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We Can't Go Alone

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Introduction

Our Scripture reading this second week of Advent is from the Old Testament book of Ruth.

Ruth's story begins with an ending. It begins with the end of life as Ruth knew it; life as she planned it and expected it to go. It begins, too, with the end of Naomi's life as she knew it.

Naomi was Ruth's mother-in-law. She and her husband moved to Moab with their two sons because of a famine in Judah. Naomi's husband died, but she stayed in Moab with her sons. They both married Moabites— one of those wives was Ruth.

After ten years, both of Naomi's sons also died. Leaving Naomi, Ruth, and the other son's wife, Orpah, all widows, alone together in Moab. Naomi decided to make her way back to Judah, but she told Ruth and Orpah to go back to their families.

Orpah bids a tearful farewell. But Ruth...Ruth chooses a different path.

Please join me in prayer as we open our hearts to God's word speaking through Ruth and Naomi's story.

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God,

The words of this world whip around us like a mighty wind.
We are caught up in news reports, in text messages, in emails
and notifications.

But here on this bright morning, we remember:
You, too, are speaking.

Still the voices around us.
Calm our minds and center our hearts
So that we can hear your words above the wind.

Speak to us, as only you can.
Amen.

Ruth 1:15-22

So Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her
people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But
Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you,
to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die,
and there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them 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.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When Things Fall Apart

Who can you turn to when things fall apart? When there is no safety net, no soft landing for you? And who turns to you?

Ruth and Naomi's story begins at the time of Judges. The time when Judges ruled over Judah was not a time of security, especially for those on society's margins. Some Judges made

reforms and sought to do good by the people and by God's law. Most looked to profit themselves or avenge their enemies or hoard power for power's sake. There was not a focus on top-down care for the vulnerable— for those God's law specifically named to care for: Widows, orphans, and foreigners.

And here we have three widows, two of whom would have been foreigners if they went to Judah. Their safety net was riddled with holes. Naomi could return to her homeland and hope to find a relative who would have pity on her. There was no other recourse.

Orpah and Ruth had a better option. Remain in Moab, go back to their family of origin, and find a new husband among their people. It was the safest bet in a game of bad odds.

Naomi accepted her lot with resignation and bitterness. In her sorrow, she pushed away her daughters-in-law. But Ruth refused to leave her. Ruth would not take the better odds; she chose to throw her lot in with Naomi.

Both women had their lives shattered. This was not just Ruth being a good friend from a place of security. This was a risky endeavor. There was no plan b. Ruth and Naomi had a new beginning forced upon them. And Ruth decided that they would walk this journey together and with trust in the God of Israel.

When things fall apart, when new beginnings come as unwelcome surprises, we are not meant to go on the journey alone.

Countercultural Community

But we must acknowledge that going it alone can seem like the only option. We live today in a time when 1 in 2 Americans struggle with social disconnection. If you've been going it alone, you are not alone in that. Many of us struggle to find kinship, especially beyond the bonds of our family of origin and marriage.

The Scripture reading this morning is often read at weddings. When we modern Americans hear,

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

It, honestly, sounds extreme even for marriage.

There are very few socially normative bonds this deep, especially beyond blood and beyond the covenant of marriage. But Ruth and Naomi broaden our imagination for connection, for commitment, for kinship, and spiritual community. Ruth was revolutionary and countercultural for her time. And she still is for our time.

Half of us struggle with social disconnection. It is bad individually for our mental and physical health, and it is bad communally for our spiritual flourishing. We are not meant to go on the journey alone.

Marginalized communities have known this out of necessity for a long time. Folks, who because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, have been pushed out of or to the margins of their families, have created chosen families, kinship groups where they can find belonging, security, and freedom to thrive. Those who are on the margins due to poverty, race, ethnicity, language, citizenship status, and age— those who are seniors— are more likely to have fictive kin. I love this term. Fictive kin are those people who are not related by blood or marriage, but who you treat as family.

In Ruth's cultural and spiritual imagination, we can choose to be family. We can choose to not go it alone. We can choose to think beyond the nuclear family unit and create deep bonds of kinship.

