

I will follow you. A sermon preached on May 29, 2016 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC (part of a series on the Book of Ruth) by Rev. Herb Hilder.

LESSONS; RUTH 1:16-22

MATTHEW 2:18-22

**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!' (vs. 16-17)

This is one of those passages from scripture that seems to be part of the public domain.

That is, it is a scripture passage that many people know,

Even if they do not know its context or even that is from the Bible.

Non church people may think that it is from Shakespeare or some other famous writer – Charles Dickens, Jane Austen or one of the Russian writers of the 19th century.

Like that peace about the Lord and
shepherds,
Many mansions,
that thing about time

Where you go, I will go is just out there.

And with good reason – these verses clearly speak about life-long faithfulness and commitment,

Dedication without time limit or pre-condition.

There is certainly nothing wrong with that!

As we pick up the story in the Old Testament book of Ruth,

We clearly see it is just that – *a promise of lifelong commitment of Ruth to her mother in law, Naomi*

It is more though.

It is a defining moment for Ruth

It is a moment of transformation!

For by this declaratory promise,

Ruth the Moabite worshipper of Chemosh shows that she is now a follower of Naomi's God – the God of Israel.

The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

Your people shall be my people,

And your God my God

Ruth is no simply embracing Naomi,

Ruth is embracing Naomi's God

There is no accompanying vision on the road to Bethlehem.

There is no burning, but not consumed bit of
plant life along the roadside.

There is no fiery wheel spinning in the sky
Nor seraphim and cherubim to touch Ruth's lips
with a live burning coal.

So, though not as flashy as some conversions to
God,

As recorded in the scriptures,
Ruth's words are nevertheless just as heart felt
and just as life changing for her and for all with
whom she will come into contact.

It is a tremendously important moment in
this great story of Ruth,
As it is when ANY person is prepared to wholly
follow the Lord.

Like anyone else – past or present – such a
change is not cost free!
Ruth, a Moabite, makes the decision to go to the
city of Bethlehem where race and ancestry will
marginalize her forever.

Whatever comfort she found as a follower of the
tribal God, Chemosh, her profession of faith in
the one God puts her on a new and unknown
path.

A marriageable young woman in Moab
Ruth is no longer
Essentially by coming to Bethlehem, Ruth has
reversed roles with Naomi – now Ruth is an

unmarriageable woman in a foreign land – an
outlander!

All that is familiar is now in flux or
receding as she travels with Naomi.

All Ruth's absolutes come into question.
All her certainties fade
It is a perilous moment.

It is as one commentator on the passage says
...the point at which we feel the anchor behind
us dislodge and the ocean in front of us draw us
in. "Those we leave behind us shake their heads.

Those who see us coming shake theirs, too.
"Listen, go back," Naomi says, "I can't, Ruth
says. And they are both right "

Orpah, Ruth's sister in law, also a Moabite, has
made what many would say is a "sensible
choice".

It is not an exciting choice, but it is
understandable.

It is the obvious choice to return to the familiar,
The known,
Where the future is a little more predictable.

But not Ruth.

For reasons the narrator does not detail,
Ruth hears the voice of another God.
Ruth finds herself at odds with her culture,
Her country,
Her religion,

Her role in life.

She just cannot go back to Moab and all the predictability and sensibleness it represents.

The future – her future, Naomi’s future may now be more unpredictable,

Unknown

And full of more mystery than when the journey back to Bethlehem began

But it is a journey with Naomi and Naomi’s God from which she will not turn back!

What a risk-taker Ruth is

What courage!

What trust!

No excuse me for living here!

But cannot the same be said even today of God’s people – you and I.

It takes inner strength to be counter cultural – as the Gospel of Jesus Christ most certainly is – counter cultural!

It takes courage to swim upstream in what seems so much like a downhill stream

To practice grace, generosity, patience, mercy, love as we have been shown in our lives by Jesus

In a world not noted as graceful, generous, patient and merciful

A world noted for stirring up fears – what might be,

And regrets over what was.

Nowhere in the Book of Ruth –Ruth’s story – does the narrator give us any detail as to the steps leading up to Ruth’s declaratory promise.

The promise and affirmation is just spoken,

Nowhere in the rest of scripture where Ruth’s name is mentioned are we give any further context or background as to why she made the declaratory promise here in chapter 1

So,

We are in the realm of speculation, rather than being able to point to the words on a page But I believe the path to conversion always has a strong element of mystery and wonder in it

The steps to conversion are not like some book of instructions to put together the latest piece of IKEA furniture.

This life altering change in Ruth, as with all conversions,

Reminds us with certainty that God is working in our souls.

Conversion is a defining moment in Ruth’s life, as it is in each of ours.

I firmly believe it is one of those points in life where God is very near – what Celtic Christians called ‘thin places’.

