

Determined To Go

Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled,
there was a famine in the land,
and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah
went to live in the country of Moab,
he and his wife and two sons.

The name of the man was Elimelech
and the name of his wife Naomi,
and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion;
they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah.
They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died,
and she was left with her two sons.
These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah
and the name of the other Ruth.

When they had lived there about ten years,
both of her sons Mahlon and Chilion also died,
so that the woman was left without her two sons
and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law
from the country of Moab,
for she had heard in the country of Moab
that the LORD had considered his people
and given them food.

So she set out from the place where she had been living,
she and her two daughters-in-law,
and they went on their way
to go back to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law,
“Go back each of you to your mother’s house.

May the LORD deal kindly with you,
as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

The LORD grant that you may find security,
each of you in the house of your husband.”
Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.

They said to her,
“No, we will return with you to your people.”

But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters,
why will you go with me?

Do I still have sons in my womb
that they may become your husbands?

Turn back, my daughters, go your way,
for I am too old to have a husband.

Even if I thought there was hope for me,
even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons,
would you then wait until they were grown?

Would you then refrain from marrying?

No, my daughters,
it has been far more bitter for me than for you,
because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.”

Then they wept aloud again.

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, “See, your sister-in-law
has gone back to her people and to her gods;
return after your sister-in-law.”

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her,
she said no more to her.

Determined To Go

Ruth 1:1-8

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I.

What we have here this morning, is nothing less than a tremendous story. A story critical to the history of Israel, and a story which is indispensable to us and we travel the path of our spiritual journey. This is a story of one family, their struggle for a better life, the risks they take to have that life, the misfortunes they endure as they move down the path they chosen for themselves, and the blessings they receive because of their faith in that journey and their loyalty to each other. The story begins over two thousand years ago, a famine drives Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and their two sons, to the country of Moab, on the gently rolling plateau east of the Dead Sea. Some time after their arrival Elimelech dies, and the sons take Moabite wives.

II.

Now this was something of a scandal, as there was quite a bit of bad blood between the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham, and the Moabites, who were descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. So against all convention, the sons marry Orpah and Ruth, and things go along swimmingly, at least for awhile.

After about ten years, however, the sons also die. So Naomi, upon hearing that things are going pretty well back in the homeland, decides to pack up and head west. Orpah and Ruth pack up to go with her, but Naomi tries to stop them, knowing that it would be a hard life for them living as foreigners in a foreign land. Naomi knew a future with her would most likely be one of few opportunities, so she sends them back to their mother's house.

III.

But, Orpah and Ruth loved Naomi very much, and they pleaded with her to stay. Nevertheless, Naomi persisted, after all, this was the safe, logical, and wise thing to do. And so Orpah kissed Naomi, and returned to her kind.

Now comes the interesting part of the story, because Ruth, in the words of Robert Frost, took the road less traveled, and that made all the difference. Ruth arrives at a critical point in her life, and in that instant makes a decision

that would forever alter not only her life, but an entire world.

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die - and there I will be buried.

Well, Naomi's jaw must have hit the ground, and she must have seen the determination in her eyes, because the discussion ended right then and there, and off they went to Bethlehem.

IV.

For those of you familiar with this story, you know the wiliness, and steaminess on the threshing floor which is to come. For those of you who don't know how the story ends, well, you're just going to have to pull that Bible down off the shelf (I know you can do it).

For our purposes today, however, it is sufficient for us to simply recognize that, like Ruth, all of us have moments in our lives when we are faced with a decision of critical importance. As we make our way along the path of our spiritual journey, each of us will eventually come to a fork in that road, and the choice we make about which way to go, will forever change who we are, and to some degree, the world around us.

V.

Now, we all face decisions in our lives: who to marry, what jobs to take, what house to buy, how to vote, and what community we will call home. And, on a day such as this, Pledge Sunday, the degree to which we will support the church financially. The question is, on what basis will we make those very important decisions?

If you ask around, most people will tell you they make these kinds of decisions either one of two ways. First, there is "the checklist." Get out a piece of paper, make 2 columns representing your choices, list of all the factors and considerations and then put a plus or a minus in either column. You can even weight some of your answers more than others. When you are done, you tally them up and you have your decision.

VI.

The second way is the "gut check." What kind of reaction do you feel when considering one option or the other? What does your heart tell you to do?

People who make their decisions in this way will tell you that even if the negatives outweigh the positives, that gut feeling is what they go with.

But what if you are a person of faith? What if you believe that **God** is in fact *leading* you down the path of your life? How does God reveal to you the way you are to go? Well, if we're lucky like Moses, we get a sign like the burning bush. An unequivocal, unavoidable indication of what we are to do and where we are to go. However, few of us get that lucky. For most of us, even after days or months of prayer, the signs we receive are subtle at best.

