

In Between
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church
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Scripture Readings Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Mark 12:38-44
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Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ²Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. ³Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.’ ⁵She said to her, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for

your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.’ ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.

¹⁷The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Mark 12: 38-44

As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

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Liminality.

Do you know that word?

Liminality, the space between here and there. It could go either way.

The in between time. Limen, Latin for doorway. The unknowing. Sometimes the space between night and dawn, sometimes the space between sunset and shadow - sometimes you don't know which, when you're in liminal time.

It's five am and there's just enough light to draw our bodies to dawn but not enough to see cloud or sun.

You got the diagnosis but haven't started treatment.

The election results are in but inauguration is months away.

You've gotten the call to the hospital.

It could go either way.

The moment between disagreement and fight.

The space between heaven and earth. The space between earth and hell.

The bulb is planted but the ground is cold and spring is a long way away.

The Saturday between the cross and the resurrection.

You've dialed, but she hasn't picked up.

When we turn to go home, but we're not there yet, don't know how we will be received.

The world you imagine, in the moment that it is still possible.

To quote Padraig O'Tuama again, "The threshold between the way things could have been and the way things are. You do not step through that threshold once. You step through it every time you breathe."¹

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Oh, how often I have preached Ruth 1 - where you go, I will go, your people will be my people. But, if my notes from this week are right, in 20+ years I haven't preached the rest of the story. The liminal space between decision (I will go with you) and destination. "And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest." (2:22) How are Ruth and Naomi received?

¹ "The Place Between" by Padraig O'Tuama, in the essay collection *Neither Here Nor There*, edited by Timothy Carson.

Today, we heard the end of the story - Naomi, for a moment looking up from her own grief, starts thinking of a safe future for Ruth and herself. Boaz practices *chesed*, loving kindness - the same thing Ruth practices toward Naomi. Boaz' *chesed* redeems Naomi and Ruth and there's a child and that child is the ancestor of David, the ancestor of Jesus. And it's wrapped up with a nice beautiful bow.

And in jumping to the end, we miss the messy middle. And folks, life is the messy middle. Liminal space - especially right now, seems to take up more room than the straightforward beginning or the simple end.

The middle of Ruth is a liminal space. Ruth has made a decision: she has pledged to Naomi that she will stay with her. She will go wherever Naomi goes. But Ruth has never been to Bethlehem, she has no people there, they don't know what will happen. Naomi has set her sights on Bethlehem, but will there be anyone there who remembers her? The liminal time of this story includes the long walk, the hungry days, the wondering how in the world two widows would survive, the idea that as vulnerable widows they might have to call on a male relative because that's the time they lived, the first conversations between Ruth and Boaz. The messy middle.

Carl Jung once said, liminality “is the space between two worldviews, two empires.” And Padraig O’Tuama says liminality has “hints of one and the other always tapping us - we’re on the cusp of breakthrough and the cliff edge of destruction.”²

Jessica Tate writes, “This is where we often find ourselves...in these empty places, uncertain of the end of the story. We do not know how, or if....our hope will be restored. We are left with simply a promise - a promise that we are not alone. It is a promise that finds incarnation in Ruth. Ruth will cling to Naomi no matter what. She will be with her wherever she goes....This is God’s promise to us, as well - that God will be with us, no matter what...This is how God acts. God clings to us, refusing to allow us to bear our despair and emptiness alone. In so doing, God shows us loving kindness that sows in us hope and fullness, in short, salvation.”³

That’s the best wisdom I have for the in between, the good news for liminality: remember, we can be there for each other, and remember, God is always with us. Chesed, lovingkindness, is what we need and what we have to offer to those who are also in the twilight that could be night or dawn. And God is always with us.

² ibid.

³ Between Text and Sermon, Ruth 1:6-22, Interpretation

In the words of Susan Beaumont, “God’s greatest work occurs in liminal space.”⁴

God sends us people. The people who pledge to us that they will walk beside us on the road, whether it be through forest or desert, whether it be through despair or redemption, these are the people who carry us in the liminal moments, the in between, until the tears are wiped away. These are the saints who bring us the message of hope, that we will get through this life, together, and with God’s grace.

Now, to the other widow. Yes, she gave a gift proportionately bigger than most - but my guess is that we missed parts of her story and part of why Jesus pointed her out. How is it possible that a poor widow was expected to give away all she had? Don’t you think it has to be that in the part not written down, Jesus practiced *chesed* with her, and offered the hospitality of his new beloved community? Don’t you think it has to be that Jesus noticed she was in between, and offered to walk alongside her?

⁴ Susan Beaumont: How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season

I think Jesus inherited something from Ruth. It is all well and good that Jesus called his disciples to follow him; called us to follow him. But the reason Christians have said yes to that call is because Jesus came to us, to share our common lot, to walk the unknown journey with us, to be there especially on the hard days, the threshold days, the ambiguous and uncertain days. Jesus came to embody God's own love and cling to us, whatever may come.

My final thought on walking through the threshold is this, from songwriter Melanie deMore: "Put one foot in front of the other and lead with love." Amen.