

# “Your God, My God”

*Preached at North Presbyterian Church – October 13, 2019*

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 146:5-10

Ruth 1:1-17

There are times in everyone’s lives when things go from bad to worse. That was certainly the case with this particular woman named Naomi. At that point in history women were totally dependent upon men. So, when she is left without either a husband or sons, Naomi had no source of income, no security and was disconnected from her people and her house of worship. Things looked hopeless for Naomi.

We have all experienced these times in our lives when things will go from bad to worse. Maybe the furnace goes out and then we are involved in a car accident; or we lose our job; or one of our children is injured and needs to be rushed to the emergency room. There are times when one thing after another makes it seem like there are no solutions – and no hope – in sight.

Naomi and her daughters-in-law experience one thing after another; and in the midst of their suffering, their loss, their pain, they couldn’t see how God was at work in their situation. But the writer of the book of Ruth – from which we heard today – allows us, its readers, to see that God is still in control and at work – though often working in mysterious ways – even in those darkest of days.

According to first verse, the story of Ruth took place during the time of the judges. This was a 400-year period after Israel entered the Promised Land under Joshua and before there were any kings in Israel (roughly 1500 BC to 1100 BC). The book of Judges comes just before Ruth in the Old Testament and you can sense from it what sort of period it was. The very last verse says, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." It was a very dark time in Israel. Again and again, the people would sin, God would send enemies against them, then the people would cry for help, and God would mercifully raise up a judge to deliver them. From all outward appearances God's purposes for righteousness and glory in Israel were failing. And so, what the book of Ruth does for us is give us a glimpse of the hidden work of God during what were seemingly the darkest of times.

The Moabites had been enemies of the people of Judah for centuries. Several wars and countless skirmishes had been fought against each other. When Judea was struck with a famine, though, Elimelech had no choice but to move his family where there was food to eat. An Israelite going to Moab must have been like a Clevelander going to Pittsburgh, maybe worse! But this family went to Moab because it is where they needed

to go, or perhaps because it was where they felt that God was leading them to go. The Bible only tells us that they were escaping the famine.

What we do know is that this family traveled 100 miles or more over dry desert land – in a time long before any cars, buses or trains. They crossed over borders and political boundaries to get to a place where they could eat, live, and raise a family. Their journey was a necessary thing if they were going to survive.

But not only did Elimelek and his family make the journey, they settled into the new land of Moab. They did more than just buy a house there, the sons married local women. They were so settled, it seems, that there were no plans of moving back to Israel.

But life did not go according to this new plan. Elimelek, Naomi's husband died. And then her two sons died. Still, it seems Naomi did not plan to go back to Israel. But then, she got word that the famine in Judah had ended – the land of milk and honey was once again flowing in milk and honey. So, with nothing to lose, Naomi decided it was time to return to Israel.

Her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, go with her part way it seems – we're not told how far the three women travel together toward the land of Judah – and then Naomi directs them to "God back...to your mother's house." Naomi indicates her concern is for their "security" which rests in "the house of your husband" – something they could find in Moab, but which Naomi, who has no living sons, cannot provide.

The custom in that day was that when a Jewish husband died, his brother or another relative was to marry the widow and continue the brother's family name. Naomi is referring to this custom when she says that she has no sons to marry Ruth and Orpah. She thinks that it is hopeless for her daughters-in-law to remain committed to the family name.

Naomi was giving her two daughters-in-law a way out. She was moving back to Judah, to Bethlehem, and Orpah and Ruth didn't need to go with her. They had never been there before; we might assume that they had never before been outside of Moab. Orpah and Ruth were young enough that they could get married again. Their marriages would give them shelter, clothing, and food; and offer them the opportunity to raise a family. Staying with Naomi, on the other hand, would assure them none of these necessities of life. But, if Orpah and Ruth left Naomi, she would be an old woman, left all alone.

Life does not always go according to our plans. We are told that Orpah and Ruth "wept aloud" when Naomi instructs them to go back and then again after she acknowledges the bitter reality of her own life and future. Orpah is dutiful to her mother-in-law's command and does go back. Ruth, on the other hand, is resistant to Naomi's command, instead vowing "where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your

people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Both daughters – though they make different choices – are presented as acting out of devotion to Naomi.

