

“Wherever You Go”
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Ruth 1:1-18

November 1, 2009

For those of us who have had the opportunity to study the Book of Ruth with Tom, today’s words will sound somewhat familiar. This short book of only 4 chapters tells an extraordinary story of devotion, commitment, and compassion. I’d like to read to you the poem that Becky Cantor wrote titled *Naomi and Ruth*.

*Here we are, you and I,
all four chapters*

*of our womanly lives.
Like the river we’ve spent*

*our days carrying our children,
our men, and I suppose*

*there’s nothing grand
about that. No exotic prophets*

*on these pages, no Philistines,
idols or kings. It’s easy to pass*

*us by. We are simply
two women--Naomi and Ruth--*

*with a promise to stay together,
to share a home, a God, a people.
Yes, the river’s bending ways
have brought us here,*

*have landed us together
at the river’s shore standing still*

*as blue wind, blue water,
blue night whip by.*

(from *Letters to Mary Magdalene*, by Rebecca Guess Cantor)

The Bible has many stories about journeys, mostly journeys of men: Abraham, Joseph, Jacob, Moses. But this is a story of two women. Naomi was a Bethlehem woman who traveled to the foreign land of Moab with her husband and sons to avoid famine. Her sons married two local girls, Orpah and Ruth. Then Naomi’s husband and sons die, leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth alone.

Now, in ancient Hebrew culture, a woman who had no man to protect her was in a very dangerous and vulnerable position; she was isolated and alone even in the midst of her community. This was particularly so when the woman was in a foreign land with no other family. Women in such situations could and often did starve to death. The only *slight* hope that Naomi had was to risk the journey back to Bethlehem, where she did have some distant relatives. A trip of 50 miles might not seem daunting to us; it would only take a couple of hours to drive it even in the mountainous terrain between Moab and

Bethlehem. But in ancient times, such a journey would have taken at least three hard days of travel on foot through dry and barren wilderness and through the dangerous Jordan River valley, where a solitary woman would be easy prey for the hungry predators, both human and animal, that lurked in the caves in the valley walls.

For Naomi, such a journey was an act of desperation. For her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, this journey would be sheer madness. Not only was the journey dangerous, as young foreign women they would be at the very least mistrusted and might well even be cruelly abused.

Naomi therefore pushes Ruth and Orpah to turn back and rejoin their Moabite families. After some resistance, Orpah finally makes the logical and sensible decision. She kisses Naomi goodbye and returns to her family. But Ruth makes a crazy, illogical choice. Her love for Naomi is so great that she cannot leave Naomi's side. Indeed, the Hebrew in Ruth's final response to Naomi could not be more intense and passionate.

In contrast to the way these poetic words often find their place in wedding ceremonies, the actual Hebrew in this setting is short and emphatic, as if Ruth could only get out a few words between her tears. Ruth's statement ends with a terrible oath that calls down the power of Yahweh to destroy her if she fails to keep her promise to remain with Naomi even if it means her death. In that culture, such an oath could not possibly be taken back, so Naomi can say nothing more. It is what it is. Ruth and Naomi therefore travel together to Bethlehem.

Next week's lectionary will tell us the rest of their story, but for today we linger awhile with the words of this oath and with a dangerous journey ahead of these two brave women. Journeys in the Bible are both physical and spiritual quests. However, these journeys through uncharted territory are not unaccompanied. I recall the words of a song popular some years ago: *wherever you go, whatever you do, I'll still be right here waiting for you.* Journeys in the Bible as well as ours today are journeys with God. God says "wherever you go" you are not alone; "whatever you do, I'll still be waiting for you."

Today marks All Saints day. In the tradition of the United Church of Christ we celebrate the *priesthood of all* believers; we do not categorize particular individuals as "saints," but we may remember those extraordinary people whose lives reach heights above those of most of us. And many of these "saints" are people whose journeys have led them through deep spiritual darkness or difficult territory and out into the light. Their journeys required of them both risk and trust, risk and trust that there was indeed a larger place for them within the dream of God. How else would they have had the courage to step out into the ominous unknown.

One evening this week I watched Tavis Smiley interview another courageous woman named "Ruth", Ruth Simmons the president of Brown University, the first woman president and the first African American president of an Ivy League school. She told of being born and brought up in Texas in pre-civil rights days. She was one of 12 children and as a girl she was not expected to do much with her life. She said: *First of all, I was taught as a child that I would never measure up. Everything around me...said you can never achieve. So for me, this journey has really been largely about discovery - discovering who I am, discovering what I can do, discovering what I can do to help others...* And she told of her older sisters and other people in her life who, by their example in words and deeds, showed her that she could learn, do, and become.

There are all kinds of journeys, odysseys, and accomplishments that raise people to the positions of "sainthood" for us. But often it is those who have been our own personal saints; who made us who we are today. Not saints who are necessarily recognized by the whole world but saints for and in our lives--perhaps a mother, grandmother, father, teacher, mentor--without whom our lives might have taken different and less desirable turns. I encourage you today, particularly as we share in Holy Communion, to remember your saints, to give thanks for them, to acknowledge that limits of time and space does not separate us from those who live within us and who have showed us the Spirit of the living Christ. Wherever we go; they go with us.

For Ruth and Naomi the journey continues; stay tuned next week for the rest of the story.