

“Covenant Faithfulness in the Climate Emergency”

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Ruth 1: 1-18

Rev. Jessica Hetherington
Wall Street United Church

Ruth 1:1-18 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 the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and 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 considered 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 goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, “Look, 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, 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, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus 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.

Happy 195th Anniversary! That is a milestone. I am grateful to Rev. Kim for inviting me to come and celebrate with you, and preach a word of Gospel into our midst.

Anniversaries are a special time, when we can look in three directions at once. We can look to the past, to where we have come from and who we have been. We can look to the present, to where we are now, and who we are in that context. And, we can look to the future, to where we are headed, and who and how we might want to be, as people of faith.

Rev. Kim provided me with a brief history of Wall Street United Church, from her doctoral work, and so I have a good sense that you, as a community of faith, have done this kind of three-way visioning before.

And I have a sense that, now, today, you are doing so, again. We are living in a time of change, a time of uncertainty, and a time of multiple crises in the world. All of us, as Christians and as communities of faith, need to do this three-way visioning if we are going to figure out where we have come from, where we are now, and where we might go, in responding in this time of change, uncertainty, and crisis. We © Jessica Hetherington. All rights reserved. For permissions contact:

jessica@jessicahetherington.ca.

We need to do this three-way visioning if we are going to figure out *who* we were in the past, *who* we are now, and *who* we want to be in the future, in responding in this time of change, uncertainty, and crisis.

I am an ecotheologian as well as a minister, which means that I focus my attention, theologically and spiritually, on the ecological crisis and our responsibilities as Christians to respond. And so, I want to lift up one of the crises facing the world today for our prayerful focus and attention.

The climate crisis is upon us. It has been for quite some time, but the rate at which the planet is warming and the climate consequences are being experienced through heat waves, extreme storms, flooding, wildfires, famine and loss, has ramped up, and we are begin to get a sense of what this increasing warp speed of global heating is doing to the planet, and to this Earth community of people, animals, plants, and more.

The entire world is in a climate emergency, and while the impacts are experienced in different ways and at varying levels of intensity around the world, it is fair to say that this is *the* crisis of all crises. The climate emergency is *the* crisis that affects everything else, from poverty and homelessness, to addictions and lack of healthcare, to the rising cost of living, family breakdowns, and so much more. The climate emergency is *the* crisis that will determine our entire human future. (*pause*)

The women in our Scripture reading this morning know something about crisis. They know something about change and uncertainty, and they know something about looking at the past, seeing the present, and envisioning the future. In this story from the Book of Ruth, we have three characters: Naomi, her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth. These three women, they know something about loss; they know something about crisis.

Looking back at the past, Naomi knew famine in Judah, which pushed her and her husband out of their home country and into Moab, a place that was hated by Israel. There, Naomi's two sons found Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. However, ten years later, her sons died, leaving Orpah and Ruth widowed and childless.

Looking now at the present, the three women are in a dire predicament. Women without husbands or sons are not protected; there are few if any protections for them, and so they are at risk of starvation, homelessness and more. Naomi decides to set out for her homeland, to be among her people, and encourages her daughters-in-law to return to Moab and find new husbands. Looking now at the present, this seems to make the most sense, pragmatically, for each one of them. Orpah agrees, and after giving her mother-in-law a loving kiss, she returns to the land of her people.

Ruth, however, does not. Ruth feels a deep kinship with Naomi; indeed, their relationship is so close that Naomi refers to Ruth as her daughter, dropping the 'in-law' designation. Ruth and Naomi love each other, and Ruth refuses to leave Naomi's side. She exclaims, "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." (Ruth 1.16)

Ruth is looking to the future, and pledging a deep, abiding relationship with Naomi. She is promising to never leave Naomi, no matter what happens, and indeed, calls on God to curse her if she reneges on this promise. She says, "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!" (Ruth 1.17)

I would like you to imagine the strength and fervour with which Ruth exclaims these words to Naomi! Ruth is literally clinging to Naomi; holding onto her and refusing to let go. She is crying, weeping at the thought of leaving Naomi, and pledging her faithful presence and love. Indeed, Ruth is making a covenant promise to Naomi; she making a solemn, binding commitment to Naomi, in the name of God. Ruth is pledging a *covenant faithfulness* to Naomi. As Ruth looks into the future, not knowing what will happen, she is promising *who* and *how* she wants to be, in her relationship with Naomi.

