

Good News in this liminal time

October 31, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Ruth 1: 1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!"

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Good morning First Church. Here in the pews, expanding across all of our many sanctuaries from home. It is so good to be with you.

A few weeks ago, a friend shared with me an expression she heard, and I quote: "the big sad is here." Followed by a sigh and some real silence. I heard this expression is on Tik-tok, too – I believe I just earned some cool points for knowing that.

The big sad. A collective sad feeling for the state of the pandemic and the case counts we so desperately want to just go away across the globe. A collective feeling for all the news headlines. A phrase that captures the moment you feel when too many hard things happened to people you loved.

I found this expression to really resonate with me. Back in December, I know that I looked to the year 2021 as if it was the shoreline after a long rocky trip across the ocean. For 2021 was and is the year that brought and is bringing vaccines and re-openings. I know the FDA just authorized the Pfizer vaccine for children ages 5-11 – thanks be to God! (in some churches I may even hear an “Amen”)

And so, I looked at 2021 as the rainbow after a long storm, forgetting that life is still life and that life will still be a mostly masked life. And with life there are painful heartbreaking moments and there are incredibly beautiful joyful moments - like installing our Reverend Lexi Boudreaux - and like a Halloween full of costumes, smiles and candies, and cat-ties and all the in-between.

I think I just yearned for this massive break, a long absence of suffering – especially for all who I knew went through more than any human should ever have to go through.

And so, when 2021 began, with the backdrop of pandemic waves, distributions of vaccines, life did continue... and I have found that the hard stuff feels harder in some ways. I don't think I am alone.

Life-changing medical diagnoses, loss of jobs, incredibly delayed unemployment checks, fender benders and accidents, financial stresses – for me, IT just all feels heavier. Not to mention alllllll the planning that goes into every little thing we do.

And all the surveys. Please keep doing them. They are so helpful.

Even with the things that some of us can do that none of us could do a year ago...

Coming here in-person. Reuniting with a singing group, a sports group, hosting a birthday party that is not just a drive by with honking, growing our family/friend pods a bit...and even with those oh so joyful moments, moments we have been waiting and praying for...do not feel exactly the same. There is a feeling of immense gratitude, and still this sadness at the pit of many of our stomachs.

“The big sad.” The sad that describes exactly that – the sad that can be hard to put into words. The sad that everyone is like “yeah, I get it.” The sad that holds all of it and the healing we are all just beginning to do.

I have also heard this captured in a phrase:

“It is like we are here.... But not here yet” this kind of in-between time... this what one Episcopal monk at Saint John the Evangelist in Cambridge says, “a liminal time. The pandemic is ending, but it is not yet over,” we are living “between what was and what is not yet”

Like a recognition that it is better, but we are all exhausted. We are still carrying stress. Still following covid cases, getting tested, wearing masks, singing but not really singing with our whole being, or when tuning in from home, seeing some sense of normalcy, but knowing it's not normal yet...

A phrase that we will pick up again and explore more deeply in Advent.

This is also the political setting I believe we find Naomi and her family in this morning.

The Book of Ruth begins with the narrator informing us that this story takes place in the days of the Judges. We know from the Book of Judges these are dark and difficult days. The Book of Ruth takes place after Moses died. After the death of Joshua who led the Israelites when Moses died...and this is before the great kings of Israel. An “in-between” time. A time noted for violence and many battles. A time “between what was and what is not yet.”

Struggling to survive through a famine in Bethlehem, Elimelek (uh-lim-uh-lek), Naomi and their two sons, in search of food, move to live in the country of Moab. There, in Moab, we learn Naomi's husband dies and she is left with her two sons. Her sons then marry Moabite women – women who grew up and lived their lives in Moab. Their wives' names are Orpah and Ruth, but after ten years, their husbands die, too.

I invite us here to pause. A lot just happened. Amidst the famine, the wars, the uncertainty, Naomi lost her husband and her two sons. Orpah and Ruth lost their husbands. That is a lot to happen in just the first chapter of the book. Perhaps the only smidge of hope is that the famine has ended in Bethlehem, her home – that might be the only, very foggy shoreline Naomi can see.

With no reason to stay, Naomi decides to move back to Bethlehem. She knows the life of an unmarried, foreign widow in Bethlehem will be very hard, and possibly even a death sentence, so she urges her daughters-in-law to stay behind. Orpah eventually agrees, but Ruth refuses.

