

Ruth 1: 1-17

2-4-18

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Running on empty is a stressful way to travel. I've done it often enough myself to understand the basic anxiety. What's more, I used to get frequent reminders. In the past I served at churches where travelers in need frequently to the door. They tell a variety of compelling stories all about the urgent need to get from here to there. Almost always, the climax of the story is, "We're running on empty."

In the Bible story I have just read, a widow named Naomi has been running on empty for some time now. First, famine forces Naomi's family to leave their homeland--Bethlehem in Judah--a suburb of Jerusalem long before Jerusalem became a city. They become immigrants, foreigners in a land called Moab, modern-day Jordan, Jewish refugees in an Arab state. For these strangers in a foreign land, disaster strikes early and often. Far from home, Naomi buries first her husband then both of her sons. Unthinkable agony, unimaginable grief. Picture this widow covered head to foot in the traditional black mourning dress making the long, long journey home. As she arrives at the city gate, she tells her old friends, "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty."

This is a woman who has been running on empty for a long, long time. One funeral right after another without family, friends, home or the familiar for comfort. And then a long, long journey across river and desert, she who went away full--husband, two sons--has come home empty. So bitter is this woman that immediately upon her arrival at the city gate, she announces a name change from Naomi, which means "sweet," to Mara, which means "bitter." Naomi has grounds to

be bitter--no doubt about it--but she has by no means been alone. All the way home, all the way across a barren landscape, daughter-in-law Ruth has matched Naomi step-for-tired step.

Ruth has reason to be bitter too. After a childless marriage, Ruth's husband is dead. Dead, too, are her brother-in-law and father-in-law, the two men who under Hebrew custom would have been required to provide for this young widow. Back in Biblical times, a widow doesn't just go out and get a job and start dating again. So Ruth is also running on empty.

Ruth and Naomi appear to be not only a hapless pair but hopeless too. After all, someone might take a chance on a young widow hoping she could yet have children and maybe turn out a good day's work in the meantime. But Ruth has hitched her star to bitter, old Naomi.

Stubborn Ruth makes one of the most remarkable pledges of loyalty on record. You often hear these verses at weddings, "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." , but it is interesting that when we look at this Bible passage it is not a husband and wife saying this to each other but it is spoken woman-to-woman, widow-to-widow. Maybe when people get married, whether they realize it or not, they are marrying into a family and not just marrying the person standing next to them at the altar.

Ruth, the woman from Moab, the Arab woman, demonstrates to our Jewish ancestors what the loyalty of God is like. By word and by deed, Ruth demonstrates what God means when God says, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

But old Naomi can't see it. She's too bitter, too wrapped up in her own inconsolable grief.

Arriving home in Bethlehem, loyal Ruth at her side, Naomi announces, "I went away full, but now the Lord has brought me back empty."

I wonder how Ruth might have felt about that statement. There she stands side-by-side with Naomi at the city gate, having left her homeland, her family and friends, her own religious tradition, having faithfully accompanied Naomi across the desert. And now Ruth doesn't get so much as an introduction. "I went away full," Naomi says, "but the Lord has brought me back empty." Not true, Naomi, God has not brought you back empty, not a long shot. God has provided your daughter-in-law Ruth as your faithful, loyal, and resourceful companion and God is not through providing for you. Not yet.

This story from ancient Hebrew scripture reveals at least two key attributes of God. This story tells us that the God of all creation is concerned with the ordinary affairs of humankind, with everyday life, the inconsolable grief of an older widow who has now buried her sons plus the broken heart of a young woman who has been unable to have children and who has now lost her husband.

In addition, this story affirms that our hope in God is well placed. As chapter 1 comes to an end, the storyteller sends us a signal of better times ahead. Naomi and Ruth came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Remember, harvest time is good timing, especially for folks who don't have work and don't have food. Harvest time is a season of opportunity, a season of optimism. Ruth and Naomi arrive at the beginning of the barley harvest and we now know this tale is going to have a happy ending. Perhaps you remember how the story unfolds from here. Naomi sends Ruth into the fields of a distant relative of Naomi's late husband. Ruth is gathering up leftover wheat when the relative, a man named Boaz, spots her. He is gracious and generous to her. Later in the crucial turning point of the story, Boaz works it out to marry Ruth. The marriage rescues Naomi too. Boaz and Ruth soon have a son, And at the end of the story the

women of the community say to Naomi in Chapter 4, “ Your daughter-in-law you loves you is more to you than seven sons and has born you a grandson whose name is Obed.

The Bible study we have which meets on Tuesdays in the morning and evening spent last week talking about gratitude, joy and happiness. We discovered that happiness is linked to circumstances. Circumstances which are often beyond our contol. But joy we found out is something different. Joy is linked to gratitude. Joy is about focusing on what we have instead of focusing on what we don't have.

Ruth was with Naomi the whole time. God was with Naomi the whole time. But there was a time in Naomi's life when she could only focus on what she didn't have. She didn't have a husband. She didn't have any sons. And so she changes her name to Mara which means bitter. And I don't blame her. All of us probably feel bitter when we focus on the things or relationships we don't have. Mara is transformed back to Naomi when she takes baby Obed in her arms and recognizes that her daughter-in-law Ruth is worth seven sons.

The harvest will be coming in and you, faithful listener, you have more fuel in your tank than you think. You have enough to make it home, for a new beginning. Because through Scripture, God calls us to hope for more than we have yet seen.

Speaking of hope, let me say a final word about the leading man in this story. Boaz is repeatedly referred to in the story of Ruth by the Hebrew word "go'el." The word is difficult to translate from the ancient language, but it means something like provider, rescuer, sponsor. The custom in Biblical times called for the nearest male kin to serve as "go'el" for the widow who had lost her husband. Boaz steps forward to serve this role for Ruth and Naomi.

Similarly, God has provided you with a "go'el," someone to serve as your God through difficult times, a strong shoulder to cry on, a partner with whom to pray, and now a friend with whom to look for a new beginning. You went away full, but you have not come back empty. You, too, have a redeemer. Christ Jesus, our Lord, as Ruth stands beside Naomi, so does the risen Christ in the form of the church, stand beside you.

All along life's way, through thick and especially through thin, through good times and especially through difficult times, your Christian sisters and brothers will stand beside you. Not a perfect person among us. Not by a long shot. But together, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the perfect love of God offered to you. Not a perfect life, not a perfect church, but by God's grace, a perfect love.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Let us pray.

O gracious and loving God,
our losses are too real to ignore, and our
disappointments too painful to forget.

At the same time,
the hope we have in you is too precious to keep
to ourselves.

We simply cannot rest until we rest in you in the
home of your own making,

the church of Jesus Christ our Lord.

In whose name we pray, Amen.