

Sermon Draft

Text: Ruth 1:1–19a

Sermon: “God Delivers”

During the season after Pentecost, we consider how God guides us in our Christian lives and is always with us. Our Psalm speaks of God’s wondrous works, in which he accomplishes his purposes. The Epistle mentions suffering as a Christian as one of the troubles we encounter (with the expectation that God will lead us through that suffering).

Our text from Ruth shows how God delivered his saints in the Old Testament from their troubles in surprising and unexpected ways. All these illustrate how God has called his servants *to “ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown,”* so that we pray God would *“give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love supporting us.”*

Our reading from Ruth is simply the prologue for the rest of the book. Ruth's coming to Bethlehem brings her to the town where she will meet her new husband and become part of the lineage of Jesus Christ. In the process, we see perhaps the best application of the laws of redemption found in Leviticus 25.

Boaz is the kinsman-redeemer (close relative) of Ruth who buys back her husband's land and marries her. In this way, Boaz, an ancestor of Jesus Christ, is a type of Christ, who became our brother by taking on human flesh (thus a close relative) and then redeeming us from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil through his sacrificial death on the cross.

Famines are part of life at many times and in many places. Famines can be as new as tomorrow's news, or as old as the Bible. Whenever famines occur, people are displaced, as they seek to find food where it's available. That's what happened in our Old Testament Reading today from Ruth.

This famine occurred during the time of the judges, the period in the history of the Israelites between the conquest of the land of Canaan and the beginning of the monarchy with King Saul.

From events told us later in the book, we can place this more precisely about twelve hundred years before the time of Christ. At that time, because of the famine, Elimelech and his family left Bethlehem to live for a time in Moab. Elimelech's family consisted of his wife, Naomi, and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Our text mentions that they were from "Bethlehem in Judah" because it was the tribe of Judah that had settled in this area.

It's rather ironic that Elimelech left Bethlehem for Moab. The name Bethlehem means "house of bread" in Hebrew. It was the town where the one who is the Bread of Life would be born about twelve centuries later. To further the irony, Elimelech and his family were going to a country on the east side of the Dead Sea whose inhabitants had refused bread and water to the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness.

Despite the rather odd choice of a place to find bread, the family found enough there to live ten years in Moab. Since God provides daily bread to all people, we might not think that God's hand is guiding them here, especially given the ironic choice of safe haven in the famine. Nevertheless, God was with them and guiding them in their lives, although not in the miraculous and surprising way we will see later.

During their time in Moab, the two sons married Moabite wives, another somewhat questionable choice. The Israelites were forbidden to marry Canaanites and warned in general against marrying wives who were not Israelites. The reason for this was not a fear or dread of foreigners (what today we call xenophobia), but a concern to keep the Israelites from worshiping false gods. The very real probability that non-Israelite wives could lead their husbands astray is exemplified later in the life of Solomon.

Once again God's hand was in the story. Once again we might not think that God's work was very impressive, since neither Mahlon nor Chilion had children, and they and their father died in Moab, never getting back to Judah. But God continued to preserve them with food until their death. There is no reason to think that their death was because of the questionable choices they made. They simply died natural deaths just as death comes to all people.

With the three men's deaths, Naomi was left with her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, all of them childless. When Naomi heard the Bethlehem famine had eased because of God's provision, she decided to return to her hometown. Naomi's two daughters-in-law decided to go with her.

On the way back to Judah, there was what we could call a "conflict of wills" between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. Naomi wanted them to return to Moab. Her daughters-in-law insisted, "***No, we will go with you to your people***" (v 10).

Naomi attempted to dissuade them from following her. There was, she knew, the law of levirate marriage given in Deuteronomy. According to this law given by God, the brother of a man who had died would marry his brother's wife, and the first son born would be considered to be the son of the brother who had died. But Naomi had no other sons, and it was certainly implausible that she would have more sons who could eventually grow up to marry her daughters-in-law. No reason to follow her.

We should not think that either side was being illogical. Naomi was correct: there was little prospect in Judah for finding future husbands, since she would have no more sons, and both her daughters-in-law were non-Israelites, so she could not expect to find husbands for them easily. Orpah and Ruth were correct: although they probably had more prospects for the future in Moab, they also owed a responsibility to their mother-in-law, since she was now "family."

The “conflict of wills” ended for Orpah when she returned to Moab. But Ruth stayed with Naomi. Ruth makes here a not-so-subtle change in reference to the Israelites. Although earlier she had said, with her sister-in-law, ***“We will return with you to your people,”*** ***Ruth now says to Naomi, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God”*** (v 16).

Ruth declares that the people of whom she was not a part, whom she had known were living opposite Moab on the other side of the Jordan River and of the Dead Sea, were now her people; she was a part of the people of God. She declares that the God she used to disbelieve is now her God; her allegiance was no longer to the false gods of Moab, but to the true God of Israel. As God’s hand guided Ruth away from Moab and toward Judah, God is ever with us on paths as yet untrodden

The presence of Elimelech’s family in Moab has brought Ruth into contact with believers in the true God, and, through marriage, the wife of one of those believers in God.

Although childless at the moment because of the death of her husband, Mahlon, even that barrenness is changed to fruitfulness under the guiding hand of God. God was indeed guiding the family in Moab; here it just comes to the forefront. The action of God's Holy Spirit drawing Ruth to faith is evident in her words. That her decision to remain with Naomi on her trip back to Bethlehem would put her on "paths as yet untrodden" is clear. And God's hand continued to guide her.

Our reading ends with the return to Bethlehem: "*So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem*" (v 19). For Naomi, these were familiar surroundings; for Ruth, they were completely new. Just as God had begun leading her as she married Mahlon, he continued leading her on her life's path, now as a part of the people of Israel, a path unknown to her up to this point in her life.

Although our reading ends here, the story does not end, nor does God's leading through paths as yet untrodden cease. The story continues so let's see what happens next.

Mosaic Law required land that would be lost to a family be redeemed (Leviticus 25). The land that Ruth would have because of marriage to an Israelite would be lost unless it were redeemed by a close male relative. That person was Boaz. He not only redeemed the land, but Ruth herself, by marrying her, and thereby became the great-grandfather of King David and an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Ruth was an ancestor of Jesus. That was a path that she could certainly not have expected and was certainly a path untrodden by her before marrying Boaz. God was ever with Ruth on all the paths she took, delivering her from being a childless widow to becoming an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Ruth is but one example of how God has guided his saints in the past. Even though God often sends his people “on paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown” (as one of our collects says), we need never fear not getting through those unknown paths and hidden dangers.

We pray in that same collect that God would ***“give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us.”*** Ruth showed us that God carries out his promise to take care of his people, and we can also trust in that promise.

Amen