

“Moment of Surrender”

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Ruth 1

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It starts bad, it gets worse, much worse; but it ends with hope and a promise. In the middle decisions are made, courageous decisions that change the future for everyone involved, even for you and me.

The story of Ruth takes place in the time of judges. The book of Judges is filled with battles and bloodshed. As the writer of the book of Judges says at the end of the book: “*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*” There are some shining lights like Gideon, but overall, there is a sense of chaos and upheaval.

The book of Ruth begins by telling us of a famine in Bethlehem that forced a family to move from Bethlehem (which ironically means ‘house of bread’) to Moab. We go from the larger story of unrest and famine to a particular story of one family — but more specifically, two women: Naomi, a mother, and Ruth, a daughter-in-law.

As if they haven’t had enough troubles with a famine and having to leave home, the father of the family dies. Still Naomi, the mother, has not one but two grown sons — an heir and a spare, as they say. I won’t trouble you with their names, you will forget them before the sermon is over. But in these sons, she has security. The two sons have married Moabite women and so the table for the future of the family is set.

But the tragedy continues because within a decade both sons are dead, and there is no mention of grandchildren. Naomi realizes she has no choice but to go back home, back to Bethlehem, back to her people where perhaps someone will take pity. The daughters are told to return to their mothers’ homes. It only makes sense. After one daughter-in-law returns to the security of her home, we are left with two women: Naomi and Ruth. But what are two women against such a brutal and uncertain world?

I want you to notice the layers of misfortune and the total loss of security. Loss has a way of creating even more loss. When the loss is significant, everything changes. Life changes.

We have had and are coming up to anniversaries of significant loss of people in our congregation. Some of us know all too well about the layers of misfortune with the pandemic and with other great losses. We had hoped that by now the pandemic and the restrictions would be in our rear-view mirror. I was chatting

with a member of our congregation who remembers so well the first day of the shut down a year ago in March. She was standing and looking out her apartment window and thinking to herself — I'll never survive a shut down that lasts 2 whole weeks!

It's almost funny looking back, and it would be if it was behind us. I don't know about you but I'm weary of it all. So many of the conversations I have with people tell me I'm not alone in feeling weary.

The last two weeks our messages have focused on the first two steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: 1. Admitted we were powerless and that our lives had become unmanageable; and 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. This week I want us to consider Step 3: *"Made a conscious decision to turn our will over to the care of God as we understood him."*

That's what I believe Ruth did in the first chapter — turned her will over to the care of God as she understood him. Not that Ruth ever went through the 12 Steps of AA. The program is only 100 years old and there is no suggestion she was an alcoholic or addict. Though who knows? The kind of pain she went through is the kind that can create an alcoholic. Maybe they exist, but I've never met an alcoholic or an addict who does not have trauma or great pain in their past. Drugs, alcohol, food, porn, gambling, shopping can all become ways to cope with and numb the pain.

But when you are ready, when you feel safe enough to stay in the present and not seek to escape and numb the pain through any number of different ways, there is great potential for transformation and renewed life in times of struggle. It begins with allowing yourself to be fully aware of the brutal facts of the present — and at the same time holding onto a hope of a love that is beyond you and calling you. I can't fully explain why, but you need both. You need to name and acknowledge the pain, but you can't stay there. If you stay in the pool of pain, you drown.

Naomi means 'pleasant' but when she returns to Bethlehem she says 'Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara: call me 'bitter''. In the face of overwhelming tragedy, Naomi the pleasant one has transformed into the bitter one.

Please don't blame or judge her. She was left with nothing, and her understanding of God, her theology, led her to believe that God must also have cursed and abandoned her. By the end of the story, she will realize that this was a season and not the permanent setting for her life. We wish she could have had the eyes to see that the season of pain would not last. As my father always used to tell me: "This too shall pass". But it is very difficult when you are in a season of

pain to see past it. Some of you are in that season right now. Be gentle and patient with yourself!

Maybe because she was younger, maybe because she'd had a taste of the transforming power of love ... for some reason Ruth saw not only the pain but also the potential, and that day she made a decision to commit and surrender her life to Naomi and to the God she was beginning to understand. It's a powerful combination.

I can't help but notice that in this moment Ruth did two things: she made a conscious decision, she made a commitment, and she also surrendered. She surrendered her will and her control over the present and future: *Where you go, I'll go.*

Making a commitment and surrendering at first glance look like opposite things to me. They feel like opposites, because making a decision or a commitment means that you have the power and the freedom to choose to do so. Surrendering, on the other hand, feels more like powerlessness and maybe even slavery.

