

“Pack it Up: Travel Companions”

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Ruth 1.1-18

Psalm 25.5-10

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If you're just joining us on our trip, this is week two of a sermon series connected to stewardship. We're taking a metaphorical trip to discern how we want to partner and serve in our 2022 journey. Each week we discuss the gifts that we bring, or what we are packing in our metaphorical suitcase. We remember the time, talent, finances, and energy it takes to support this journey. We might consider this like a cruise. Last Sunday we traveled a bit, you stepped off the cruise ship into the world, hopefully reflected a bit on your gifts, and now we're back on the cruise ship to go to our next destination. I'm sorry I don't have an all you can eat buffet like cruise ships, but at least you don't have to sleep in those tiny, crammed rooms.

Last week I talked about packing snacks for the trip. All good trips have good food. We celebrated that this church has food ministries that help support local families. This week we talk about travel companions – the people with whom we travel. We all have different traits we want in travel companions. You might want someone who will talk and keep you awake through a long drive. Maybe you want someone silent who will just listen to music with you.

On my recent trip to Texas we flew into San Antonio, but drove five hours into McAllen, TX. Fourteen of us crammed into two small vans. Everyone had a gift on that trip: one person who could load the luggage like a game of Tetris, fitting it just perfectly. One person brought music and podcasts. We had good navigators in both vans. Someone brought snacks to eat. My role was to make good conversation while I knitted my kids' Halloween costumes from the backseat. We each brought a gift and had a good journey.

Today's scripture passage tells about the best travel companions ever – Ruth and Naomi. Before we talk about their relationship it is helpful to understand their context. Naomi and her husband Elimelech had two kids, Mahlon and Chilion. They had to move because of famine, and then Naomi's husband died. It's important to note that they were also refugees in a different land. They had traveled from their familiar to a new place for a better life. When her husband died, she was still in this unfamiliar land. Naomi's boys married, and then her son's died. There is such heavy grief in this passage – so much loss – loss of familiar places, their home, and then loss of her husband and children. Naomi is probably one of the most underappreciated characters in the Bible. She experiences all of this grief and continues with strength and boldness.

After these deaths these three women are left alone. In that time women were fully financially dependent on men. Women couldn't have jobs, so widows, especially childless

widows, had no means of finances or security. All three of these women must now figure out how to make ends meet. The younger women, Ruth and Orpah, could have gone back to live with their fathers or they could have married again. Naomi even tells them to leave and have prosperous lives. Orpah chooses to turn back but Ruth gives this famous phrase: “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-- there will I be buried.” These women were not just traveling companions through different countries, but through life. Ruth commits her life to Naomi. Not only that, Ruth commits her life to Naomi’s people. She connects herself to them, as well.

To commit one’s life for another is honorable. The relationship doesn’t have to be a marriage. It can be a friendship, siblings, caregiver. A church family is a particular kind of connection. Lifting one another up, listening to each other, disagreeing in as healthy way, laughing and crying together, and committing to caring for one another – that is what travel companions do.

This congregation is very good at caring for one another. When someone is in need you have deacons who reach out with a meal or a card or a phone call. And deacons are not the only ones who show love – I have seen the ways you pray for one another and rally around each other. You lift one another up.

The psalm is the text we are using throughout these four weeks. On this journey we are remembering that every road leads us to God. We might go off the trail at times, we might pause, we might turn back once in a while, but God is with us all the time. On this journey with God, the church are our travel companions. We individually bring different gifts to guide along the way. Some might have the gift of spiritual direction, lending a listening ear and encouraging words. Some might have the gift of laughter and joy. Others might have the gift of time and energy. We support each other with our gifts so that we can do God’s good work in the world.

Being a church is a type of covenant. It is this sacred relationship like Ruth and Naomi’s. We covenant together to walk this difficult road of life and support one another, pray for each other, and listen to God along the way. God never promises that it will be easy. Returning to the Ruth passage, Ruth and Naomi endure yet more hardships after they part from Orpah. They gather food from empty fields and struggle to survive. They lean on one another for support.

A note about Orpah. She went another road, but it wasn’t the wrong road. She listened to Naomi and went back, taking her own journey. We never hear how hers ends. We don’t know what other travel companions she finds along the way. We know that Ruth becomes important in the lineage of Jesus. I love what Methodist minister Rev. Thomas R. Steagald writes about her: “The whole covenant relay depends on these world-weary women, and they do not drop the

baton.”¹ They had no idea the pressure upon them, they had no idea how integral their stories would be in the journey of Jesus. Perhaps not knowing the pressure was beneficial.

Our journeys weave in and out of others. We might have the same travel companions for decades, or we might switch who we travel with over time. Our paths are all different. Yet, in this moment, our paths have crossed – for whatever reason. We have different individual gifts so that we can serve this community for such a time as this. We work together to provide food ministries for those who are food insecure. We partner with each other and support one another in the difficult work of ministry in a broken world.

Our goal is not to be Ruth and Naomi and have the same travel companions forever. Ruth married Boaz eventually, though she did still care for Naomi. To say we will go together, means that we will listen for God and trust what path is before us. To say that we will die together doesn’t mean that literally, but perhaps that as Romans says, if we live we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. We all live for Christ, and we die in Christ, and our journey is complete when we do so in Christ’s light.

Last week I packed some snacks in our suitcase. It is difficult to pack travel companions in a suitcase. So, I’ve packed a ball of yarn. Maybe you’ve done the game where you stand in a circle and throw the ball of yarn across the circle, and someone catches it, and then throws it to someone else, weaving a web or tapestry. Our journeys create beautiful tapestries, our individual strands working together to create a masterpiece. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Thomas R. Steagald, “Living by the Word” in Christian Century <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/october-31-ordinary-31b-ruth-11-18>.