

Determination
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
November 4, 2012

Psalm 146

¹ Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

² I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴ When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.

⁹ The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The Lord will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord!

Ruth 1:1-18

¹In 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. ²The 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. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

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 had consideration for his people and given them food. ⁷So 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. ⁸But 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. ⁹The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' ¹¹But 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? ¹²Turn 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, ¹³would 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.’ ¹⁴Then 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.’ ¹⁶But 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!’
¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

What is at the heart of the story of Ruth and Naomi? Before we can know that we need to recognize the clues we’ve been given by the narrative. At the very beginning we read, “In the days when the judges ruled...” Knowing that the judges were ruling helps us know which prophets were prophesying and what they were speaking about. In particular, Ezra and Nehemiah were advocating for purity among the Israelites, which meant no foreign wives. So, no foreign wives for the Hebrew people.

“A certain man of Bethlehem in Judah...” At the time the country of Israel was divided into the regions of Judah in the north and Israel in the south. We know then that Elimelech was an Israelite. And this Israelite “went to live in the country of Moab.” Moab? Of all places – Moab?? As Gary W. Charles has written, “Throughout the Hebrew Scripture there is a strong bias against anything good coming out of Moab. It was a place for the people of God to avoid. Moabites were a category of people to avoid.”¹ Didn’t Elimelech realize that, food or no food, anywhere but Moab should be the answer? So, an Israelite moves his family to a foreign land and, our reading points out, “remained there.”

Elimelech died, and his people would likely say it was because he settled in Moab. And then, his two sons “took Moabite wives.” Together they lived there ten years. And then the sons died. I suspect you know what their family back home would say. Their deaths put Naomi in a position where she had to act, and fast. In those days, a widow was cared for by her sons and, lacking those, she would seek refuge in her father’s home or that of another male relative. Women had no way to provide for themselves and they needed to rely on a male relative for all their needs. We’ve established that Naomi

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 244.

would be facing a barrage of “I told you so’s,” that is, if her family would even welcome her back after living in Moab *and* after her sons took foreign wives. Her chances are slim. So, an Israelite widow with foreign daughters-in-law is looking for refuge in her homeland with her family who looks down on Moabites and who are being told that foreign wives are out of the question.

Keep this in mind as you remember that her daughters-in-law, with her, “went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.” If she was stuck trying to feed and shelter herself, what was she going to do with two other mouths, and Moabite ones at that? She knew the women would have better luck in their own country, even under the circumstances – note that she tells them to go back to their “mother’s house.” It seems likely that their fathers had also died and their mothers were surviving with another male relative. Even *then* their chances were better in Moab than coming with Naomi to Judah. Orpah recognizes the truth in this and returns her mother-in-law’s kiss in farewell and heads back to Moab.

Not Ruth. She may have recognized the truth in what Naomi said, and based on her savvy planning later in the story we can guess she was not naïve. Despite the truth, Ruth had hope and spirit and loyalty and determination. And so she delivers her beautiful poetic reply to Naomi from which we read, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” It seems Naomi’s God has already become Ruth’s God. Despite the truth, **God** has hope and spirit and loyalty and determination. The heart of the story then is that Naomi’s God has already become Ruth’s God.

Although Naomi has declared that “the hand of the Lord has turned against” her, she does not say that God has abandoned her. Quite possibly, Naomi has been hearing in her head the voices of her family and of her people and she, herself, believes that she has brought God’s anger upon herself. Ruth is not dissuaded. She vows, “May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you.” Her help is in the God of Jacob; her hope is in the Lord.

And rightly so the psalm tells us. Rely on God, the only one whom we can trust. We cannot rely on mortals for “when their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.” That is a sobering thought. When our breath departs and we return to the earth, each of our plans perish. And it is an odd thought on a day like today, on our celebration of All Saints’ Day, when we remember those who have gone on before us and we credit to them the legacy which we have inherited. We credit to them a legacy of faith and a legacy of this body of Christ gathered here.

But what have we really inherited? And what do we really pass on ourselves on the day when our mortal plans perish? It is God’s plans which are everlasting and God’s foundation upon which this body of Christ has been built and God’s gift of faith through the Holy Spirit. We mortals strive so that we will be remembered but one hundred and two hundred and one thousand years from now, how many will

be? And is that what God desires? We can work for ourselves and be forgotten or we can praise the Lord as long as we live; we can sing praises to our God all our lives long.

How do we do this? Like Ruth, we need hope and spirit and loyalty and determination for what God desires is what God does. We read in the psalm that God keeps faith forever, executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, loves the righteous, watches over the strangers, upholds the orphan and the widow, and brings the wicked to ruin.

None of us can do all of these things and the faithful lives of the saints who precede us are our proof and our reassurance. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa and the apostle Paul and my grandmother and your father and your friend and your neighbor all had different gifts and none could do all that God does because none are God but God alone. Maybe you will watch over the stranger and do it with hope and spirit and loyalty and determination. Maybe you will give food to the hungry, maybe even today as part of our Reverse Food Drive. Or maybe you will uphold *an* orphan or *a* widow as Ruth did, with hope and spirit and loyalty and determination.

I've said it before – it's not easy being Christians. We must be determined. We do best to ask for help from the God of Jacob; we do best to place our hope in the Lord our God. We find encouragement in the saints of the church, for whose faith-filled lives we give thanks today. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. Praise the Lord who will reign forever, for all generations!

Let us pray: God, we give you praise for your hope and spirit and loyalty and determination to be our God no matter what. And we give you thanks for those who have followed your example by keeping faith, executing justice, giving food to the hungry, setting the prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, lifting up those who are bowed down, loving the righteous, watching over the strangers, upholding the orphans and widows, and bringing the wicked to ruin. We await the joyful day when we will all be reunited with you and we pray for strength and courage until that day. Amen.