But while Orpah leaves the stage, Ruth remains center-stage; in spite of her apparently hopeless future of widowhood and childlessness. Naomi paints the future black and Ruth takes her hand and walks into it with her.

This is an amazing commitment: not only will Ruth leave her land and her people to go to a new place where she will know only one person, she vows that even after Naomi dies, she will stay there in Judah. She commits to be even more settled than Naomi and her husband had been in Moab. But, maybe the most amazing commitment of all is this: she says, “Your God will be my God.” Naomi had just said, “The hand of the Lord has turned against me.” Naomi’s experience of God has been bitterness: famine and relocation and death and despair. But in spite of this, Ruth forsakes her own religious heritage to make the God of Israel her God. Perhaps she had already made this commitment years before, when her husband had taught her of the great love of God for the people of Israel; about how God had delivered them from bondage in the land of Egypt and delivered them to the Promised Land to fulfill God’s purpose of righteousness and peace. Somehow, Ruth had come to trust in Naomi’s God in spite of Naomi’s bitter experiences.

Ruth eventually becomes one of those in the grand genealogy of Jesus that is laid out in the beginning of Matthew’s gospel – one of only four women who are mentioned as a part of Jesus’ family tree, the great-grandmother of King David. Her willingness to uproot and to move to a new land created the opportunity to have a place in the great story of our Christian faith. Her pledge of faithfulness to Naomi, promising to stay with her and care for her even if it meant risking that she would not have a husband and children of her own is an example of sacrifice that is almost unparalleled.

Jesus once said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” Many times, in our lives, we are faced with the decision to focus either on meeting our own wants and desires, or sharing our blessings with others and serving them. Often, these are not easy decisions to make; there may be many different factors to take into consideration. But when we do commit to act and live for others, we often discover that we really don’t lose anything; that, in the end, God is at work and in control. And what we gain is the joy of giving and the experience of living a life of committed discipleship.

The sacrifices that we make as disciples of Jesus Christ come in different shapes and sizes. Some are relatively easy – perhaps it only means a few hours of our time; or offering to someone else something that we really didn’t need ourselves. At other times, our sacrifices are more like Ruth’s – they are deep and life-changing. The future can be uncertain and blessings are never guaranteed. This, however, is the life we choose as we

respond to God's love and grace. God's love flows through our sacrifices and God's grace is shared with others.

And for us, Ruth serves as a reminder of the importance of being willing to cross borders. Will Willimon says that crossing borders is the very definition of "mission" – whether those borders be geographical, political, psychological or sociological. Borders can be either visible or invisible; anticipated or surprising; passed through quickly or endured for a long time. When we cross borders with the Good News of Jesus, when we are offering ourselves sacrificially despite the potential cost, we are engaged in mission. Ruth crossed borders based on her faith, and her confidence in Naomi, and in the stories Naomi and her son had told her about the "land of milk and honey." She had heard the good news of God's love, even if what she had experienced and seen had been filled with bitterness and pain. Ruth was willing to cross over borders because she had faith in a God defined by mercy and faithfulness.

Jesus may have called it taking up our cross, but what he is asking of us, as followers, is a willingness to cross over borders. Maybe not always; there certainly are times when, like the other daughter-in-law Orpah, the faithful response is to stay where you are and follow God's will for you to be at work on the inside; in the places and with the people you already know. There are other times, though, that the call on our lives is to cross over and into some place we haven't been before, but we're confident that God is leading us; a place where God is already at work ahead of us, where there is a mysterious way forward we maybe cannot yet see or even imagine. As with Ruth, we may be called to settle in, not looking for a way to cross back over to where it is more comfortable, but to trust in the God that has been revealed to us; a God who hears and acts, who strengthens and supports, who rescues and saves.

Naomi may have thought that because of famine, because of relocation to a foreign land, because of the death of her husband followed by the death of her two sons, because of the rules of the day which meant her life (and the life of every woman) was dependent on men; because of all these bitter things, God was not with her. But Ruth, by remaining faithful to her mother-in-law, shows that God was there all along, and that – if you read the rest of the story of Ruth – God was at work making a way forward for her, for them.

Friends, believe this good news, revealed to us here and confirmed through the life and love of Jesus, that nothing – no trial, no loss, no heartache, no border – nothing can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Christ. Thanks be to God and may God's blessings rest upon each of you. AMEN.