

Scripture

Ruth 1:1-18

Elimelech's Family Goes to Moab

1 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. 2 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. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 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, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Naomi and Her Moabite Daughters-in-Law

6 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. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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. 10 They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 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? 12 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, 13 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." 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said,

"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.
17 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!"

18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Sermon: Rejecting the foreigner

The refugees are coming!

After a few days of news silence, the migrant caravan making its way north through Mexico is back in the news.

There seem to be around 3500 people in this group, though the numbers change from day to day. 1500 of them have already applied for asylum in Mexico, the rest face a thousand mile march to get to the border of the US where thousands of armed soldiers will be waiting for them.

These migrants are mostly from Columbia, Honduras and El Salvador. Columbia has been having a deadly internal conflict for 50 years which has displaced more than six million people, while Honduras and El Salvador are suffering severe violence related to the drug trade.

I could speak about how the US has directly contributed to the conditions that these people are fleeing through their war on drugs and armed support for military dictators who allow American conglomerates access to vast natural resources, but that is not the lesson of today's sermon.

This morning I will speak to you about migrants, refugees, xenophobia, racial and cultural purity, foreigners, and neighbours.

Certainly this decade has been the decade of the refugee. All around the world people are on the move. To a certain degree this has always been the case, but this present age is unique because of the sheer number of people who have been displaced from their homes.

Every inhabited continent is being affected by mass migrations. In Africa people are fleeing conflicts in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Eritrea, Mali, and Nigeria. Many of those have been making their way to Europe through Libya which is now a largely lawless state due to western bombing.

Millions have also been pouring into Europe from the Middle East: from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq because of conflicts there. Moving a little further southeast into Asia hundreds of thousands are fleeing persecution in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

North America and Europe seem to be the only places that don't have a massive outflow; rather we are the destinations for many of those desperate to find a home.

I read that about 280 million people are living outside of the country of their birth, and that doesn't include the many, many more who are internally displaced; who have fled their homes but haven't the resources to strike out for a new country.

As we look toward the future, I don't think this problem is going to get any better. Conflict has always been part of humanity's dark side – it's not going away any time soon. As our technology grows, so too does the scale of our conflicts, so we should expect the numbers of displaced people to continue to grow, as our ability to destroy increases.

In the coming decades we will also add to this number hundreds of millions of environmental refugees. Unfortunately, many of the areas of the planet expected to bear the brunt of the droughts, floods, extreme storms, and rising sea levels that we are already witnessing as part of the environmental changes that we are in the midst of are already weakened by poverty, unstable governments, and conflict.

If this decade has been marked by migration, the next few decades will be even more so.

Back to the migrant caravan working its way towards the US border. Much has been said and written about the dangers that these people represent. They have been called murderers, thieves, rapists, terrorists – generally they are being portrayed by some as criminals who will mark the end of the western world as we know it. Thousands of soldiers are being dispatched to deal with this threat of weakened, starving, shuffling human beings wearing shorts and flip-flops, armed with water bottles and canteens.

It is mid-term election time south of the border, so it's no surprise that this caravan is being used as a political wedge to try to motivate voters, but there is more to it than just that.

This xenophobic, anti-immigration attitude isn't particular to the current American administration, but rather it is afflicting the entire world. Leaders and would-be leaders from Turkey to Norway to France to Denmark to Brazil – which has recently elected Jair Bolsonaro to be its new president – have campaigned on a platform of nativism and have done their best to stoke the fears of an encroaching army of others, usually darker-skinned people, who are coming to destroy a long-held way of life.

This isn't a new attitude. We find it all through history, and we can even find it in the Bible. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the period of time after the exile of the Israelites to Babylon. Many of the Israelites had been displaced – they were forced migrants, carried off to foreign lands as slaves, while their own land was settled by foreigners.

After the Babylonian empire was overthrown by the Assyrians, many of the Israelites were able to return home, to try to rebuild the home they once knew. During all the upheaval of exile, return, and resettlement, many of the Israelites had intermarried with people of other nations. Once they were home, some felt that it was time for purification – that they would have to cleanse their land of those outsiders.

So they sent away their foreign wives, as well as the children born through them. Xenophobia is not a new phenomenon; it's been around for a while. Neither book mentions where the Israelites sent their unwanted families, or how they got there. Women and children traveling the desolate roads would have been particularly vulnerable; easy prey for highwaymen. There would be no guarantee they would ever make it back to their original countries, and no guarantee that anyone would take them in once they arrived.

