

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**Narrative Lectionary 4.45 – Ruth 03/04 & 04/04
Ruth 1:1 – 2:23; Matthew 5:3-9**

**22 July 2018
Salem, Bridgeport**

“Behind the Curtain”

On Friday evening I participated in a panel discussion here on why so many people, especially younger ones, are not interested in church, and one of the comments made was that the Bible just didn't seem relevant to people's lives anymore. Before I had a chance to respond, a member of the audience commented that perhaps that depended on what part of the Bible you were talking about – which was exactly what I had been going to say.

If you want to talk about sexuality, for instance, the young woman continued, you have stories of Joseph trying to escape being seduced by Pharaoh's wife, or of David sending one of his most loyal soldiers to the front lines to be killed so his affair with the man's wife won't be discovered, or of David's eldest son, Amnon, raping his half-sister, Tamar.

Or if you want to talk about depression and despair and grief, you've got this story we heard today – the story of Naomi, for whom things go from bad to worse to worst to even worse than worst. First, despite the fact that Naomi and her husband and their two boys were from Bethl'hem, literally “House of Bread”, famine had driven them from that place to the neighboring enemy country of Moab, where they lived as refugees and foreigners.

Then Naomi's husband dies, and she is left with just their two sons, who eventually marry Moabite women. Next, one of her sons die; then, the other one dies, also. And now Naomi and her two daughter-in-laws are widows, with no power, no status, no money, and no way of making money. Naomi, in fact, has 3 strikes against her: she's a woman, a widow, and a worthless foreigner.

Some of you know what it's like to lose your source of income;
some of you know what it's like to lose your spouse;
some of you even know what it's like to lose a child;
and some of you may even know what it's like to have to flee your country in order to save your life.
But can you imagine what it would be like to have all these things happen to you?
and happen one right after the other?

No wonder Naomi was bitter.

No wonder her words quickly became cynical as she complained to Orpah and Ruth:

*“Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?
Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?
¹²Turn 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,
¹³would 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 YHWH has turned against me.”*

No wonder she responded bitterly when she was addressed as Naomi!

*“Call me no longer Naomi or Joy, but call me Mara or Bitter, for Shaddai has dealt bitterly with me.
²¹ I went away full, but YHWH has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi or Joy when YHWH has dealt harshly with me,
and Shaddai has brought calamity upon me?”*

What is so interesting about this story is that God plays no dramatic role.

There's no burning bush, no water from the rock,
no angel appearing with food, no prophet raising the dead to life.
Naomi sees no sign of God's grace or love –

God has obviously not just abandoned her, but has let bad things happen to her;
in fact, the way she sees it, God has caused these bad things to happen.

But there is one ray of hope: her daughter-in-law Ruth,
who instead of returning to her parents' home as Naomi and custom and logic suggested,
clings to Naomi, promising to accompany her on the trip back to Naomi's homeland –
a long trip of over a week,
a hard trip requiring them to cross the river Jordan and climb 2000 plus feet in elevation,
and a most dangerous trip for two women walking alone by day and sleeping out alone by night.

When they finally arrive in Bethlehem there's another ray of hope:
the famine was indeed over, the barley harvest was beginning,
and Ruth is young and able-bodied enough to take advantage of Israel's public welfare system.
She, like orphans, and other foreigners and other widows,
can pick up the gleanings left behind by the reapers.

And that's when we glimpse a third ray of hope:
"As chance would have it", she ends up gleaning in the field of the exact right person:
Boaz, not only a wealthy man and a kind man and thus one of the town's most eligible bachelors,
but one of the nearest relatives of Ruth's former husband
who by law is now responsible for her well-being.

What I find so exciting about this passage is the very fact that there are no huge God miracles here,
but just the little miracles of ordinary life:
the little miracle of someone going above and beyond out of love,
the little miracle of a good harvest,
and the little "chance" coincidence of being in the right place at the right time to meet the right person.

God's role in this story isn't the big on-screen dramatic one, but the small off-screen, behind the curtain one,
as God quietly works the divine magic of healing the broken lives of God's beloved.

Of course we usually want the fast, dramatic, life-saving miracle from God, and occasionally we might get that,
but more often than not, God isn't to be found in the starring role on center stage,
but in the background, behind the curtain,
rewriting the dialog, directing the characters, and moving the plot forward.

Whether we're talking about the changes and challenges in our individual lives, or in our congregations,
or in our communities or city or state or country or world,
what the story of Naomi assures us is that no matter how we feel, God is always at work.

Whether it's Naomi mourning the loss of husband and sons,
whether it's us mourning losses in our own lives,
or whether it's our congregations mourning the loss of what we once had,
the story of Naomi reminds us that God is always at work
in every act of love we experience,
in every material blessing we're given,
and in every "coincidence" of grace in our lives.

The story of Naomi reminds us that God is always at work,
blessing us not only when we mourn or are poor in spirit,
but when we are meek and merciful, and when we work for justice and peace.

So whenever we find ourselves in that place of depression and despair and grief, wondering where God is,
may we remember the story of Naomi, and the rays of hope:
love, blessings, and those divine "coincidences", all sent to us from the One behind the curtain. **Amen**