

Do you think Naomi saw it coming? The famine, the death, the loneliness that would inevitably follow. Do you think Naomi saw it coming? Something tells me she did. After all, we are told she lived in a time when the judges ruled. Even if you don't know it means for judges to rule, wouldn't you agree that it just sounds bad? Typically, you need judges only when there are arguments to settle and people to punish. But if lawlessness wasn't bad enough, these judges are much the cause of it. So, it goes that in our Bibles, just before we get to the book of Ruth, we're in the book of Judges. 21 chapters of pure depression, of mistreating the poor, of polluting the earth, of those who can taking more than they should from those who can't. In the book of Judges the scales of justice aren't just tipped, they're broken. By the time we reach the last sentence of the last chapter, we're told, "In those days there was no king. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

It's not exactly your happily-ever-after ending. In fact, you get to the end and you're just happy for it to be over. But let's be honest. The book of Judges isn't over, is it? In this second week of Advent, there's a reason we light a candle for hope. Because we are still very much in the thick of things. At best we are trying not to be partisan with our politics while still taking a stand on the side of love. At best we are trying not to be so sentimental about the season that we forget our neighbors in California whose homes are burning to the ground right now, or to ignore the fact that more than half-a-million Rohingya Muslims have fled Myanmar as refugees just since August under the threat of ethnic cleansing. At best we have come to realize that we neither want nor need to keep up with the Jones,' who just bought yet another new car. We are, with Naomi, living in the days of the judges.

You read the opening lines of her story and you get the impression that the writer has told this story so many times that it's become predictable. There is a woman named Naomi and she marries a man named Elimelech, whose name in Hebrew means, *My God is King*, and we think, well that's good. In a time when there was no king, no one to keep law and order, at least for Naomi there is Elimelech. And then we hear that she gives birth to two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and together they all live in Bethlehem, a town whose name means *House of Bread*, and we think, this really is a lovely story. Until we're told there is suddenly no more bread in Bethlehem. In the house of bread there is no bread! And then,

without warning, Elimelech dies. But no great worries, Naomi still has her sons and they are able to find beautiful, strong, caring women to marry. All is well again until it isn't. Mahlon and Chilion die. Of course, we're not told how they die because what does it matter how they died? The point is: all the men in Naomi's life are dead and she is left with no one. No one, that is, except her two daughters-in-law. But they don't really count. They don't count because they are, first and foremost, women. They can't work, they can't own land, and so they can't help provide for Naomi or for themselves in any meaningful way. Secondly, they are Moabite women. Throughout the Bible, Moabites are branded as hostile enemies of the Israelites. Thought to be shameful, immoral people from whom it was believed no good could ever come, how they got to marry Naomi's boys, God only knows. "Go back to your mother's house," Naomi tells them. I can do nothing for you, you can do nothing for me, go, and may the Lord be as kind to you as you have been to me. And Orpah goes. But Ruth clings to Naomi.

It makes no sense really for why Ruth would do this. As a widowed woman, she would do better to go home to her own parents. She is young. She can start over again. And Naomi tells her over and over again that it would be okay for her to do so. I can hear Naomi telling her, "The cards are stacked against me, my dear. God has forgotten me. Think about it Ruth, you'll have no future with me." And Ruth says back to her, "Yes, but Naomi, you'll have one with me."

I don't know if you're aware of it or not, but according to the church calendar, two weeks ago marked the end of what is called Ordinary Time. Stretching out over 33 weeks, Ordinary Time is what we spend most of the year in. But with the start of Advent last week, we marked the end of Ordinary Time and the beginning of a new time. Granted, for many in our community and world, ordinary time will just keep right on going. The famine, death, and loneliness of everyday life is so overwhelming that many won't notice what is about to go down in a little town called Bethlehem. That in a house of bread where there is no bread, the Bread of Life is about to be born again. But many will not see it. They will not see it unless we, like Ruth, cling to them; unless we, like Ruth, walk beside them and into a brighter future.

