

“Loss and Perseverance”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
August 10, 2014**

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 5:3-5

Old Testament Lesson: Ruth 1:1-22

It's quite a journey that Naomi and Ruth have taken thus far. Socially and emotionally, they've gone from being married to widowed. And physically they've traveled from Moab to Judah. They've also covered some ground spiritually and in their relationship to one another.

And there's more to unfold for these two women of the Bible. During the next four weeks, we will see God's plan for the redemption of Israel and the future of God's people – us included – we will see that worked out in and through the lives of Naomi and Ruth.

So I encourage you to be here for worship throughout August. Or if you must miss, to catch up during the week with the online sermons, either video or printable, either at home or here at church on the volunteer computer. Because no matter how you take this journey with us alongside Naomi and Ruth, it's sure to be a story worth your time as together we watch it unfold.

Our story begins with Israel and all the world being ruled by judges, as opposed to God. That's what it says, “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.” This is what sets the stage for a turn of fortune for Israel, in which our spiritual ancestors will become the hope of all the world. But notice how the story begins. It begins with famine and tragedy.

And when I say tragedy, I mean the same type of normal life events that happen to each and every one of us. Naomi's husband dies, and then, tragically, her two sons die. And Naomi and her daughters-in-law become widows. Such things happen, to all of us.

Today, being a widow or a widower is no small thing, even after recovering some from the sense of loss and grief. But in the time of Naomi and Ruth, well, being a widow left you defenseless and with no resources. That's why Naomi is leaving Moab and heading back to her home country of Judah. Naomi is an Israelite and they are generally not accepted by Moabites, nor are Moabites welcomed in Israel. And, by the way, Ruth is a Moabite. She married into an Israelite family, but she is by birth and by heritage a Moabite. So what's God to do with these two people?

That's what Naomi is concerned about. Naomi says to Ruth and her other daughter-in-law, Orpah, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you.... The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you, in the house of your husband.'

OK, let's stop here a minute and look at Naomi. What type of a woman is she? She moves with her husband to a foreign land, the country is hit with a severe famine – there's no food for anyone to eat – her husband dies, then her sons, and now she's on her own to travel all the way home. She has to cross the Jordan River, hike through the Judean wilderness and navigate the desolate Jericho pass. Plus she has two foreign girls – her deceased sons' wives – clinging to her. I mean, they really can't help her too much, and back in Judah, as foreign Moabite women, they can only bring her trouble.

If you know the story of Naomi and Ruth, that might be a different way of looking at it for you – just how miserable Naomi is and what little her daughter-in-laws could possibly do to help her. But it's true.

And if you don't know this story, well, this is great thing that we're doing here, giving you a chance to hear it and see God's hand in it. God is in the midst of it all.

Whatever you've thought of Naomi and Ruth in the past, it's clear that Naomi is a pretty miserable soul, and that Ruth isn't equipped to help her one bit, or is she? That's for God to know, and for us to find out.

But as it stands thus far in the story, Naomi and Ruth have got nothing. Naomi even says so. "I've got no husbands and no sons and I'm too old to get married and have more children. So there's nothing I can do for Ruth or for myself." This is why, when Ruth and Orpah says to Naomi, "... We will return with you to your people," Naomi says, "No, ... it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because

Have you ever felt that way – that God has forgotten about you or at least forgotten about your troubles? I think we all have. What do we do when it seems that God has abandoned us to the harsh realities of life?

We persevere. We move out into new territory, try something new. Or maybe we go back to what worked before, like Naomi returning to Judah. We, too, find ourselves hoping that family and friends might help us, even if, like Naomi, we've not seen them for years. We persevere.

Naomi and Ruth, they persevere. Over and over again, Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law not to follow her to Judah. And while Orpah finally gives in and stays in Moab, Ruth does not. She's has her mother-in-law's strong will and determined spirit. And sometimes that's just what it takes to receive the reward that God has waiting for us: persistence. It's like in the Japanese culture. My mother-in-law is Japanese, but after living in the U.S. for many years, a funny thing happened to her.

She had returned to Japan to live for a few years before coming back to the United States, which really, had become her home. And while back in Japan, a woman stopped by for a visit. So naturally, Fumiko offered the woman a cup of tea and a piece of cake, which the guest politely declined.

The think is, in Japan you don't just decline one time, but three or four times, even if you actually want the cake and a cup of tea. As I've learned living with my wife, Yuri all these years, in the Japanese culture, "No" often means "yes." But Fumiko had forgotten this.

And so when her guest declined, Fumiko said, "OK, maybe another time." It was a cultural insult; the poor woman didn't get her tea and cake. And Fumiko, well she felt so bad after realizing later what she'd done. The point is that good things – like cake and tea – often come only through perseverance.

And that's what we're going to see as the story of Naomi and Ruth – and God – continues to play out over the next three Sundays.

Naomi, she perseveres even after being turned from sweet old Naomi – that's what her name actually means in Hebrew – "pleasant" or "sweet") – despite having turned from sweet old Naomi to a bitter Mara, she perseveres. She says, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara (which actually means "bitter"), for the Almighty," says Naomi, "has dealt bitterly with me." "I went away full", she says", but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

Why indeed. Why should any of us – when hit by a tragedy, doubled over by disaster, left ravaged and ruined – why should any of us have any hope for the future?

Well, we see it right here in today's Old Testament story. Just look how far we've traveled already. "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine." That's how we started out this morning. But look where we've come to now. At the end of chapter one, it says, "Naomi returned ... with Ruth the Moabite (and) they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barely harvest."

From famine to harvest. From sweet old Naomi to the bitter Mara. From Moabite woman to What? What is to become of Ruth, this foreigner in Israel? That, my friends, is question for another day.

We're going stop for now in the story of Naomi and Ruth, taking with us the assurance that for those who persevere, even through the most tragic losses, the most hopeless futures, and, yes, even through the strongest "No's" this world can throw at us – for those who persevere, God does indeed have a rich and abundant harvest awaiting us.

And between now and then, between famine and harvest, between loss and perseverance, there is much about God's workings in the world for us to experience and to learn.

And all we have to do is to look; look into the stories of the Bible-like the story of Naomi and Ruth-and in there, see something of our own story, the story of God and God's people, the story of us and the Lord. Amen.

Pastoral prayer

Holy God, we thank you for reminding us once again that you are Lord of all. You are Lord of our days, Lord of our world, Lord of your church.

You are Lord of our present and our future.

You reign sovereign over all and are never caught by surprise, never at a loss for what to do, never overwhelmed by the creation or the creatures you have made.

We thank you for the reassurance of your presence. We trust in your eternal purposes. We rest in your bountiful grace.

May our hearts become more deeply attuned to your action in the world, that we might demonstrate the humility and obedience of Christ.

For his sake we pray, using the words that he taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**