So let’s speculate

I wonder what things were in play that allowed Ruth not only clings to Naomi,

Not only continue along with Naomi\ but also to say what she said to Naomi.

**Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!**

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where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.**

**¹⁷Where you die, I will die—
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**May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!’ (vs. 16-17)**

I believe one very important thing in play so to speak was the loving-kindness both Ruth and Orpah received from the get go from their mother in law, Naomi

Each of the three had suffered loss, yet had found great comfort and solace in each other’s company.

Not always the case between mothers and daughters in law!!

I think Elimelech and Naomi continued to worship God in Moab

They continued to tell the stories of Creation, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and the Exodus.

And not just continued to tell the stories, but acted daily and in practical and observable ways – their thankfulness and appreciation of this generous and lavishly giving God

Elimilech and Naomi modelled their faith

To Ruth and Orpah, this new God must have seen more winsome and attractive than old Chemosh

Touch point for us – We must never underestimate the power and influence we as God’s people have on the lives of others. The world has always watched us – it is watching us closer today!

A critical spirit, a Pharisaic, judgmental attitude or word does nothing to make Jesus winsome and attractive

But showing mercy, loving-kindness, grace, forgiveness, generosity will long be remembered and for the right reasons!

One of the most salutary things I have ever done in my own spiritual life is to write my spiritual autobiography

In part it was a course requirement for course fulfillment for the Spiritual Formation Certificate at Columbia in Decatur Georgia

In retrospect, it was an invaluable personal exercise that allowed me to examine and give thanks for the ways in which circumstances and people helped me on the journey of following Jesus and still are helping me.

As an aside, Katharine and I hope to provide an opportunity in the fall for you to

engage in writing your own spiritual
autobiography,
Not as an exercise for academic credit,
But as a way of personal spiritual growth and
awareness.
Sound intriguing to you, let us know.

*I believe another factor in play leading up to
Ruth's declaratory promise rests in Ruth herself.*
Whether it is the result of early widowhood,
Or a growing unease in general about her life,
Ruth is no longer satisfied with the status quo —
how she is expected to behave,
What she is expected to do,
How her life is expected to unfold
It is just not enough for Ruth.
The known is not comfortable and sensible to
Ruth.
It is stifling
It no longer 'fits' for her
Something or more in Ruth's case, Someone is
missing.
Something or Someone is pulling at her to say,
'there is more'
The narrator of the story does not tell us whether
Ruth herself was surprised by her declaratory
promise, but there it is!
Again, there is no turning back

Something within her shifts and she finds that
she is no longer the person she used to be.

C.S. Lewis, in his Surprised by Joy wrote
quite colorfully about his own transforming
moment from atheism to the gospel.

It was for Lewis the moment 'God closed in on
me'.

He was riding a bus from Magdalen College,
Oxford up Hedington Hill.

I became aware that I was holding
something at bay, or shutting something
out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing
some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a
suit of armor, as if I were a lobster. I felt
myself being, there and then, given a free
choice. I could open the door or keep it
shut; I could unbuckle the armor or keep
it on.... The choice appeared to be
momentous but it was also strangely
unemotional. I was moved by no desires
or fears. In a sense I was not moved by
anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle,
and to loosen the rein. I say, "I chose" yet
it did not really seem possible to do the
opposite.... You could argue that I was
not a free agent, but I am more inclined
to think this came nearer to being a

perfectly free act than most that I have
ever done pp. 216-17

Touch point for us.

Do not fear, be surprised by, hide, try to bury,
run away from those promptings of change or
transformation.

For those promptings may well be the Lord
God working in our souls, as he worked in Ruth's
and as he had been working for years in Naomi's.

*I believe still another factor in play – perhaps the
single most important factor – leading up to Ruth's
declaratory promise is the action of God in conversion.*

In the end,
We do not convert, God does
Naomi's action was important in the conversion
process – very important.
Ruth's own sense of dissatisfaction with what
was and wanting something more was important
in her conversion.
But without the personal involvement of God in
the process,
Ruth probably would have walked back to Moab
with Orpah
Or if she had gone along with Naomi, she would
have been even more intimidated by entering the
city as an outlander

Meeting the gossipy old biddies of Bethlehem –
waiting at the city gate

Can't you just visualize this group?

Hear what they are saying – **stirring up the
whole town**

Told you she's be back

And she has brought a stranger with her.

Really looks her age doesn't she – all that bad
food in Moab.

Conversion is not dependent upon us – it is
God's call and timing

And as in Ruth's story, even though God is not
front and centre – He is there – here

And he is not silent or disengaged

We will see more evidence of God's guiding
presence, as Ruth's story unfolds.

Conversion – a defining moment in a life, a
moment of transformation.

Is Ruth's promise just words empty of meaning?

Has she chosen 'poorly'?

Stay tuned... it gets more and more interesting

And we are not even into chapter 2 of the Book.

AMEN