

December 8, 2024, First Congregational Church, Loveland UCC

“You Can’t Go Alone”

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Scripture: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, selection from Ruth 1

Will you pray with me? Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This holiday season -- Thanksgiving to Epiphany -- is one in which we hear constant refrains about family, joy, togetherness. But for some of us, this can be the loneliest time of year -- when we feel most acutely the absence of loved ones whether because of death, estrangement, distance, loss, disappointment, unemployment, depression, or numerous other reasons. For some of us, instead of family and joy, pain, grief, and loneliness are our constant companions.

Perhaps YOU can relate to Naomi -- a stranger in a strange land, having lost her husband and both sons, no grandchildren. She has nothing to keep her in Moab, so she decides to go home. So she says goodbye to her daughters-in-law, releases them from their duties to her family. Perhaps you can feel the depth of Naomi’s grief, her loneliness, that sense that she belongs nowhere and to no one.

Not only has she lost her family, she has also had to grieve the dream -- that she and Elimelech would grow old together. That their sons would farm their land, their daughters-in-law would care for them and their home, their grandchildren’s laughter would echo through the house.

Many of us have had to grieve the dreams of what we thought would one day be. I know I have. Never in my wildest imaginings did I see myself 40 and almost divorced. A single mom. Instead, I imagined that even marrying at age 30 I would celebrate my 50th wedding anniversary with a beloved spouse, our children, hopefully grandchildren too. I had imagined living close to my parents or in-laws -- a multi-generational family. And now.... All of that-gone.

I wonder -- did the grief, loneliness, sorrow, despair, even the question “why me?” ever overwhelm Naomi? Did she wonder what she had done to deserve such a lot in life? Did grief, loneliness, sorrow, or despair ever overwhelm you? Do you question: “Why God? Why?” Do you wonder when you’ll catch a break? Why it’s always so much?

If you do, I daresay, you know Naomi’s grief.

You feel it in our bones. You know it in your marrow.

The truth is, none of us is a stranger to sorrow, disappointment, loneliness.

“Recent studies show that 1 in 2 Americans struggles with social disconnection.... Dr. Vivek H. Murthy [a former Surgeon General of the United States calls] loneliness an ‘epidemic.’ ...Research [shows] that loneliness can take the same toll on our bodies as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.”¹ 15 cigarettes a day! That’s what loneliness can do to us.

Because here’s the thing: we were not meant to go alone. You can’t go alone. God created us for community, for family, for belonging. Even Jesus -- God incarnate -- did not go alone. He had twelve close friends -- some say that was one of his miracles -- a 30-year old man with a dozen close friends! And that doesn’t even include the women -- the ones who stood at the foot of his cross at the end. Jesus knew he couldn’t go alone. And Ruth knew it, too. Ruth the Moabite says to her bereaved Hebrew mother-in-law: “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.

¹ Kayla Craig, A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide page 6.

Where you die, I will die—and there will I be buried.”

This text and the one from Ecclesiastes are often used at weddings, but they’re not about romantic relationships. They’re about chosen family -- those who understand we were not wired to go it alone, those who have the courage to create and claim a new family -- not bound by blood but committed through covenant, pursued in promise, lasting in love.

And perhaps there is surprise for Naomi in this gift as there has been surprise for me this last year in the creation of chosen family. Perhaps, like Naomi felt vulnerable and afraid as I have -- leaning on people who aren’t flesh and blood kin. Perhaps you have felt vulnerability and fear of asking and offering bonds that no blood holds fast.

AND... AND, isn’t that what we do as a congregation? Isn’t this what we do through our extravagant welcome -- claim for ourselves and proclaim for each other that we can’t go alone. And that we don’t have to. Isn’t what we are doing choosing each other as siblings in Christ? Some days surely are easier than others. We find ourselves drawn to some individuals more than others, and yet here we all are -- whether you’ve been here your whole life or this is your first Sunday, you can’t go alone. And so, today, we are going together.

As we approach the New Year and a new administration, many of us carry great fear and certainly there is significant uncertainty for all of us -- what will it mean for medicare, social security, for our trans and queer siblings, for our siblings of color and our indigenous siblings? We remember the violence that saw the last exchange of power. We’ve seen the divisions among us and how some have felt emboldened to act out their fear, prejudice, and hate. And some of us feel afraid. So let us remember that we are not alone. That we cannot go alone. That we journey together.

In this season of waiting, of anticipation, for all the things we are anticipating, I want to share a poem by Sharlande (“SHAR-land”) Sledge, words she wrote for her congregation this Advent season:

Look upon us gently, Lord, for waiting is not our forte....

When we are waiting for the light to shine,
When we are waiting for the Word,
When we are waiting for a wound to heal,
Nothing in all the world
Is harder than waiting.

So in your mercy, Lord, wait with us.
Be our very present help in waiting.
Heal our frenzy.
Calm our fears.
Comfort those who at this very moment
Are with every anxious breath and thought
Waiting for they know-not-what.
Transform our in-the-meantime
Into your time
While we wait **with each other**,
[While we] Sit with each other,
[While we] Pray each other into hope,
Surround [us in] your presence,
Even in the darkness,
Especially in the darkness.

For we cannot go alone.
So let us go together. May it be so. Amen.