

Sermon "Living Beyond the Walls"  
Kirk of St James  
Sunday November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
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I am not sure how you are feeling this morning, but this past week felt long to me. I am certain part of it was shorter days with the time change, and November weather in general which is typically cool and damp. Part of it has been political uncertainty and negative news cycles. Add to that ongoing conflicts, division and global unrest, and there is a lot to process. It was incredibly disheartening to hear human rights activists warn that a new law announced by the Taliban could effectively ban women from talking to each other. So many global issues can leave us wondering what if anything we can do as Christians to offer hope. On the eve of November 11<sup>th</sup> these questions feel even more poignant as we remember the high cost of war and all who have served.

Typically I would not think to turn to the book of Ruth for a word of hope for us today. This passage is typically relegated to a reading at weddings, because it speaks of fidelity and commitment. While those themes are indeed present, it is also what one writer called a "bulldozer book." We often miss how radical this book is, and tame it down but, if we are do it justice we need to understand that it is an incredibly explosive book in the best ways possible.

"Set in a situation of grief and barrenness, this chapter introduces us to two women through whom God will tear down some long admired and carefully crafted walls. The fact that this book holds canonical status at all is in itself scandalous. The heroine in this story is not a Hebrew, but a Moabite widow who was once married to a Hebrew. In a polarized world and in a polarized church, Ruth speaks to us of possibilities, great possibilities that can emerge when we live beyond the walls that would define us and confine us." In all of my years preaching about Ruth and too my shame I have missed the heart of this book.

Let's frame our story first. We have a family living in Bethlehem during a time of great famine. As countless families have had to do throughout history and right up until today, Elimelech and Naomi have to make a choice. In order to save their lives and those of their two boys from starvation and death they are going to have to leave. I can't imagine how difficult that decision must have been for them. To leave behind their way of life and their family, to move to a land where people were considered their bitter enemies in order to survive. Somehow, they manage to carve out an existence there. Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi a widow, but at least she still has her two sons and their wives to save her from destitution. Then the unthinkable happens, both of her sons die as well. The only thing worse than trying to carve out a life for one widow would be trying to find a way to keep three of them alive with no family left to rely on. No wonder Naomi renames herself "Mara" meaning bitter.

Hearing there is now food in Bethlehem she makes the difficult decision to return home. She encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their homes, where perhaps their fortunes might once again improve. Ruth however refuses, insisting in a beautiful promise that she will not leave Naomi alone. While that is lovely, Ruth is risking everything she has in this journey with her. "Ruth is a foreigner, a woman, a widow, and, perhaps of most importance, she is an enemy of Israel." In fact, "the book of Ruth probably arose as a potent critique of the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah in the period of restoration of Jerusalem. These two leaders tried to purify Israel and cement its ethnic identity by casting out foreign wives and their children from the land." Ruth is choosing to leave her home, her family, and everything she knows, to move to a land where her chances of survival as not only a widow but also a foreigner are slim. At best she will encounter apathy and at worst hostility. "In the ancient world, tribal and family origins firmly fixed one's identity and one's gods, and people did not voluntarily abdicate either." Ruth is

willing to go, she is willing to stay with her mother-in-law no matter the cost. That is likely part of the reason Naomi does not want Ruth to come with her, she is not sure of what reception she will receive let alone what Ruth will face.

Somehow, through the hesed (the steadfast love) of the two women this story will not be contained within neat boundaries. Ruth becomes the beloved great grandmother of King David. “Ruth is a foreign woman and wife who does not diffuse Israel’s essence by being who she is but instead, in a marvelous reversal of expectation, acts as a saviour of the nation.” Through friendship and steadfastness these two women show what is possible. Two people who should have been enemies, save one another, and through their actions ultimately save the lives of all humankind. “In view of Ezra and Nehemiah who were trying to preserve the future by purging foreign influences, the seemingly simple story of Ruth becomes an acerbic political counterclaim and an implicit theological affirmation of God as the God of all people. The God for whom Ruth abandons everything is the God of the lowly, the widow, the stranger, and the enemy.” The family tree of Jesus raises a few eyebrows. “Jesus’ own genealogy is a theological statement that includes the nations, the enemies of Israel, the excluded ones.” I love that fact.

When Jesus told us one of the greatest things we could do in this world was to love our neighbour as ourselves it sounds incredibly simplistic. Yet, when we consider the division in the world, the unrest, the idea of who an enemy is--it can feel impossible. This morning Ruth and Naomi shows what can happen when we care for one another. It can become a counter cultural movement that changes the world around us. “Through the love and care we extend to and receive from one another we encounter the gifts of God. We encounter the grace of God.” We remember those who have gone before us, who gave everything they had to keep people safe, and to work for justice. We remember all those who continue this work in the world through unimaginably difficult situations. We pray that we might find ways forward like Ruth and Naomi did, that allows for the inbreaking of God’s spirit in ways that are radical and life giving.