I find it saddening that a people who just experienced 70 years of living as refugees would joyfully come home and then immediately create a new class of refugees and send them out to fend for themselves in the world.

It is during this post-exilic period that the book of Ruth, from which we heard this morning, was written, though the events being recounted are from an earlier period, and it would also appear that the book itself is a protest piece. One of the purposes of the book of Ruth seems to be to serve as a counterpoint to some of the attitudes expressed by Ezra and Nehemiah.

For Ezra and Nehemiah, for most of humanity throughout the ages, and also for many of us, there is a tendency toward tribalism. Us and them. In and out. We gain security by surrounding ourselves with people who look like us, speak like us, and think like us. The way that we know that we are in the tribe is by pointing out all the people who are not, and refusing them entry.

Last week's children's sermon dealt with exactly this issue. Those closest to Jesus were trying to shush blind Bartimaeus. They didn't want to let him in; didn't want to share Jesus with him. They were in, blind Bartimaeus was out.

The book of Ruth runs counter to this attitude of exclusivity. In this morning's reading we were introduced to Naomi, a Hebrew woman, who fled with her husband and two sons to the land of Moab because of a famine in Judah.

Already in this first paragraph, the author has refuted Nehemiah's accusation against the Moabites, that they had refused bread to the starving Judeans. Because, not only did Naomi and her family find food in Moab, they settled down and found wives for their sons.

In the course of time Naomi's husband died, as did both of her sons, leaving Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law on their own. In a patriarchal society, these three women had no means of support with their men gone, so Naomi proposed that each of them return to their own families and carry on as best they could in their home towns.

One daughter-in-law agreed and headed home to her mother and father, but Ruth, for whom the book is named, gives a beautiful speech of loyalty and devotion.

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.

So Naomi and Ruth returned together to Bethlehem, where Ruth caught the eye of Boaz, who married her. Together they produced a son, Obed.

What does this all mean? Naomi was a displaced Hebrew woman; a refugee in a foreign land, with an uncertain future. Naomi represents the remnant of Israel, all those men and women who had been carted off to Babylon, far from home, far from the temple, unsure of what the future would hold.

With the loss of her sons, Naomi the remnant was in dire straits. The name of her husband was about to be wiped out. We can take this to represent more than just the end of that family – the loss of Elimelech's name is the loss of a tribe, and the loss of Israel.

If Naomi was the remnant of Israel, widowed and childless, then Naomi was the salvation, the one who provided a child and a future, the one who gave life to a dying seed. Not only did Ruth give hope for the future, but in marrying Boaz she also provided support for Naomi.

Hope for the future, support in the present. It is not an exaggeration to declare that Ruth the Moabite saved the entire nation of Israel because her son Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David, the king who would lead Israel to become a mighty nation.

Naomi was a refugee in Moab. Ruth was a Moabite immigrant to Judah. Though they did not know it at the time, the people of Israel had to welcome the refugee stranger Ruth into their land so that God could work through her. Their openness to a vulnerable migrant was their path to restoration and salvation.

Indeed, their openness to accept this Moabite woman was the key to restoration and salvation for all us. Not only were David and Jesse descended from this woman, Jesus himself was a shoot from Jesse's stump – a descendent of the house of David.

Jesus, saviour of the world, was a child of mixed race; he wasn't a pure Israelite, whatever that may be. He had Moabite blood in him. Jesus' own genealogy is a theological statement of inclusion, even inclusion of Israel's enemies.

And we know that Jesus spent time as a refugee himself, fleeing to Egypt as an infant to escape persecution and death.

The migrant caravan is not heading to Canada, though some in that group have expressed that desire. The distance is just too great. But we do have an inflow of migrants of our own, many crossing the border from the US.

Others apply for status from overseas and come, like the new Syrian family that will be with us by Christmastime. As we encounter these folks, and as we are in conversation with acquaintances who express negativity about those coming into our country, we would do well to remember three things.

One – each and every one of us is descended from an immigrant. Even if we have to go back four or five generations, at one point our families were unwelcome. Maybe we spoke Dutch, or Hungarian, or Portuguese. Our food was as foreign as our language and our customs. Remember, you once were aliens – foreigners – sojourners in a strange land.

Second – remember the words of Jesus the refugee. ‘The king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

Third – remember the law as Jesus told it. ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.’

God of Ruth and Naomi;
God of hope in bitterness,
harvest in hunger,
life in death,
we offer our prayers of blessing
on the feet and lives of those women and men
living in poverty and taking risks to
feed their families and communities.
Invite us into solidarity with them and with you,
as you lead us to life and justice.
Amen.