

Ruth chapter 3 and 4
Remembrance Sunday
November 11, 2018
Rev. Sharon Smith

Objective:

To discover that, in the midst of suffering, faith is the courage to live before a God who remembers us.

Today we remember.

On this day, 100 years ago, was the hardest and best moment of humanity.
The waging of war and the ceasing of war. And we are always capable of both.

For most of us we remember because we have heard second hand stories.
Though some of us sitting here have actually experienced war.
Sirens, bombings, gun shots, wireless and later radio broadcasts, food rations, and families separated for protection.

One of the ways we choose to remember is by wearing a poppy, it is a way of remembering the end of war. We remember the flower (or weed) that grows after the tumult that churns up the soil. Life that is generated after death.

And it is tempting today to think in generalities – the soldiers, the nurses, the chaplains, a treaty signed and a white flag waived.

But there are particularities that need remembering. Stories that linger in memoirs and in the minds and bodies of those who continue to live. Those who experienced the worst of humanity.

Perhaps it is the ones who continue to live, the ones who are left behind at the end of a war that have it hardest. Not only do they hold the memories of trauma that haunt the mind, but psychology also tells us of survivors' guilt - for the soldiers who live and return, for the families that survive following the loss of their loved ones – they grapple to understand why they live when others' lives ended.

A song written for Victor Hugo's Les Miserable describes the pain of loss well.
Marius wounded in battle was carried away from the battle zone during the years preceding the French Revolution. His friends were not so fortunate.
And he sings the following words:

There's a grief that can't be spoken
There's a pain goes on and on
Empty chairs at empty tables
Now my friends are dead and gone

Oh, my friends, my friends, forgive me
That I live and you are gone

Phantom faces at the window
Phantom shadows on the floor
Empty chairs at empty tables
Where my friends will meet no more

The lyrics were written by [Herbert Kretzmer](#)

These are the memories that linger in memoirs and in the minds and bodies of those who continue to live.

In our first reading we heard a story.

A story of people enduring pain, women who suffered because of the death of their partners, the loss of the possibility of income, they became refugees returning to their land as their last hope.

It is a story about the lives of two ordinary widows - Naomi and her foreign daughter-in-law Ruth.

Naomi, her name means sweetness, and when she left the land of Judah with her husband (a civic leader) Elimelekh in search of food in the middle of a famine, she was sweet, and full of courage, a mother of two sons, travelling to the land of Moab, unknown territory, in search of safety.

Our reading today jumps to the end of the story, kind of like the field of poppies following a war - remembering life after intense suffering. With a grandson in her arms, Naomi became grandmother to Obed in the lineage of the future King David.

But there are particularities to this story. There was a courageous hard journey that needs to be told.

Naomi's tragedy happened in the land of Moab. Where her husband died. And after him her two married sons.

And she was left behind. She remained alive to fend for herself with two foreign daughters in law – both from the land of Moab.

The Jewish Midrash calls Naomi, Orpah and Ruth – the walking dead.

For they had nothing left, no land, no money, no direct family, and no way to earn money.

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Naomi's words in the first chapter of the book of Ruth reflect this state:
"I went away full and God brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21)
She cannot make sense of this. Why God?

She is left with emptiness.

It is great suffering when having known joy, known love, known plenty, known pleasure... to have it removed. It is the intermingling of memories of past delights and past tragedies that is the greatest suffering. The contrast of fullness with emptiness.

And it is tempting when experiencing this – to disconnect and not to try in fear of losing again.

And so Naomi (sweetness) changes her name to Mara (bitter).
Isn't that a valid response in the face of such loss?

A Syrian boy, a recent refugee in Vancouver, hides under his bed on Canada Day - the sound of fireworks that usually amaze 8 year olds brings back the memories of guns firing. And he is unable to adjust. His mother weeps for her son, once such a contented child. She feels helpless. Her loss is great.

A valid response to the harsh realities of life. Sweetness to Bitterness.

Naomi is a woman in process. She announces her plight to the community on return to Judah. She lives honestly before God and before others. This takes courage.

Paul Tillich writes the courage to be (to simply be) is an expression of faith.
Being, in spite of anxiety, uncertainty and in the face of death.

It takes courage to carry on. It takes courage to attempt to trust God.
It takes courage to cry. It takes courage to cry out to God.

Last year I sat at the bedside of my good friends' little boy, as he slipped away from our world. He had endured a courageous battle with cancer. He was 8 years old. I was so deeply sad, I had no words.

Then I climbed into my car. And as I drove home from Canuck Place. The sadness in me turned into raging anger. I remembered what an old Scottish preacher once told me: "Vent your grief into the bosom of God, cry deeply into God's chest – God can take it."

So I yelled, I screamed, I protested. I pounded the dashboard. Somehow, I hoped that God was hearing my cry. And when I got home, hoarse and exhausted from the drive, I lit a candle and pulled out a poem that was given to me years earlier...

I would like to read it to you today. It's a little long but bear with me. It goes like this...

And so, we must begin to live again,
We of the damaged bodies
And assaulted minds.
Starting from scratch with the rubble of
Our lives
And picking up the dust
Of dreams once dreamt.

And we stand there, naked in our vulnerability,
Proud of starting over, fighting back,
But full of weak humility
At the awesomeness of the task.

We, without a future,
Safe, defined, delivered,
Now salute You God,
Knowing that nothing is safe,
Secure, inviolable here,
Except You,
And even that eludes our minds at times,
And we hate You
As we love You,
And our anger is as strong
As our pain,
Our grief is as deep as oceans,
And our need as great as mountains.

So, as we take our first few steps forward
Into the abyss of the future,
We would pray for
Courage to go places for the first time
And just be there,
Courage to become what we have
Not been before
And accept it,
And bravery to look deep
Within our souls to find
New ways.

We did not want it easy God,
But we did not contemplate
That it would be quite this hard,
This long, this lonely.

So, if we are to be turned inside out,
And upside down,
With even our pockets shaken,
Just to check what's rattling
And left behind,
We pray that You will keep faith with us,
And we with You,
Holding our hands as we weep,
Giving us strength to continue,
And showing us beacons
Along the way
To becoming new.

We are not fighting You God,
Even if it feels like it,
But we need Your help and company,
As we struggle on,
Fighting back
And starting over.

[Anna McKenzie quoted in "Good Friday People" by Sheila Cassidy]

And when the time was right, Naomi acts. She courageously calls to Ruth, and says:
"My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you."

The Hebrew uses the word "Mano'ach" from which we get seek security or seek a resting place.

- This is the same word used in Genesis for the dove that Noah sent out from the Arc to test the waters after the flood. Like the dove, Ruth is sent to seek a place of stability in the volatile world.

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And God remembers them.