I think it's worth noting that if you read the book of Ruth all the way through, God is never mentioned. At no point in Ruth does God speak up or even show up. Read Ruth's

whole story and you'll notice that Ruth never tries to explain God to Naomi. When Naomi tells Ruth that God has cursed her, Ruth doesn't respond with words of rebuke, as some are prone to do. "You shouldn't say such things. God would never curse you." As far as we can see, Ruth doesn't even try to make Naomi feel better about her situation. She just clings to her, goes with her wherever she goes.

Author and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen has a term for what Ruth is doing here. He calls it "voluntary displacement," the willingness to shift away from what is proper. For Ruth, she is not out to play the hero in Naomi's world. Rather, Ruth herself knows what it is to be displaced, to be in search of belonging and solidarity with a million other disrupted lives. Ruth must see in Naomi what she sees in herself.

Nouwen goes on to say that in order to make this shift toward voluntary displacement, one must be willing to confront, to acknowledge that we cannot set the captives free unless we are willing to confront the person who holds the keys. In the case of Ruth, this means having to confront a man named Boaz. We don't learn a lot about Boaz from our text today, except what Naomi tells Ruth, that he is Naomi's next-of-kin and that maybe he can help restore both Ruth and Naomi to a family and a future. So, the two women devise a plan for Ruth to slip in upon Boaz in the middle of the night, to put the moves on him, and to see if she can't win him over. What's so remarkable of course is that Ruth and Boaz are technically enemies. Remember, Ruth is a Moabite, a member of the rival gang. We might expect her to slip in upon Boaz with a bomb strapped to her chest, or to slit his throat while he's sleeping. And we might expect from Boaz, for him to wake up and pull a knife on Ruth. But to cozy up together, to get intimately involved? It's a terrible risk Ruth takes, but one that pays off. When Boaz sees her and what she's doing, he exclaims:

"Blessed are you of the Lord, my daughter. Does your loyalty to Naomi have no limit? Is there nothing you won't do to redeem her poor lot in life? And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, and all the assembly of my people will know that you are a worthy woman."

Don't miss what is happening here. This is the Israeli and the Palestinian sitting down together in a bar...in Jerusalem. This is the Rohingya Muslim and the soldier whose been

sent to kill him laughing it off on the front porch of the Rohingya's home. This is Ruth, the woman with no family giving birth to a boy named Obed, who will later give way to a boy named Jesse, who will give way to a boy named David, who will ultimately give way to a boy named Jesus, who will be born in—of all places—Bethlehem.

As you may know, I've been writing and preaching a lot lately about Father Gregory Boyle, who works with gangs in inner city L.A. One of these days I will preach a sermon that doesn't include Greg Boyle, but today is not that day. I recently listened to an interview he had with Krista Tippett on her podcast, *"On Being,"* in which he tells a story about a conversation he had with a young man, a former gang member who now works as part of Boyle's ministry, Homeboy Industries. In this conversation, Boyle asks the young man what he did on Christmas.

"Oh, just right here," he told me.

Now this boy was an orphan, and abandoned and abused by his parents. I said, "Alone?"

And he said, "No, I invited six other guys from the graffiti crew who didn't have no place to go."

He named them, and they were enemies with each other at one time, members of rival gangs. I said, "What'd you do?"

"You're not gonna believe it. I cooked a turkey."

I said, "Well, how did you prepare it?"

"Well, you know, ghetto-style."

I laughed and said, "No, I don't think I'm familiar with that recipe."

"Well, you rub it with a gang of butter, and you squeeze two limones on it, and you just put salt and pepper, put it in the over. Tasted proper."

"Wow," I responded. "Well, what else did you have besides turkey?"

"That's it. Just turkey. The seven of us, we just sat in the kitchen, staring at the oven, waiting for the turkey to be done. Did I mention it tasted proper?"

“Yeah, you did.”

This is a Ruth story. It’s about what can happen when we dare to do what is improper only to discover that it is the most proper thing we can do, when enemies cross lines to sit around an oven and share turkey, when we dare to step into those places where there is no bread and allow ourselves to become the bread. It’s about kinship and incarnation and Christmas hope, about a God who is too busy loving us to ever be scared or disappointed by us. Amen.