



How do you go on when everything you’ve counted on fails to keep you safe? Doors keep closing behind you and the way forward is dark. Brent Bill, in his book Sacred Compass¹, says that “faith is not a call to understanding. It is a call to trust” (125). Yesterday we had the opportunity to engage in “Holy Conversation” around the qualities, dreams and hopes that we have for our next Bishop. Thank you to all from St. John’s who took time away from being outside on a lovely fall day to be part of the conversations. Overarching all of the conversations is our trust that God is part of the discernment during this period around what we want and what we need in our next Bishop. We can trust God to guide those who are charged with the responsibilities of honestly portraying who we are as the Diocese of Indianapolis to potential nominees and ultimately to the person selected. We can trust God to provide security for us.

Ruth and Naomi know all about trusting God to provide when all around them life was in shambles. They didn’t passively sit back and wait for a miracle. Rather, they looked at possible options, chose one that seemed most likely to provide for their needs, and moved forward in trust. The Book of Ruth is a story about family relationships. It is, once again, about God working through unexpected people and in unexpected ways.

Although the book is named “Ruth” the one who offers us the most thought for our own lives is Naomi. At the beginning of the book of Ruth, we are introduced to Naomi. She was a wife and mother of two sons. Life was good according to the values and customs of that time. But then famine struck and the family moved from Bethlehem to Moab in order that they might find food to eat and thus live. And her two sons marry Moabite women. Life looks good: enough to eat and family to support you.

As too often happens, though, what initially looked good – moving to Moab to find food and life – in fact later turned into disaster. Disaster behind them if they had stayed in Bethlehem because of the famine there. Disaster now in Naomi’s life as her husband and then her two sons die. She is truly a stranger in a strange land – an Israelite woman in the land of Moabites, people deemed to be outside of the covenant with God. What once was sanctuary has now turned into desolation.

Tides turn and now it is Bethlehem that has food. Naomi, a widow without husband or sons and thus without power or prestige in that culture, prepares to return to Bethlehem. There she can seek sanctuary. Her two daughters-in-law, both Moabites, prepare to go with her rather than remaining and returning to their own families which would be the norm. Returning to their own families and seeking another husband. This was the custom and practice of the time. It would not

¹ J. Brent Bill. Sacred Compass (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008).

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

be unusual for Ruth or Orpah to wave Naomi on her way and then seek the comfort of their own blood families, and hopefully find another husband. After all, neither Orpah nor Ruth had children- they had no ties to Naomi now that the husbands were dead. And so Naomi gives her blessing to Orpah and Ruth, saying “May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me” (Ruth 1:8).

After a great deal of discussion, Orpah remains in Moab. Orpah follows the expectations of her day and her culture. And there is nothing to condemn in this choice. Orpah did what her society, expected of her. She was faithful to her culture.

Ruth chooses another route, however, and says

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (1:16). Naomi will not be alone, therefore, in the next phase of her journey.

Philip Yancey² writes:

The poor, the hungry, the mourners, and the oppressed are truly blessed. Not because of their miserable states, of course- Jesus spent much of his life trying to remedy those miseries. Rather, they are blessed because of an innate advantage they hold over those more comfortable and self-sufficient. People who are rich, successful and beautiful may well go through life relying on their natural gifts. People who lack such natural advantages, hence underqualified for success in the kingdom of this world, just might turn to God in their time of need. Human beings do not readily admit desperation. When they do, the kingdom of heaven draws near.

Ruth is often used as a model of loyalty and faithfulness, and there is textual support for this interpretation. Kathleen Farmer suggests that Ruth’s statements to Naomi reflect “chesed” or loving-kindness above and beyond what might ordinarily be expected.³

Ruth has chosen to worship Yahweh, and her understanding of what Yahweh requires of her supersedes society’s expectations. We ask this of ourselves as Christians: will I make choices that reflect contemporary society or will I make choices that honor and support my beliefs as a Christian. The two don’t always conflict but when they do, as Christians we are called to make choices that show we are disciples of Jesus.

Ruth takes a risk- she trusts in the God she has come to believe in. She goes against what her background would have her do in order to honor her faith. She trusts God to help her find a new life. Ruth stays with Naomi even though it means moving to a new land where Ruth now will be the outsider.

Ruth stays with Naomi even as Naomi expresses her bitterness at life which has left her with no husband and no sons – the usual and expected ones to provide for her. Ruth stays with Naomi even as Naomi fails to acknowledge Ruth’s faithfulness and commitment when the women of

² Philip Yancey. The Jesus I Never Knew (Zondervan, 2002).

³ Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer. “Ruth” in The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 908.

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Bethlehem welcome Naomi back home. Ruth, like God, is faithful even when we are bitter; when we turn away; when we fail to acknowledge God's love for us; when we fail to trust God.

Ruth and Naomi settle into Bethlehem, as two widows who have little standing in the community. At least Naomi is an Israelite, and an insider. Ruth however is a Moabite, one of the despised outsiders. And yet, Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi gains her some welcome and at least an ability to glean in the fields following harvest. Thus, Ruth's efforts in gathering grain left behind mean that Naomi and Ruth will have the means to eat.

Enter Boaz. A man of standing in the community and related in some way to Naomi. Initially Boaz seems to recognize Ruth as one who has helped Naomi and for that loyalty Boaz asks the Lord to repay Ruth for what she has done (2:11-12). This sequence challenges us to look beyond who is in and who is out in our society. To look beyond the labels to the truth of what the person does. The story of Ruth is truly one of actions speaking louder than words. Just like the parable of the Good Samaritan, the outsider is the one who shows us that God is faithful even in times of loss and despair.

Today's reading suggests that Naomi has reached a point of acceptance with her status as a widow and at least some of her bitterness has been left behind. Naomi now focuses on finding security for Ruth, the outsider. True, if Ruth finds a home and a place of security, it is likely that Naomi will benefit as well. Just because there may be some self-serving in what Naomi proposes does not make Naomi's plan not worth our consideration.

Whether or not Ruth understands all of Naomi's purposes, Ruth agrees to follow Naomi's instructions with regard to Boaz. Sometimes we, too, are asked to follow God even though we do not understand the ramifications of what we are called to be and to do.

Boaz agrees to marry Ruth, and by doing so he also undertakes to ensure that Naomi is cared for. Marriage in ancient times carried with it strong obligations towards kinsmen. Boaz and Ruth subsequently had a son – and that son, Obed, is the father of Jesse, who was the father of David the king.

These verses remind us that genealogy was important to the Israelite people. Being able to trace your ancestors was one means of ensuring that you were part of God's people and thus part of the Covenant. Indeed, the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 1) and the Gospel of Luke (Luke 3:23>) both have detailed genealogies showing that Jesus is related to the House of David. Continuity. God's love and care for God's people transmitted through time and family.

Thomas Parker says that "Faith becomes the courage to endure what we must without losing heart and thereby losing our souls."⁴ He continues that "faith is not about a building or a throne or happy family circumstances. It was [and it is] always about access to God and faithfulness to the way of God in the world."

⁴ Thomas Parker in Feasting on the Word (Year B, vol. 4), p. 276.

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

The Book of Ruth shows us that even when we are most human, we possess the ability to remain faithful to the way of God in the world.

We, too, can offer, *chesed*- loving kindness- to those around us, even when they are bitter with life. Those that are most difficult for us to be with may be the very ones we need to be with. If we can see the face of Christ in those with whom we have the most challenge, we can be transformed by the love of Christ that calls us into one family- not without our squabbles, but a family that loves and cares for all.

And, we, too, can accept *chesed* from those around us who seek to help us. Sometimes we are the ones who need the care from others. As Americans, it is often hard for us to accept that we need help. We don't want to hear that we need to stop driving- even though in our hearts we know it is time. We don't want to acknowledge that we may need to consider moving, even though in our hearts we know living in our current space is no longer safe for us. Those are hard places in our lives. They are hard decisions to make. And there are other hard decisions in our lives that can pop up at the worst of times- when we are tired, angry, and lonely.

The Good News is that we are not in this alone, even though at times it may feel like it.

We are called to be faithful to the ways of God, most especially when the way before us appears dark and desolate. Faith is a call to trust. Trust that God loves us. Trust that we are never alone, even when we believe ourselves most alone.

Lack of understanding is not a reason to abandon God. The story of Ruth is a story of hard choices, of life not going the way you hoped it would go. It is a story of the importance of relationships, whether blood family or family by choice. It is also a wonderful story about trust in God and the willingness to act even when the way forward is uncertain.

Lack of understanding calls us to trust in the mystery of God and in *chesed*. Brent Bill reminds us that "God faithfully delivers our lives, even when we can't read the address" (Bill, 126). In that darkest of times, the light of God is still present if we will but look and see with faith.
Amen.