

Call Me Bitter

Rachel Watson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Jeremiah 29:4-7, Ruth 1:1-18

“I want to go home.” The prekindergartner cries as she appears, teary-eyed, beside me. Overwhelmed by the sights and sounds and decisions and activity of the classroom, she craves the comfort of home.

The phone rings and it’s the tween at the sleepover. She thought it would be okay, but now in the darkness and stillness of the night, the unfamiliar overwhelms and she wants to go home.

The teenager calls from the school. It’s too much. The stress of fitting in, of getting the grades, of school cliques and spats. On the phone, a small voice cries, “I want to go home.”

A few years ago, I found myself facing a mountain of deadlines, a sick kid at home, a to-do list of errands a mile long, a news cycle full of violence and political unrest, news of a death of a friend, and a clock that relentlessly ticked off seconds with no regard for my feelings at all. From the depths of my heart, I heard it bubble up, “I want to go home.”

I wonder if you have ever heard this cry well up inside you. In the deepest parts of your heart. Just a whisper, “I want to go home.”

Ironically, I was home. Where else was I going to be? The world was in the midst of a pandemic and I was home. Like always. I wondered to myself, where is this home you want to go to? Our house in Houston was no longer ours. A new family was making it a home. My mother’s house was a memory packed in boxes after she died years ago. Where is this home?

Home is a sanctuary. A place of security, familiarity, and comfort. A place you go when you are bitter. Worn down. Overwhelmed. A place of hope and renewal.

I want to go home. I imagine Naomi uttered those same words. She just wants to go home. To find security, familiarity, comfort, rest. This whole book is Naomi’s homecoming story. As much as it is the story of a faithful friend, of Ruth, it is the story of a woman finding home. It is Naomi’s story.

Naomi, the Ephrathite, a citizen of the city of Bethlehem, had raised two young boys in the city alongside her husband, Elimelech. There was no king in these days and the political powers came and went. While, from time to time a wise judge would arise and bring peace and safety to the land for some time, they faced cycles of political unrest and economic uncertainty. But then there was the famine.

Elimelech and Naomi were forced to make an impossible decision. Do they take their boys and flee their home, the place that had offered stability and security and their daily bread for so long? Do they say goodbye to a world they understood to seek life in a land far away?

Moab, of all places, would not have been their first choice, as the Moabites were held in disdain by the Israelites. Nor was it to be their long-term choice. They planned to sojourn there for a little bit, not forever.

But when they got to Moab, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow with two young sons in a foreign land. She ends up making this new place her home, building, planting, eating, and living there. Her sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. And Ruth and Orpah became family in this strange time and place.

Ten years later, disaster strikes again. Her sons die. She is alone now. This is not how she imagined her life was going to be. She's overwhelmed. She's scared because the financial and social security she had is slipping away. She is alone without her family, who had anchored her in her faith and culture. In the depths of her heart, she feels it bubble up, "I want to go home."

But it's been ten years. Her house, the building, is no longer there, or at least no longer hers. Time has marched on. Will the citizens of Bethlehem even remember her? Bethlehem does not hold the promise of homecoming banquets and open arms ready to embrace. But still, it's home?

Wanting to spare her daughters-in-law, she beseeches them to go home, to the home of their childhood. Naomi is sure that hers will not be a happy homecoming. Bitterness and despair await her in Bethlehem. Naomi makes it clear that she can offer nothing for them and tells them to go home. There they can find happiness and hope that she cannot offer them.

But Ruth refuses.

Did you notice that no one in this story swoops in to fix it and sweep it under the rug? No one tells her to get over it. No one tells her it will get better. No one blames her for what has happened. No one offers platitudes of comfort.

They only offer her a hand and shoulder to lean on. First, Orpah and Ruth. Then just Ruth who can promise nothing but presence...but promises that with all her heart and soul.

