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Sermon: *“It is I you have been looking for”*: Meditations on Pandemic, the Book of Ruth and the Practice of Kindness Beyond Borders

Ruth 1:1-22

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I begin this morning with a favorite poem by Naomi Shihab Nye:

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day (to mail letters and purchase bread,)  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

This poem is a worthy backdrop to our short story from the Book of Ruth today; both are works of art for our time. Both take us from heartbreak to the gestures of kindness that carry us through hardship and all that keeps us from finding home.

As we mark a year of pandemic and see the light at the end of the vaccination tunnel here in the United States at least, it seems timely to reflect upon this anniversary moment--to honor where we've been, who we've become, and, best of all, who we may yet still become. It is a process of recovery and healing and as the psalmist says, *“God is still speaking in the midst of the city and shall not be moved.”* (Psalm 46)

It is tempting to want life to return to normal, to gloss over the losses, to fast forward to a day when our meetinghouse can be full again with our choir, bells ringers and children leaning over the rafters. We believe that *will* happen in good time,... but what have we learned? Who are we now? How shall we live now knowing what we know...?

I remember how nervous we all were as a staff doing those early virtual services. Speaking into an empty meetinghouse and staring into the small lens of Mary's video camera with an uneasiness akin to a bad nightmare...

As ministers, we grumbled in those early days that we were becoming tv reporters. I felt awkward and uncomfortable at our makeshift pulpit. How long could this lockdown last? A month at most? A few people had died which was very concerning but honestly, how bad could this be?

A year later, and we've lived into that answer. It has been a year to lament with sighs too deep for words. For many, the isolation has been like a famine. We've been so cut off physically from each other, from touching, from even the nonverbal language of a gentle smile shared with a neighbor at the deli... We've lost loved ones but couldn't honor them with a service. The COVID pandemic brought job loss, economic hardship, increasing awareness of racial inequities.... These twelve months have meant hard parenting choices for families balancing between safety and school. Living our lives "on remote" has been unrelenting, the borders of our lives have shrunk even as we may have wished otherwise.

And yet, there have been gifts, too. Surprising ones. Life has slowed down, great books have been tackled, and some have been written. Babies have been born in our community and we've buried friends. Some of us have explored new artistic endeavors and applied to college...still others of us have become power walkers and Netflix-ninjas. Oddly, Zoom has kept us united, deepened friendships, helped us "see" whole faces, and share cups of coffee hour and a laugh-- if only through a computer screen. We've seen how small deeds of kindness through calls, cards sent in the mail or a lovingly knitted comfort shawls can restore flagging spirits and help us to reconcile our losses.

At its heart, the book of Ruth is a short story for this unprecedented time. It begins in a famine and ends in a harvest. Relationships build beyond loss and pain, and ultimately, a new community grows out of love. Plenty renews the barren places. A widowed foreigner through her acts of devotion, kindness (and cleverness) takes care of her

widowed mother in law, Naomi. Considered one of the most beautiful pieces of literature in the bible, the Book of Ruth is hardly a simple story. In just four short chapters, there's calamity, exile, gender issues, scandal, and sexualized stereotypes. It's a man's world. And yet, Ruth, the protagonist through her words and her actions leads us to think beyond borders and the arbitrary lines we draw around "the stranger" .

As you know, women have very little power in most of the Bible stories, and in the book of Ruth the fates of Ruth and Naomi still remain tied to the men in the story. In fact, out of all the books of the whole biblical canon, only three are named after women (Ruth, Judith and Esther). The dynamic power of Ruth's kindness and cleverness conflicts with traditional social contracts. This "Moabite from Moab" changes things. Her acts of loving kindness offer a kind of power that leads to an abundance. Just as Naomi was depleted and overcome by grief, Ruth offered a love that moved them both into a renewed life. Ruth marries Boaz in the 2nd chapter and goes on to have a child named Jesse. The lineage of Israel continues. We don't hear Ruth's name again until the gospel of Matthew when Ruth is listed in the genealogy of Jesus (and is named in Matthew 1:1-16). When we speak one another's names, we breathe life and honor the lives of those that lived before us.

Looking more intently at the passage, the first lines tell us of a family forced to leave Bethlehem because of famine, daring to cross into the land of "the other" territory because of hunger. Interestingly, "Bethlehem" in Hebrew means, "house of bread" . Moabites and Israelites did not mix (read more details in Genesis for that ) and were known enemies. But in a famine (or pandemic), survival was what mattered.

Like many families today, fleeing their homes for safety and survival. Elimelech and Naomi cross the border as migrants into Moab. After a decade rebuilding their lives, Naomi loses her husband and her two sons. We have no explanation but can imagine their sweeping grief in that moment. Naomi and her two daughters in law are now widows. In ancient times, widows especially these from Moab, would have been those most marginalized in society. Naomi's grief is so deep she later changes her name to *Mara*, meaning bitter. Life has turned *bitter*, empty for her (v.20). She even feels God has abandoned her. The text invites us to consider our own grief--and where our own hope lies.