This - this is when we witness one of the most powerful declarations:

Ruth refuses and please: “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

In the face of tremendous grief, in unshakable sadness, Ruth makes a commitment to Naomi to never leave her. She bears witness to Naomi’s loss – loss of her husband and children and makes a profound commitment – a commitment that stems from a place of pure love and devotion. A love freely given, a commitment freely given, with no attachments or strings, or caveats.

In this moment of our story, I believe we see the face of God through Ruth. Through her promise to never abandon or leave Naomi alone in her grief. To travel with her back to Bethlehem, a land very foreign to Ruth, a place she can very well starve to death as a widow.

And she does not shy from death as a possibility when she says, “Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”

At this point in the story, we may know what will happen and how this story will unfold, but Ruth and Naomi do not. I think this is the moment that marks the beginning of healing for Naomi. A profound and powerful love that will accompany her in her grief and on her journey. It is this moment that reminds me how much love and loving more (as much as we possibly can) can enrich our lives. (PAUSE)

I have been hearing about this show, Ted Lasso for a couple of months now and so I decided to start watching it about a week ago. I am now on the Ted Lasso train and highly recommend the show. This past Friday, I was struck by a speech at the end of an episode that reminded me of our biblical passage today. Now, I am going to be somewhat vague on purpose in my description because I do not want to give any spoilers away.

In case you have not seen the show, it is based on an American football coach who is hired to teach football, aka “American” for soccer, in England. He is a very lovable, funny and heartwarming character. He sincerely cares. One character is even surprised that Ted remembers his name.

In the episode I am recalling, the English football team just experienced a hard loss and the whole team and coach Ted Lasso are in the locker room. Even I, watching, feel defeated. Ted acknowledges this sad moment for the team, and then says you know what is harder than being sad? Being alone and sad.

I immediately thought of Naomi. Granted I do not mean to imply that losing a football game is ANYTHING like Naomi has been through, but the words struck me: “What is harder than being sad? Being alone and sad.”

At a moment when Naomi could experience loneliness on top of all of her losses, Ruth vows to stay by her side and weather the storm and the grief with her. Ruth cannot take away the sadness. She does not even try to.

Ruth’s commitment to journey with her does not change any of their circumstances. They are both still widows, they are both women traveling to Bethlehem with nothing, no financial cushion, no food.

They are still in this in-between time, “between what was and what is not yet.” We learn later in the book that Ruth meets a relative of Naomi whose name is Boaz, an Israelite. Moved by Ruth’s love and devotion to Naomi, he marries her even though she is a Moabite woman. Ruth and Boaz then bear a child who will be the grandchild of King David, one of the great Kings of Israel, who ends up being Jesus’s great, great, great plus 24 more greats grandfather.

But right now, Naomi and Ruth do not know any of this. They are in this liminal time.

What gets them through this is - is knowing they have one another. Knowing they are not alone.

Perhaps reading the book of Ruth today, in this moment, can remind us that no matter what -we are not alone. We are not alone because God our creator is with us even now. **In this time of we are here, but not here yet.** We are not alone because the Holy Spirit is among us, connecting us across wires and technology, across masked faces, holding us as one body of faith.

Siblings in Christ, hear these words God professes to us even now: “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay.”

We hear these words after the resurrection of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

It is this love, this divine love, that can and will sustain us.

I believe it is this love that can help lighten the heavy load. That heavy load we have been carrying on our backs through this pandemic.

I believe it is this love that can help “the big sad” moments feel just a bit more manageable. I believe it is this love that can help us embrace the joy that is around us.

No, these words will not take off our masks, make the pandemic go away, make suffering go away, but I believe it is this love that can begin to heal each of us. If 2021 taught me anything is that what we have been through as individuals, as a community, is not just going to go away. It is going to take time. The road will be long, but we are never alone in that journey.

It is Ruth this morning who is reminding us that God is present, that divine love is present always and it is also Ruth who reminds us to share and profess that love to one another. Within our faith community and beyond our church. Professing a profound love, a love that we were created in and continue to be held in by our Creator, a love that we are called to freely give.

Through pausing - silencing the calendar reminders, the to-do lists to really listen. Boiling water for tea or coffee. Offering your heart. Like Ruth did, like God does.

Because hard things are still happening. Perhaps at times our backs feel a bit sore for what they have already been through. It is love, God’s love, that will help us get from this place to the place that is not yet. The place that will be.

For now, may this Good News offer us solace and hope, may it begin the process of healing and may it continue to hold us in this in between, we are there, but yet here - time. Amen.