

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 ~ Ruth 1:1-18, 22

"Words for the Beginning - You Are Not Alone"

2nd Sunday of Advent ~ Sacrament of Baptism (Alexander K. Krohn) – December 8, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

Famine. Loss. Trauma. Grief. The story you are about to hear is driven by all these hardships and the compelling question each provokes: *Now, what?* The story of Ruth is one of our old ones: Ruth and Boaz lived about two generations after Moses and three generations before King David. The slim 4-chapter book of Ruth is nestled between Judges and 1 Samuel, connecting our long line of heritage from Abraham to Jesus. Yet, the Book of Ruth was not added to the Bible until about 700 years after it happened-- not until the 5th century B.C. E. *after* the return of Judah from Exile. The Book of Ruth was added to the Bible as they were digging out and rising up from what had seemed like the end of everything.

The story of Ruth is also unique. Robert Alter points out that Ruth is one of the few truly successful stories in all of literature in which there are only good people in it. (Orpah is only less good. Not bad.) Good people faced with the hard question "*Now, what?*" when their precarious lives had just blown up and all their options were bad. In today's portion of this story, we will witness a turn made by Ruth in the Plains of Moab one day. Ruth's burst of "NO" to isolation, and "YES" to togetherness: Faithful, forceful, gutsy, practical. And God saw that it was good. Listen now for the whisper of the Spirit, in this dramatic reading of God's Ancient/Future Holy Word, from Ruth, Chapter 1.

Sermon:

"Not good." Did you know that the very first time God said, "It is not good" is right after God created the whole world, assessing that work step by step as "good" and also "very good." The first time God says "It is *not* good" is when God sees that Adam, (the first human being) is all alone. "Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helper as his partner." (Genesis 2:18.)

Before Genesis was ever written, there was the "Epic of Gilgamesh" (*GIL-ga-mesh*): the oldest existing myth in the world. It is actually *from this myth* that the writer of our first scripture lesson, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 took the already popular proverb, "*Two are better than one...And the triple cord will not be quickly snapped.*" The original myth came from when the historical King Gilgamesh reigned over Mesopotamia (in what is now Iraq) around 2750 BCE. In Book 5, Gilgamesh convinces Enkidu to enter the forest to confront and slay the monster, Humbaba. He reminds Enkidu that they are stronger together. But then in the moment of crisis at the monster's den, it is *Enkidu* who reminds *Gilgamesh* of his own words, "Two boats lashed together will never sink because no man can snap the triple cord" by which it is fastened." (Line 122).ⁱ

Both of these ancient stories teach us what we know to be true: Together is best. Especially when we are facing monsters (which we all do) real and imaginary: Within and all

around us. And yet, here in the United States you may have heard: we are suffering from epidemic of loneliness, that has infected half of our adult population! Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the US said, "In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness. And that was *before* the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation." He explains, "Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day... And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished."ⁱⁱⁱ

As the report, inspired by this finding called "Making Caring Common" by the Harvard Graduate School of Education pointed out, *social isolation is not the same as loneliness*. One can feel lonely even while there are plenty of family members around, but you don't feel appreciated by them. Or really seen and heard by them. Loneliness can happen when you get the feeling that other people are present in your life only because you are useful to them. Close to 60% in this study said they felt lonely because they were unable to share their true selves with others.

Perhaps *you* are feeling unappreciated, invisible, misunderstood, "different." You may wonder where or how you might ever "fit in." Or how to shake this loneliness. Friends, I have good news: You have made a good choice to be here with us today. Our Bible story about Ruth gives us hope. Here's why: Ruth was a Moabite, from the Land of Moab. That probably doesn't mean too much to most of us. Moab goes back to Genesis 19, and the son of Lot named *Moab* who was born from Lot's incest with his daughter. By the time of Ruth, the Moabites were looked down upon as outcasts: the most extreme case of a foreign, alien, despicable people, they were the perennial enemies of the Israelites. *And yet* Ruth, the Moabite is the hero of the story. In time she would become the great grandmother of the great King David. And she would be one of the three women named in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:5. Faithful, gutsy, girl with grit: Ruth transcends and traverses the boundaries and isolation others would place around her. This is our story. This is our song.

Just one more thing to help us more fully realize the scope of these two stories. You may have heard the one from Ecclesiastes or Ruth at weddings. They are indeed great choices for wedding scriptures because they speak in proverb and poem to the abiding power of God's faithful, steadfast love between two people. At the same time, I think it important to note that *neither* of these stories originally came from a love story or a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. These stories and sayings were originally inspired by faithful friendships, actually between two women in Ruth, and between two men, in Ecclesiastes. This is gospel Good News that Jesus came to show us: The golden cord of divine connection reaches across any of the lines we might try to draw.