Naomi doesn't realize it now. She doesn't see the grace in this moment. Too deep is her pain. Too strong is the urge to run home to the old way, to the memory of a better time, to a place that doesn't really even exist any longer. But Ruth holds out her hand.

From Naomi, she has learned about a God who calls us to love each other with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. To uphold the suffering of her friend even and especially on her worst day, to offer hospitality with no strings attached, to hold on for her when she can't hold on for herself, to offer grace in the form of presence. So she holds out her hand. And in it offers a way home.

Naomi is running out of hope. She's scared about what the world holds for her. She just wants God to step in and fix it already, set it right, to make peace for her...and God's not's doing it.

Call me bitter, she tells her daughters-in-law as she tries to send them back to their childhood homes. Call me bitter, she tells the townspeople as she returns home to Bethlehem. No more am I pleasant, no longer Naomi. Instead call me Mara, which means bitter.

Call me bitter.

I want to go home.

There's a lot of people right now that look at the world and see what Naomi saw. Overwhelming grief because of death and illness. Families fractured by stress and distance. Financial and social unrest that makes us fearful for our way of life. Divisions in our nation that seem to be getting wider as we forget how to listen to one another. Injustice and pain as we see each other as the enemy, the other, the not-me, instead of siblings in Christ.

And we see the hunger in the world, a famine of our own making, leaving the most vulnerable hungry and thirsty and wandering while others hunger and thirst for meaning hidden under too much pain.

Call me bitter.

I want to go home.

Home is a sanctuary. A place of security, familiarity, and comfort. A place you go when you are bitter. Worn down. Overwhelmed. A place of hope and renewal.

But how do we get home, when like Naomi, the home we knew is just a memory? And probably a polished memory with the hurts and troubles, all the mess of the world, wiped away, leaving only the best of what used to be.

How do we get home? The story of Naomi and Ruth says we get there through the grace of others. Through their dogged presence when we are hurting. Through their willingness to cry with us and for us when the world has worn us down. Through their willingness to sit with us when there are no words to express the grief. Through their willingness to speak for us when the world silences us. Through their hand offered in the darkness that we might be led home.

Where is God in this story? We hear Naomi cry, wanting to know she belongs with God, but fearing she has been forgotten.

If you're looking for a wide-eyed miracle, a burning bush or a host of heavenly angels, you risk missing it here. God's action is subtle here. It will be subtle throughout Naomi's whole story. We only see God's explicit action once in the whole book, at the very end. But God is with her throughout, offering presence, offering grace, offering home. This grace is played out in the ordinary action of ordinary humans. In the hand of a friend, we find God's hand reaching out.

We participate in the building of the kingdom. As Naomi's story shows, the building of home, the making of sacred space, in the midst of the confusing time is something we are all able to play a

part in. When ordinary humans like us reach out across human-made borders, when ordinary humans like us love others extravagantly, we become sanctuaries, safe places flowing with God's loving-kindness, for them.

This work is not easy. Ruth knew that.

Where you go, I will go.

Where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Ruth knows what she's offering. She doesn't believe that Naomi will provide stability for her, but that they will wander together, in temporary dwellings, in places unfamiliar to her, making a bit of sanctuary for each other wherever the wandering takes them.

We could all use a little bit of this loving-kindness right now. To believe we are better together even and because we are a diverse mix of people and ideas. To believe that standing together and listening, learning, and growing together makes us stronger. To believe that when the world out there is topsy turvy, we find space for each other. To believe that we can be a sanctuary in here and out there in the world for those crying out for home. What a gift it is to find a moment of sanctuary, of home, with friends who are not afraid to intentionally cross our human-made borders to be with us.

It is in the relationships we share as we walk this often-bitter journey of life that we find home, not in a place, but in the heart space shared. A sanctuary in the wilderness where God is there in the ordinary actions of humans seeking relationship. In the offered hand of a friend, we find the hand of God reaching out to lead us home. And in the offering of our hand, we offer home. Amen.