What a powerful commitment! What faithfulness, what witness. Ruth is promising that, no matter what happens, she will stay with Naomi, even as they are buried beside one another, in death. Looking to the future, Ruth does not know what is coming, but no matter what, she knows who she wants to be with, in that future. (*pause*)

When I look at the climate emergency, I do a three-way visioning, like Naomi and Ruth have done. I look back to the past, and I see the human actions that have gotten us to where we are, through fossil fuel dependency and rampant consumerism. I look back to the past, and I see a faith tradition that has long seen humans as separate from and dominant over the rest of the natural world, and used that as justification for the ecological devastation that we have wreaked on the planet.

I look to the present, and I see a human community that is differently impacted. People in the global South, who have caused the least amount of fossil fuel emissions, are suffering the worst impacts. People in the global North, including us, use the most emissions, and suffer the least impacts. I see people who are in denial about how bad it is, and others, well-meaning, who try to act but it isn't enough.

I also see governments and industry, who are actually the bodies who need to act the most, through policy-making and large-scale changes to manufacturing, doing little, or actively seeking to undermine climate action. I see people of faith, who want to respond, and don't know how. And, I see a faith tradition that, for the most part, still focuses primarily on just human beings, to the exclusion of the natural world. A faith tradition that, for the most part, still sees itself as somehow outside the Earth community in which we are all, actually, embedded.

And I look to the future, where I see two possibilities. I see one, the course that we are on now, of increasing climate volatility, leading to more storms and heat waves, more human and animal deaths, more and more suffering.

But I also see another possibility...I see a possibility of changing, radically, the way that we view the world, and thus how we act. I see a possibility of Christians changing their relationship with the natural world in a way that inspires real change in response to the climate emergency. I see a possibility for a new *covenant faithfulness in the climate emergency*.

Drawing on the Ruth story now, I want you to imagine something. I want you to imagine that Naomi, in all of her suffering and loss, represents the planet Earth. Naomi is the Earth community, consisting of plants and animals, rocks and mountains, water and rain, all of the ecosystems and the life cycles of the planet. It turns out that, despite the way that we have been taught, in religion and in wider culture, we are *not* separate from or superior to the natural world. We are, in fact, related to everything else that exists on the planet. Through science, we have discovered that we are, in fact, through the evolution of life on Earth, literally cousin to everything else. There is no "us" that is human and "them" that is nature; we are part of nature. We are nature, too.

And, indeed, our Scriptures teach us that all of the Earth community is God's creation; God calls it all good. God cares for and loves all of the Earth community; not just the human one. So, I want you to imagine that Naomi is God's good creation, the Earth.

Now, since it is the rest of nature that is suffering from human actions, let us imagine that Naomi, as the Earth, is suffering from loss. From loss of sustenance, loss of stability, loss of clean air, water and soil. Suffering from species extinction and loss of habitat, climate change and

the privatization of water. The Earth, like Naomi, is suffering, so much. The suffering, the grief, is palpable. We see it in the news every day.

And now, let us imagine that Ruth is *us*. Let us imagine that Ruth is each one of us, individually, as well as Wall Street United Church. Ruth is you and is me, and Ruth is this community of faith that is 195 years old and counting.

And let us imagine that we, like Ruth, make a pledge of *covenant faithfulness* to the Earth. Let us imagine that we *cling* to this beautiful planet that is our home, that we are a part of, and that is part of us. Let us imagine that, like Ruth, we *cling*, and we *weep*, and we say, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge.”

Let us imagine that we cling and we weep and we say, “Where you suffer, I suffer too. Where you need healing, there I will go, and I will seek to heal. Where you need me, there I am; I will respond.” Let us imagine that we pledge a covenant faithfulness to the Earth, as God’s good creation, knowing that God created it all, that God loves it all, and that God *calls us* to act in response to the Earth’s suffering, to act in response to the climate emergency.

It is within Ruth’s covenant faithfulness to Naomi that God’s grace shows up, not only in the passage we read today, but throughout the Book of Ruth. And it is within our covenant faithfulness with the Earth that God’s grace will also show up.

So let us not just *imagine* this covenant faithfulness; let us actually pledge it. Let us actually make a covenant promise to the Earth in this time of climate emergency. Let us recognize the relationship that we have with the entire Earth community, as one species among many, but the one causing the harm, and pledge a faithfulness to be with, suffer with, and help heal, the Earth now, and in the future.

What I have learned about you, Wall Street United, is that you have a history of being adaptable, of being open, and of creating a space for respite and recovery. It seems to me that these are the very characteristics needed in the climate crisis.

And so, as you reflect upon this 195th anniversary, as you do some three-way visioning, I invite you, individually and as a community, to make a covenant promise to the Earth. I invite you into covenant faithfulness in the climate emergency. I invite you to be like Ruth, and cling to the Earth, the way she does to Naomi.

And as you do so, remember this: although, like Ruth and Naomi, we do not know what the future holds, we do know, as they did, that God is with us, and God will give us grace. AMEN.