It is here, Beloved family of faith, where we can learn and practice how to love one another as Christ loves us. How to extend grace to one another, how to help each other feel

appreciated, seen, heard, unconditionally: that is Christ's call to us. Every one of us knows what loneliness feels like firsthand. No human is exempt from this hazardous condition. Not even Jesus. We know from our gospel story, that Jesus experienced ultimate isolation hanging on the cross, utterly abandoned not only by his friends and followers, but also by his God, when he cried out from "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yes, Jesus is with us in our loneliest hour. He's been there, is there. Done that, doing that. For us.

Beloved Community, I want to quickly lift up *three beautiful examples* that shimmer with Christ shining here this very day.

- First, we all just witnessed in the baptism of Xan Krohn. His nuclear family of 5, along with his precious extended family, just expanded sacramentally to over 105: siblings, cousins, parents, grandparents, great grandparents in Christ pledging to love and support, to share the love and stories of Jesus, to lift him up when he falls down. Now and forever. He and his siblings and parents are not alone. They have us.
- Second, right after worship in the Fellowship Hall we get to taste gratitude with every bit of Jimmy and Joy's Jamaican Kitchens luncheon made by them, given to us, to express their thanks to all who have helped them again and again, since August of 2023 when Joy fell ill with a stroke that hot summer day at the Fair. This long hard-healing journey made possible, doable, hopeful, through the triple golden cord of this faith community of friends.
- Third, will begin today at Noon at the Chestnut Center for the Arts: the centennial celebration of the historic building on 3rd and Chestnut that was FPC's home for 80 of those one hundred years, before we moved here, 20 years ago. With song, bells, brass and story, we will hear and see and feel the power of God working through us together, day by day, year by year.

God is with us when we are at our worst, or the worst happens to us. Loss, trauma, grief: whatever monster you may be facing right now: a health issue, a relational struggle, money problems, a fork in the road with no easy answer, a change that you know needs to happen, but are scared to pull the trigger. Any of these monsters can knot our stomach, kink up our neck, or rob us of deep sleep. And let's be honest: this "Happiest time of the year" is making it worse, not better. You may feel *more* alone. Here's your takeaway from me: a gift you can't get on Amazon or QVC. Nor does it cost a penny: *Give yourself and God a gift of 5 minutes.*

Yes: 5 minutes of silence a day: Take a walk (inside the house if it's too cold), 5 minutes in the shower, 5 minutes while you are driving, or 5 minutes while you are waiting for the microwave to heat your dinner. You get the idea: surely, we can all find 5 minutes of quiet somewhere in our day. Perhaps on the edges: early morning or late night. Or a midday breather. 5 minutes to cultivate an openness to encounter God. To be still and know: you are not alone. 5 minutes to deflect our habit of doing and overdoing, thinking and overthinking, toward the life-giving, life-restoring path of hope, peace, joy and love. Like Ruth and Naomi, side-by-side into the utterly unknown. Hip to hip with Jesus. Just breathe and listen. He will tell you your next best step when you are ready. Are you wondering, "Now, what?" That's just the question your 5 minutes with Jesus will help you with.

I will close my sermon today with a poem/prayer by Ilia Delio titled, "The Christic."ⁱⁱⁱ That word, "Christic" means *of or relating to Christ*. You know the One whose birth we are waiting to celebrate. The One who freshly baptized Xan will be in our Christmas play in two weeks. The One who is the light of the World. The One whose light is inside of YOU. Whether you can feel that love and light or not. You may be wondering where God is right now. Where is this Jesus when I need him? When I feel so isolated, so on my own without a clue. May this poem prayer serve to open the eyes of your heart to see Christ and know you are not alone. Let us pray:

*I am looking at a tree, but I see such astounding beauty and graciousness,
the tree must be You, O God,*

*I look at the wild weeds playing across the fields,
and their wild joyful freedom speaks to me of You, O God.*

*Yesterday, I saw a child crying alone on a busy corner, and
the tears were real, and I thought, you must be crying, O God.*

*God, you are the mystery within every leaf and grain of sand,
in every face, young and old, you are the light and beauty of every person.*

You are Love itself.

Will we ever learn our true meaning, our true identity?

Will we ever really know that we humans are created for love?

For it is love alone that moves the sun and stars and everything in between.

We are trying too hard to find You, but You are already here,

We are seeking life without You, but You are already within,

*Our heads are in the sand, our eyes are blinded by darkness,
our minds are disoriented in our desperate search for meaning.*

Because You are not what we think You are:

You are mystery. You are here and You are not, You are me and You are not,

You are now and You are not, You are what we will become.

You are the in-between mystery, The infinite potential of infinite love,

And it is not yet clear what You shall be, For we shall become something new together.

Amen.

ⁱ *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3: The Writings, A Translation with Commentary*, Robert Alter, Qohelet, (Norton: New York, NY, 2019) p. 689. Also: <https://www.supersummary.com/the-epic-of-gilgamesh/summary/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf> by Dr. Vivek H. Murthy 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ilia Deli, "The Christic," in *The Not-Yet God: Carl Jung, Teilhard de Chardin, and the Relational Whole*, (Orbis books: Maryknoll, NY, 2023), p.259. Used with permission, quoted from Center for Contemplation & Action, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, Dec. 7, 2024.