

**The Presence of God**, October 31, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby

Psalm 146; Ruth 1.1-18; Mark 12.28-34

“The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.”

*Prayer*

God is present in the world. God is present, but we can't always see God's actions. And often we wonder *where* God is at all, especially when we see hardship and hunger and challenge.

Often, when we read stories from the Bible, God is presented as one of the characters in the story, acting a part in the development of the plot as any of the other characters. God plays a role rather than sitting on the sidelines observing. In our own lives, God is often *present* but not *active*. God is *there*, but God doesn't seem to be intervening. At least not in the way of some of the other stories we hear.

We spent a few weeks looking at the story of Job. In Job's story, God is a major player, acting on Job through deliberate *inaction*. God permits the Satan to interfere in Job's life to test him and his devotion to God. Job loses everything as a kind of pawn in the bet between God and Satan as to whether or not Job's faithfulness to God is because of all the blessings Job has received through his life. At the end of the story of Job, when Job repents in dust and ashes and still prays for his “friends” who were convinced Job's hardship was due to his own sin, God rewards Job with children, riches, and a long enjoyable life.

Naomi's story has a lot in common with Job. Naomi begins her story with all that she might reasonably desire: a place to live and a loving family. However, just as in Job's story, she quickly loses nearly everything, though in her case, this was not the result of some cosmic wager. Her husband dies and then her two sons die. And there is a famine in the land and she is drawn back to her own land. Of her two Moabite daughters-in-law, one returns to her own family while the other, Ruth, commits to her mother-in-law as they head into an unknown future.

Naomi didn't start out as rich as Job. Because of that, she didn't lose as much as Job lost. But she also didn't get everything back either. This is a helpful counter-example to the story of Job. While Job was supposed to help us understand that sometimes bad things happen to good people, Naomi's story shows us an example of that, not as a moral tale that we are to learn from, but as a matter-of-fact account in the genealogy of King David, one of the most important figures in the history of the people of Israel.

This story raises a number of concerns that can't all be addressed today: it raises the plight of women in the ancient world, especially *unmarried* women—an issue that has certainly not gone away today. But there are other issues that also persist to today that are raised even in this short passage: the plight of refugees, of foreigners, and of food security. In three thousands years we haven't seemed to solve *any* of them, and have only made very little progress.

But what might be the most challenging part of this story is that it doesn't have a simple “happy” ending. I won't spoil the end of the story for you yet as we will look at it later, but I usually endeavour to

find the “good news” in the scriptures we look at. Where is God present? What is the encouragement? How is God building up the people in the story and, by extension, us in the present day?

But today’s account from the book of Ruth is a sober reminder that things don’t always work out for the better, especially not in the short term. Sometimes things just go badly—and not only when Satan is involved in making deals with God. Sometimes life just seems to fall apart and there is no clear way forward. And sometimes the best response is *not* to try to cheer up, but to sit there, at least for a while.

Upon her return to her homeland, Naomi tells her compatriots not to call her “Naomi” any longer. “Naomi” means “pleasant”. Instead, she says, call her “Mara” which means “bitter”, for “the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.” There is no easy way out for Naomi—not like there was for Job. Job, somehow, could just *restart* his whole family and have a bunch more kids and somehow rebuild a whole flock of animals. Naomi knows that her child-bearing days are over—and even if they weren’t, she cannot produce sons for her daughters-in-law to marry. That ship has sailed. The Lord has dealt harshly with her; the Almighty has brought calamity upon her.

But that is not the end of her story. She doesn’t just lie down and die. Instead, Naomi is able to continue her story through her devoted daughter-in-law Ruth. Ruth who, for reasons known only to her, has decided to stay with her mother-in-law as they travel to a foreign (to her) land where she is unlikely to marry someone from her own culture. She will have to establish herself among a people that are not her own, though, as she pledges to Naomi, she will make the land, the people, and their God her own after her mother-in-law.

It is Ruth’s commitment to Naomi that often gets the attention in this book—at least in the first chapter. These two women, technically not even related through marriage anymore, form a powerful bond that will ensure that they are taken care of somehow, even if only through their own determination and cunning. They recognize that orphans, widows, foreigners and refugees face all kinds of hurdles, but they are determined to stick it out together. Somehow. The two of them against the world and all its difficulties.

And their goal is not to thrive—they are not out to acquire huge plots of land or giant herds of livestock. They are looking only to survive. That in itself is enough of a struggle. And it is by no means guaranteed. We may have improved on *that* a little in three thousand years, but we still have people who fall through the cracks and can’t even get enough food to survive, even in the so-called “developed” world.

And when we turn to the gospel, the companion reading to this passage from Ruth is *not* one where Jesus promises that everything will work out. Where Jesus tells his disciples to pull up their bootstraps and dig in because the hard work will produce an abundance. It’s not even a passage where Jesus talks about any kind of reward. Instead, Jesus and a teacher of the law discuss the requirements of the faithful under the law. What is the first commandment? To love God—and the second is to love one another. But there is no promise attached to those laws. No reward. No guarantee that life will become easy, pleasant, or even bearable.

But there is something encouraging, even if it is only hinted at: If we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbour as ourselves we will find that we are not alone. Not only will we have the company of our neighbours through whatever hardships we face, but we will also have God with us, Emmanuel, in each person we encounter. As we persist in the hardships and the joys of our lives, we will do so seeing the face of God in everyone we meet. We will begin to recognize that God is with us in our struggles. God has joined to us as we have joined ourselves to others, as Ruth joined herself to Naomi, through thick and thin, whatever may come.

But we will also begin to see God present in the joys that we experience. We will see the work of God in the actions of the people doing even little things to show love for one another. In special kindnesses like checking in on those who have been shut in for so much of this pandemic and even in the way people work so hard to help children celebrate Halloween while keeping COVID protocols in this never-ending pandemic.

We don't have assurances that things will go smoothly or well—but we are assured that God is with us. And though God doesn't always intervene directly, we are not left alone. We can experience the work of God and the presence of God through the people we encounter in our lives.

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