VII.

Now, Ruth surely did not undertake her decision to follow Naomi on the basis of pluses and minuses. And I am not convinced her gut was the reason, either. Even gut reactions take time to assimilate and convince us. No, Ruth's decision smacks of a matter-of-factness, a certainty, almost an inevitability, that regardless of the cost benefit analysis, or the feeling she had in her gut, there was something *outside* of her, some voice calling to her, beckoning her onward, probably from the very early days of her life. As much a burden as it was a gift.

VIII.

I would like to read to you some words from an old daily devotional book I sometimes pull down from my own shelf called Streams In The Desert.

They were living to themselves, the self with its hopes and promises and dreams still had hold of them; but God began to fulfill their prayers. Now at last their turn has come.

Before, they had only heard of the mystery, but now they feel it. Little by little, from time to time, by flitting gleams, the mystery of the cross shines out upon them.

Had they chosen for themselves, or their friends chosen for them, they would have chosen otherwise. They would have been brighter here, but less glorious in the Kingdom. They would have had Lot's portion, not Abraham's. If they had halted anywhere, if God had taken her hand from their back and let them stray what would they not have lost?

But God stayed them up, even against themselves. Many a time their foot had well nigh slipped; but God in mercy lifted them up.

IX.

I have been doing this church thing a long time. I have seen a great many stewardship drives come and go. I know all the maxims, techniques and, even, tricks. However, all of those are based on the erroneous assumption that stewardship is about money. Stewardship is *not* about money, or even time and talents; not really. Stewardship is about *commitment*; making a commitment and growing that commitment over time.

My general sense of the stewardship math here at the church is fairly simple. I think most people are giving what they can: their money, their time, and their talents. I know this is what Linda and I do. We are not holding anything back. I also know that our *own* pledge to the church has more than doubled over past 27 years. We started with a commitment to the work and mission of the church and we've grown that commitment slowly over time. It also seems to me and Linda that, correspondingly and in that same time span, the church began with a commitment to our family, and has grown that commitment, slowly over time as well.

X.

Having arrived at this point in the sermon, I would like to speak a bit about this week's Presidential election. Frankly, I am more than a little nervous about the next few days and I am guessing that many of you are as well. I will remind all of us, that our faith is not for frivolity; but, rather, for those very real and serious matters which govern our lives, the affairs of our nation, and the world in which we live.

In the simplest terms, our faith is what allows our soul to reside in serenity even as our mind races and our heartbeat quickens. Just as Naomi placed her faith in a future in Ruth's care so, too, we must place our faith in a future under God's dominion and providence. To not believe this to be the case is tantamount to having no faith at all.

XI.

That said, I think it is crucial that we keep all of *that* going on out *there* from directing or distracting us from all of *this* going on in *here* in our life together as a church. What we do in *here* is the means by which we abide and survive what is going on out *there*. We have all been working tremendously hard for the span of a great many years to build up and strengthen our faith.

At times such as this, let us have the wisdom to *turn* to that faith and *use* our faith with deep resolve. Which is the same kind of resolve which moved Ruth to say to Naomi: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

XII.

Just like Ruth on the road that day with Naomi, this day each of us finds ourselves here in this sanctuary, at home watching, or reading this sermon because at some point we made a check list, or because we had a feeling in our gut, or because this is the place God has led us. Like Ruth, we now find ourselves considering what we shall do moving forward? What kind of commitment are we willing to make to these people gathered around us with whom we are traveling this road?

However, *unlike* Ruth, my own personal experience tells me such a deep and abiding commitment really is not necessary, or even possible, at the *front* end of things. However, slowly, over time that commitment can and will grow such that *these* people will become *your* people just as all of you have become *my* people.

XIII.

The trick is to make a start. Or, probably more to the point, come to the realization that you have *already* started. I say all this to you today not because it is Stewardship time and Pledge Sunday (though perhaps it is easier to recognize at such a moment) but because this is the same dynamic which is at work in our church, and in our own spiritual journeys each and every day. Ours is the story of one congregation’s struggle for a better life, the risks we are taking to have that life, the misfortunes we are enduring, and the blessings we receive because of our faith *in* this journey and our loyalty *to* one another.

XIV.

They were living to themselves, the self with its hopes and promises and dreams still had hold of them; but God began to fulfill their prayers. Now at last their turn has come. Before, they had only heard of the mystery, but now...now they feel it.

What we have here this morning, is nothing less than a tremendous story. All that remains, is how determined we are to go...together. Amen.