

**Riverside United Church**  
**December 8, 2024**

Scripture Lesson: Ruth 1 and Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

Ruth 1

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 one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or 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 had consideration for 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.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’ She said to them, ‘Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

#### Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

#### Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,  
lead us to deeper understanding of you,  
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

### **“Words for the Beginning: #2 - We Can’t Go Alone”**

The story of Ruth and Naomi is not a usual passage to hear in Advent.

We don’t usually hear verses and wisdom from the book of Ecclesiastes at any time - except for the verses from chapter 3 - “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven ...”

Yet, today we have these two readings on this the second Sunday of Advent. The readings are suggested by A Sanctified Art in their Advent and Christmas resource which has as its theme: “Words for the Beginning.”

Advent is the beginning of a new church liturgical year and we also know that there are various ways that we experience new beginnings in our lives, in our families, and in our world. We can see each new day as a new beginning. So, what words of wisdom help us to live a new beginning with assurance, hope and peace?

Last week, the word/phrase for the beginning was “you are a blessing” and we heard the angel speak that word to Mary as her pregnancy was announced. “You are a blessing” is a word of dignity and assurance that is not only reserved for Mary or characters in the Bible. It is a word that is offered through a variety of beginnings and endings and in between. It is an assurance of holy worth and meaning.

Today, our word for the beginning is “We Can’t Go Alone.” And I imagine that a variety of thoughts and questions and realities are invoked by these words. And I particularly think of those who find themselves alone due to death or ending of relationships. The word is not “we can’t be alone”. It is “we can’t *go* alone” and it is more about how we view the world and our way of relating to it.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a helpful story to hear anew as we think of this word, “We Can’t Go Alone.” Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi and both have been widowed. Ruth was a Moabite and it would have been more expected that she would have stayed in her homeland. But, when Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem in Judah, Ruth decides to go with her and there is a well known phrase out of this story, “Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

So, Ruth and Naomi head out on a journey to Bethlehem. Maybe this is an Advent passage after all, because maybe we know of another journey to Bethlehem..

One of the images or metaphors of this season is that each of us makes the journey to Bethlehem and that means different things for different people and in differing circumstances.

For Mary and Joseph it was a journey of promise and new birth. That doesn’t mean it wasn’t without anxiety or fear.

For Ruth and Naomi it was a journey of grief and healing. That doesn’t mean it wasn’t without joy and promise.

As we live into this Advent time and make our way to Bethlehem to absorb anew the birth of Jesus, and it’s a journey of a whole lot of feelings and realities because our lives are a complex mixture of grief and promise, new birth and healing. It’s a journey we make each year, but can feel very different one year to the next - not because the truth of the story has changed, but because we have changed, the context of our lives and world has changed.

And we are reminded that *we can’t go alone*.

As I was growing up, poetry was not my favourite genre of literature, but I do remember learning John Donne’s poem with its best known quote: “No man is an island, no man stands alone . . . Each man's death diminishes me, because I am involved with mankind . . .”(sic). Language is a little dated, but it made an impression upon me - No one is an island, no one stands alone.

And yet, in our time and in our world, isolation and loneliness are major issues for the health and well being of many. There are many who stand alone. We live in a time when there is a great fear of difference and that paralyzes community.

As we think about a journey to Bethlehem, we think of it as a metaphor, but an actual journey to the city of Bethlehem in 2024 involves check points and violence as the city is in the midst of disputed land in Israel and Palestine. There is so much that prevents hope and peace from being born and known in our world.

“We can’t go alone” is an important word for faith and hope in our context and so we are invited to think about how we can encourage connection and offer friendship and support as we live into these days, when feelings and emotions can intensify because of the meaning and expectations of the season.

In the reading from Ecclesiastes, we hear this theme of “We can’t go alone” echoed in the words that are titled: The value of a friend. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; ... And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

While there is a lot to do in this season, maybe the best gift we can offer is presence with someone. What would it look like to foster deeper connections in this season - not just exchanging pleasantries, but being open to deeper sharing of the complicated, mess and beauty of our lives? Maybe it is a phone call or two. Maybe it time shared over a meal. Maybe it is gathering in worship and holding need and hope in prayer.

I have been thinking about the image of the threefold cord in the words from Ecclesiastes and realizing how rich an image the braided cord can be in terms of thinking about how we make this journey to Bethlehem. We don’t go alone. The Holy is in our midst and messages of the Holy may come from some unexpected sources. Not all angels are dressed in white and have wings. Angels are messengers and messages of assurance, of hope, of compassion, of challenge, of possibility, of invitation - come in a variety of ways.

A couple of weeks ago I went on a retreat, one of the activities we were invited to do was to use craft and artistic material to create an image of an angel. Now my creative side is not often revealed in drawing or with artistic materials. But I thought about it for a long time, and I thought about it as other people in the retreat were busy getting feathers and knowing what they were going to do. So I took a piece of paper I used some yarn and created two beings in conversation - I didn’t use feathers or portray wings or halos. I conveyed a message being offered to the head and to the heart and being back and forth.

Ruth and Naomi are not often portrayed as angels, but they were messengers of love, loyalty and grace to one another. We don’t know that much about the conversations that Mary and Joseph had with one another after the angels disappeared, but we can imagine some intense conversations of meaning and purpose, as their lives became a braid of strength as they made their way to Bethlehem.

Have you experienced any angels recently? Have you offered words of encouragement, of compassion, of love? As we continue this Advent journey, let us listen and let us speak - for Holy words are needed to be heard in our world. The words need to be heard and they need to be spoken.

We can't go alone. This quest for rugged independence is a lie. This idea that we can make it our own is devastating. Our strength, our worth, our purpose is personal, but not to be sought or lived in isolation from one another.

So, we give thanks for the ways our lives are braided together with the Holy story and Holy love. We give thanks for the ties that bind us together and increase our capacity to be connected in community and purpose.

May the ties that bind give us strength - far greater than we know by ourselves. Amen.