "She's got possibility and that's why I'm going to bind myself to her." I wonder for you and I wonder for me, who do you let see you. I mean, who do you let really see you, because in that is the possibility that someone can see what we cannot see ourselves.

The poet David Whyte had a very good friend who was going through a painful divorce and she was leaving a marriage. And all of the tumult and chaos and loneliness of such a time David saw something in *her*. He saw that she was coming to *life* in some way that he never witnessed in her before. But as he said, you know at a time like that when someone's life is falling apart and all of that, you *don't* say if you're a good friend, "You know this seems to be really good for you." So, instead, he wrote a poem called "The journey" that he shared with her someday about what he witnessed in her. What he witnessed was this.

Sometimes with  
the bones of the black  
sticks left when the fire  
has gone out  
  
someone has written  
something new  
in the ashes of your life.

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Sometimes with  
the bones of the black  
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someone has written  
something new  
in the ashes of your life. <sup>2</sup>

Could you imagine that someone might be writing something new in these ashes of your life now?  
Could you imagine that possibility?

And then there's these eight little words. They're like throw away words at the end of the story.

It was the time of the barley harvest.

Now you know, I don't know anything about barley or harvesting, but what I do know is that it is spring in Seattle. What I know is that for some of us, the journey just didn't go as we hoped and longed it to be. *And* it's spring in Seattle. And I wonder if you have gone outside and heard the gospel that God is proclaiming on this glorious day. Ada Limón put it this way in her home "Instructions for Not Giving Up."<sup>3</sup> She said there is "a green skin growing over whatever winter did to us." – I mean,

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<sup>2</sup> David Whyte. Excerpt from "The Journey" in *The House of Belonging* (1997). Text confirmed 7/27/2018 from <https://consciousmovements.com/th-journey-by-david-white/>

<sup>3</sup> Ada Limón, "Instructions on Not Giving Up" ©2017. Originally published in Poem-a-Day on May 15, 2017, by the Academy of American Poets. Information access 7/27/2018 at <http2://www.poets.org/print/node/447742>

## JOURNEYS' ENDING - NAOMI COMES HOME

“despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty, there is a green skin growing over it all. Fine then, I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf unfurling like a fist, like an open palm....”

The Guatemalan woman who was deported took the dangerous journey back across the border again to sit around a fire that night with other immigrant women who had taken journeys that had not gone as they longed them to. And she heard a story that echoed her own life. And as she wept, the women around the fire leaned in close to her and though she couldn't look up or didn't look up and she didn't see all around her the fields were green.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from <https://universityucc.org/resources/sermon-podcasts>  
07/27/2018