Ruth chooses to follow Naomi after being given many reasons not to. It's Ruth's testimony that we hear above all else: *“Wherever you go I will go, wherever you live so shall I live, your God will be my God Your people, my people”* ... It is a blessing of kinship that follows them into the future. However, Ruth's spoken promises of loyalty and loving kindness, known as *“chesed”* (Hebrew) are reminiscent of the love promised by God to God's people. *“You shall be my people and I will be your God”* (Ex:6-7). Ruth's words change not only the arc of the narrative but the trajectory of this family's livelihood and their future. Nonetheless, referred to as a “Moabite from Moab”, Ruth would be shunned as an outsider to the Israelites. In ancient times, the negative stereotypes of Moabite women were that they were highly sexualized and loose.

What do people do who live in desperate situations with limited resources ? Where can they turn? In our contemporary context of the Coronavirus we understand how the practice of kindness can soften all sorrow. It helps us carry our burdens with one another in private relationships and in our public spaces. Ruth's story has something to say, too, about the courage it takes to cross borders and be a *stranger in a strange land*.

Writes the poet and theologian, Padraig O'Tuama, *“It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”* In his commentary about the Book of Ruth, O'Tuama reminds readers that, *“The story of the world is a story of migrating peoples. For millenia, people have moved across seas and mountain ranges. Empires seized lands and created borders. With empires and borders came the idea of policing the permission to move...and notion that you have to be in a country for hundreds of years before you become the ones with the right of way. And even then, you may still not belong or be welcome.”*<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, we know too well what policing the movements of those deemed “other” looks like in the world. What stereotypes persist across our community and because of that, who is welcome here and who isn't? How might we dismantle them more deliberately? How can we foster the courage to step across the visible and hidden borders that separate

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<sup>1</sup> Padraig O'Tuama and Glenn Jordan, *Borders and Belonging: The Book of Ruth for our Times* (2020).

us from belonging to each other? Whom can we partner with in this endeavour even beyond our current partnerships?

Ruth's epic journey illuminates this experience and raises more questions. In and outside of church, many of us are having conversations about how we move forward. What is bubbling up in your heart? To that end, next Sunday, March 21st we're all invited to a Listening Forum on Zoom at 12:30 to share our reflections about this question and responses to the *Virtual Wheels of Justice* journey we've taken together.

We believe hope abounds. Our faith charges us with this- infuses us with the power of the sacred story to reignite our hungry souls and remind us of who we are as a people walking in the footsteps of the gospel. As the prophet Jeremiah preached, *For surely I know the plans I have for you, " says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."* (29:11)

Just the other day, I met up with one of our beloved church members Martine Kazadi. Her face was lit up as she told me about her experience at work one day last week at the Lyme Consolidated School where she is a teacher's assistant. Martine had been invited to tell her refugee story to the 5th grade classes she works with. We'd practiced her speech the week before...and now, she'd done it! Martine relayed to them some details of her family's perilous and long journey from Congo to the refugee camps and safe houses in Kenya to finally being transported to New Haven by the UNHCR. and then ultimately, moving to their new temporary home in our church's Refugee House in Old Lyme. And, possibly, at the end of the school year, they will be moving on to even more permanent housing that will be their own!

There is nothing in my life with my comforts and white privilege that even comes close to Martine's experiences as a refugee. And yet, as we walk the little streets around Rogers Lake in the neighborhood we now share, we have become shelter to one another. *And I am grateful.*

For me, these moments of grace (and there have been many in this past year) speak of the love of God alive in our midst and the mystery of the Spirit within and among us. It speaks of your resilience and courage and that of our ancient foremother, Ruth, and our current neighbor, Martine. We hope for a future we can re- imagine together in which we are all neighbors to each other in the beloved community.

We're half way through the Lenten season now making our way to Good Friday and then, to Easter. As we plan and dream of the reunion days ahead when we can emerge from our COVID hiding places into the gardens of spring, may we pledge as Ruth did to be border crossers and dreamers in our daily lives. As we unpack all that we have learned in this year, may we remind one another to “dwell in the possibilities” not in the mind of scarcity. To use our gifts for the common good wherever we may be called to share them. May we listen to all the voices among us and create spaces of kindness and bravery where all voices are welcomed and can be heard.

As the great poet, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote, “We are each other’s harvest. We are each other’s business. We are each other’s magnitude and bond. Amen.

*Benediction: The Irish Blessing*

*May the road rise to meet you*

*May the wind be always at your back.*

*May the sun shine warm upon your face and the rain fall soft upon your fields,*

*and until we meet again,*

*May God hold you in the palm of Her hand. Amen.*