

## Season after Pentecost

Narrative Lectionary Year 2, Week 6

October 18, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings Mark 3: 33-35; Ruth 1: 1-18

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen*

Her child was sick. Her neighbor was staying with her daughter while she hurried to the pharmacy to get medication. She got back to her car and found she had locked her keys inside. She found an old rusty coat hanger on the ground. “Lord, thanks for the coat hanger, but now I need someone who knows how to use it.” Minutes later a beat-up motorcycle pulled up driven by a bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag. He got off his cycle and asked if he could help.

“Yes, my daughter is sick. I’ve got to get home but I’ve locked my keys in the car. Can you use this hanger to unlock my car?” “Sure,” he said. He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was open. She spontaneously hugged the man and through tears said, “Thank you SO much! You are a very nice man!”

The man replied, “Lady, I am NOT a nice man. I just got out of jail yesterday; I was serving a sentence for car theft.”<sup>1</sup>

The woman hugged the man again, sobbing, “Oh, thank you, Lord! You even sent me a professional!” The grace of God comes to us in mysterious ways, through unlikely people and in less blatant circumstances, ---- we can miss it!

The book of Ruth is set “in the days when the judges ruled.” It’s a long way from pharmacies, locked cars and motorcycle dudes but then again . . . It was an unsettling time in the history of the Israelites. They had moved into the promised land but still battled displaced and neighboring peoples. They were an unorganized confederation of tribes who may or may not help one another. Adding to their difficulties was this tendency to “to do whatever was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25) rather remaining faithful to God and God’s ways. The book of Judges, which precedes Ruth, is a collection of stories about this uneasy time. Most episodes begin, “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” and they find themselves in a terrible mess. But when “the Israelites cried out to the LORD” a man or woman was sent by God to lead them to safety. These “judges” were not judicial figures as we might imagine but wise and brave political and military figures who would lead God’s rescue — like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. These are the times in which the story of Ruth is set.

There is a famine. A family from Bethlehem in the tribal land of Judah takes refuge in the neighboring country of Moab. Since Moab had an uncomplimentary and hostile history with the Israelites, Elimelech, his wife Naomi and sons, Mahlon and Chilion would

be unwanted refugees and likely treated as such. Elimelech dies and leaves Naomi a widow with two sons, who marry the Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Such intermarriages would have been troubling to Ruth's original Hebrew audience. After being in Moab for about 10 years, Naomi's sons both die. Now we have a situation aptly named "desperate." Without an adult male to provide care and protection, these three widows were left vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. <sup>2</sup> They were dependent on the generosity of sometimes reluctant communities for their survival."<sup>3</sup>

Naomi is also an immigrant with no rights, no status, no ties, who is considered too old to remarry and overwhelmed with grief. And perhaps saddest of all, Naomi believes, "the hand of the Lord has turned against me." She believes the Lord has either abandoned her or caused these calamities to happen or both. Naomi feels alone, forsaken, and depressed. In her despair all she can see to do is head back to what she knows, back to Bethlehem where she hears the Lord has given food and the famine has now ended, back to an uncertain reception. She packs up her emptiness to head back to Judah, a broken and desolate woman.

Her widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, head out with her. But Naomi tells them to go back to their family homes in Moab. They are young enough to remarry. Why come with her to Judah where they will be foreigners and outsiders and their treatment unpredictable. And perhaps Naomi wants to be left alone in her grief and bitterness. Orpah reluctantly obeys Naomi and turns back to Moab. But Ruth refuses. She is with Naomi for the long haul. She will give up her homeland and gods for Naomi's. Ruth walks with her into the unknown. Ruth will not leave Naomi forsaken. Without denying Naomi her right to grieve, Ruth will not allow Naomi to face her sorrows or future alone.

Ruth is offering unconditional love. Ruth is a person of "persistence, perseverance, patience and promise"<sup>4</sup> Now who else does that sound like? Naomi has the very grace of God walking next to her but can't see it. Naomi has the love of God incarnate in Ruth clinging to her no-matter-what, yet she still thinks God has punished and deserted her. In her pain, Naomi is oblivious to the blessing of Ruth and the truth of God's faithfulness. We may wish we could shake Naomi awake but then we remember . . . then we remember when we were like Naomi.

Is there anyone here with some years behind them who hasn't had their own experience of deep fear or loss? A time when you thought the heaviness in your spirit would never lift and you could hardly see a reason to bother with anything? Remember the way you felt when you heard the word "cancer" or a loved one died or the hurting in your muscles or joints seemed like it would never stop? Or maybe it was when one bad thing

kept happening after another and you wondered if you'd ever see light again. Perhaps you stood with Naomi just this week when there didn't seem to be enough hours in the day or a good friend turned on you at school or you thought if one more person you care about has to struggle with chronic pain or illness you'll scream. Maybe you understand Naomi whenever you listen to the news or read the paper. When filled to the brim with such storms of despair, we have no eyes for the shimmers of God's grace in our midst . . . we don't recognize God with us in the love and help of our own Ruths, be they family, friends, or strangers. But, they are there, my brothers and sisters, God's grace is there.

And do you know why I can say that with such certainty? Because God said to God's people over and over again, "Be strong and bold; have no fear . . . because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; who will not fail you or forsake you." (Duet. 31:6) And I believe it to be true. I can assure you in whatever circumstances that God is neither absent nor uncaring, because God spoke to us through the prophets, saying:

"I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." (Is. 43: 1d-3a)

And I believe it to be true. I can declare that God is ever present and God's presence is revealed because Jesus showed us and his resurrection confirmed that not even betrayal, suffering or death would keep God from us. And when I open my eyes and heart in the good and bad days, I see it is true in the colors of autumn, the uninhibited laughter of a child, the kindness of a stranger . . . I see the truth of God's faithfulness in the generosity of those helping another with rides to therapy or meals, in the care we take with each other's feelings and the tenacity of those trying to make Jesus real to our children and teens. Ruth has shown up in a guest who donated all the bread we needed for our Thanksgiving baskets though they never returned. Ruth showed up in one our children who used her own money to donate supplies for VBS and Ruth is present each time we genuinely extend the peace of God to another here in church or in our everyday living.

Here today there are people feeling like Naomi. Here today there are people who will be someone's Ruth. Here today there are many who are a blend of both. Don't bother with who is who. Just keep your eyes open. God does, God will show up in very real, Ruth-like blessings. In your dark or light times, pray to see God's grace. It will fortify you with hope and strength. In your dark or light times, pray to be God's grace. It will fortify you with hope and strength. "Do not be afraid. I am with you. I will not forsake you," says the Lord. Believe it! Count on it! Look for it. And when you see it, say, "Amen!" Amen.

## ENDNOTES

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1. "When God Sends Help," source unknown.

2. Vanessa Lovelace, "Commentary on Ruth 1: 1-17" as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

3. Molly Baskette, "No Saints' Day" November 1, 2009 as posted on [www.goodpreacher.org](http://www.goodpreacher.org)

4. Angela L. Ying, "Square Pegs and Round Holes: Seeking Oneness in God's Creation" July 12, 1998