For those of us who are married, who because of our spouse and perhaps children, are not alone very often, the call to a kinship community remains. We cannot carry the burdens (and joys!) of life within just one family unit. Ester Perel, famed relationship therapist, has said that in modern life we expect one person—a spouse—to be for us what a whole village ought to be. We need our village. We need our fictive kin.

It's true that Ruth and Naomi paired up, but soon Boaz and his community came into the picture, as well. Mary and Joseph

would make their way to Bethlehem, but first, Mary would gather strength, assurance, and hope from her visit with Elizabeth. The early church created *koinonia*— fellowship, communion, a beloved community where people of different ethnicities, religious backgrounds, economic and social statuses came together daily to worship God, to break bread, to care tangibly for the needs of the vulnerable, widows, orphans, and foreigners, and to walk the way of Jesus together.

Our son loves this show called, “Wow in the World,” where they do household science experiments. One episode was all about experiments with balloons. For one of the experiments, they wondered, “Can you stand on a balloon and not make it pop?” If you’ve ever been at a children’s birthday party with balloons on the floor, you have likely experienced this in real life— When even a child steps onto a balloon full of air, it pops! But they tried something different. What if they put a tabletop on the balloon, then stood on it? What if they distributed or spread the weight out? And just like that, a child was standing on a balloon— and no pop!

Our burdens are not so heavy when they are spread out. We don’t succumb—we won’t pop—under the weight of life when it is carried by others, too. Life is not so lonely when we have people and communities of kinship by our side. We are not meant to go alone.

Accepting the Hospitality of the “Other”

And we can't go it alone...because God has chosen to go with us. In Christ's birth, God was doing something surprising, but not outside of God's nature. Jesus shows us most clearly who God is— and God is with us. Not necessarily in the ways or places or people we would expect, but God is with us on this journey.

Often the person who shows us most clearly who God is—as a real, tangible, grace-filled, loving, risk-taking presence in our lives, God-with-us— is not the person we would expect.

Ruth is an outsider with her own burdens to carry, who takes the risk and extends hope, peace, and abiding presence to Naomi in her sorrow.

Ruth, as a Moabite, shows Naomi who God is for her in her bitterness and her fear.

Ruth, as a Moabite, goes above and beyond Jewish law for the sake of love.

Ruth is part of Jesus' lineage, not just by blood, but by incarnating love in a broken and lonely world.

Person of Peace

I had professor, named Janie Swart, who began each class with Scripture and the instruction to, “Find a reasonably friendly

looking stranger” to listen to and to share with. We then would be asked to share what we heard from the other person— they had to trust us to represent them, and we had to trust them. It was a more vulnerable exercise than you might assume.

At the end of class, he would instruct us to take that vulnerability into the world. Find people of peace— those reasonably friendly looking strangers among us, who we could share with, listen to, and truly hear one another. It was a small, incremental practice of building kinship, of not going it alone.

This Advent season, the lights, sounds, and well-wishes can make it seem like everyone is doing just fine. It can make it seem like our sorrows are only our own. It can make it seem like our grief is an anomaly, like our loneliness is our burden alone to bear.

I am continually unlearning my polite tendency to not pry and to not burden others.

We are not alone when we are lonely.

We are not alone in grief or fear or anxiety.

We are not alone in feeling overwhelmed and under-resourced.

When we take the risk of vulnerability—of sharing our messy, complicated, holy lives with one another—we, like Ruth, share in Christ’s lineage of incarnate love. We embody God’s love. A love that vulnerably enters the world, even as things are falling apart, and chooses us to be God’s family.

We can't go alone, and we were never meant to. May we journey—together—with the God who is with us.

Amen.

Charge

Friends, find a reasonably friendly looking stranger in these weeks of Advent. Find a person of peace who you can share with and listen to. Invite someone into your home or go to theirs. Be open to the surprising ways God might extend peace to you. Share, not just pleasantries in this season, but your messy, complicated, holy lives.



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