If it is a hostile takeover, it is slavery; but God is love. When you choose to follow and surrender to love; you do not lose freedom — you discover it. Love is not something that you do, so much as something you discover and give yourself to. We use the term “fall in love” when two people form a deep connection, but it's not just with people that we fall in love. We can fall into God's love.

Back in the mid '90's — about 25 years ago— my husband's cousin came to visit us from England. We were living in Toronto at the time while I was going to seminary. His cousin had three sights on the list to visit: the CN Tower, Niagara Falls and the Toronto Blessing. My guess is you know 2 out of 3.

In the mid '90's there was a church in a warehouse near the Toronto airport that had an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I had heard a little bit about it. I know at my school people mostly made jokes about it — the reputation was pretty wild and wooly. People would be slain in the Spirit and fall down laughing or crying or making other strange noises. Anyway, this church was actually more famous outside of Canada than in it. Alex's cousin had heard about it in England and wanted to check it out.

So one night we went. The service was long, the preaching uninspiring (to be fair to the preacher, evangelical churches have a very different preaching style that looks more like teaching and often goes for about 40 minutes — if you were expecting that style, it was probably a decent sermon. I can't say I remember.) After the service we were invited to go the back of the church — remember it's a giant warehouse so at the front were chairs and a stage but at the back it was

empty except for taped lines on the floor. We were invited to stand on the lines. I realized that the lines were just a little more than 6ft (or body length) apart. As the congregation stood on the lines, prayer teams came to pray for each person and as they prayed, people fell back onto the floor. It was weird and uncomfortable and as I watched this I remember praying fearfully: “God I have no idea what is going on, but if this is not from you protect me.”

When the team came to me, I wasn't feeling any better about it — but I've got just enough FOMO in me (Fear of Missing Out) that I didn't run away. As the team of women prayed, I felt them gently but definitely pushing me back. I remember resisting, but then a thought popped clearly into my head. The thought was: “If you can't beat 'em join 'em.” With that thought I let go and allowed myself to fall back.

Once on the floor the team prayed for a little longer and then moved on to the next victim (I mean person!). As I lay on the floor an incredible warmth enveloped me. I can't remember what time of year this was but it wasn't hot out, and I am almost always cold, so the warmth felt amazing. And then I felt this joy well up in me and I just started laughing. It was really wonderful laughter. It sort-of came in waves, and in between I just felt warm, joyful and peaceful.

I share that story to give you an idea of what surrendering your will can feel like when we surrender our ego, our small fearful selves, to the wonderful and transforming love of God. That surrender is at first frightening — what if this is wrong, what if I get hurt, what if this is a bad idea, what if, what if, what if ...? Giving up our control is never easy. But as we take that leap of faith, as we make that decision, we find that we are falling back into a firm, warm embrace.

I truly believe that what I experienced was a tiny taste of what is to come. On this side of life we can't live in that experience full time, but experiences like that remind us that though life and loss can be very, very difficult, we are not alone through those challenges and beauty can be present even in the pain.

There was no way Ruth could have known in that moment if she was making the right decision when she made her vow to Naomi:
“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.”

When you surrender to love, new life grows. Jesus said: *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* The moment that Ruth made her pledge to Naomi was the moment she buried the seed of her life as she imagined and hoped and planned it would be.

But! It was also the moment something beautiful and beyond her imagination began to grow. As they begin to seek out a living in Bethlehem with Ruth scavenging — gathering what is left over from the barley harvesters— she meets a man named Boaz and Boaz becomes their redeemer — the family member who will take them under his wing and stand in the gap of all that loss.

Ruth and Boaz marry and have a son named Obed. Obed becomes the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of King David. So, Ruth becomes the great grandmother (and Naomi the great-great grandmother) to Israel's greatest king. If you read Matthew chapter one you'll read a genealogy that traces Jesus' ancestry back to King David and back to Ruth and Boaz, and Naomi.

In a few minutes we will have the Reception of New Members and later this evening people will be received into the church through baptism in the river. This is a Step 3 activity. It is making a commitment and a conscious decision to be a follower of Jesus within the context of this particular church, and it is a surrendering, knowing that while the church is not perfect, that the love of Jesus is.

These are hard times. And I have to tell you today, I don't think we are going back to what was. I can't tell you exactly how our world, our community, our church will look when this is all over, but the world we lived in in February of 2020 is gone. I'm not the same person I was back then and neither are you.

Today you have a choice — you can continue to cling to what was, or you can let what was die as you commit and surrender to the only rock, the only anchor that can keep the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll. Amen.