

Scripture Readings and Sermon

October 31, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Ruth 1:1-18

Set in the time of the Judges before Saul and David, the Book of Ruth tells the story of David's great-grandparents Boaz and Ruth. Because of this, some scholars believe that Ruth was written during the time of David and Solomon to show God's providence in bringing David to the throne. Since Ruth was a foreigner who later became the great-grandmother of David, other scholars believe that the story was written after the exile to legitimize those who had foreign wives. Scripture is not, however, about proving bloodlines or disproving ethical laws but rather it is about God's work in human history. The theme of covenant dominates this story. Because Naomi sought the best for Ruth and Ruth who devotedly served Naomi, God blessed them both. Ruth's covenant before entering the promise land is a reminder of the people of the covenant the Israelites made in Joshua 24:15. Just as God promised to make the people fruitful in this new land if they were faithful, so Ruth find fruitfulness.

Ruth 1:16 Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Have you ever made a commitment like Ruth?

When have you had to cut all connections with your past in order to embrace the future?

Can you hear the call of Jesus in this?

What does it mean to accept Jesus' people as your people?

Are you ready to lodge where Jesus lodged totally dependent on other's hospitality?

Can you respond to Jesus as Ruth does to Naomi?

Commentary on Revelation 21:1-6a

This passage, which is often read at funerals, is not the second coming of Christ (Chapter 19). Christ returns to earth after the tribulation of the seals, trumpets, and bowls when it seems that evil has complete control. The tribulations will end with Christ's return and his thousand year reign. Despite this, there will still be those who oppose Christ and will rise up at the end (20:7) and Satan will finally be defeated. The defeat of Satan and the purge of all sinners will mark the end of Adam's fall. The beautiful vision of God's return to Earth is symbolic of the restoration of the Garden of Eden with the tree of life. The way it was at creation (alpha) will now be restored at the end (omega) with creation being made new again. Death, which was the result of the fall, will pass away and God will once again walk with humanity in the Garden. Who will be in this garden? All those in the Book of Life recorded since the beginning of time who are waiting in heaven for this reunion.

Revelation 21:3 "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes."

What would it mean to have God dwelling with us?

What would have to change? Governments, economies, traditions?

Are we willing to give up our society in order to live with God?

Do we somehow expect God to move in with us rather than us living with God?

Would we react the same way as the people did in the day of Jesus?

Commentary on John 11:32-44

The story of the raising of Lazarus can be divided into three parts. In the first part (1-16), Jesus uses the news of Lazarus' illness as a teaching moment for the disciples. There is a question of who is Lord of life. The disciples are afraid of the Jewish authorities but Jesus assures them that it is God who

chooses when Jesus will die. Then Jesus describes Lazarus' death as simply "fallen asleep". Jesus challenges the view of death as the final end. Death is the sleep of the mortal body which God can wake up. Thomas completely misses this point which foreshadows his problem with the resurrection of Jesus. The second part (17-29) deals with the interaction between Jesus and Martha. In this Mary and Martha story, it is once again Martha that does the talking while Mary stays at home. While the other Gospels have Peter proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah, John gives that honor to Martha (27). The third part (30-45) is the "awakening" of Lazarus. Rather than entering into a discussion with Mary as he did with Martha, Jesus is moved by Mary's grief and asks to see the tomb. For those struggling to believe in difficult times (Martha), Jesus engages them and leads them to hope. For others who are overwhelmed by emotions and suffering (Mary), Jesus' actions bring comfort and healing. Jesus did not explain away Mary's grief but rather wept with her. Then Jesus, again talking to Martha, called for the tomb to be opened and for Lazarus to come forward. On that day, not only was Lazarus raised but Martha and Mary's faith was unbound and set free from fear of death. They will be the ones who will go to Jesus' tomb. This is called the raising of Lazarus or awakening and not resurrection because Lazarus eventually died. When the resurrection comes, we will have eternal life.

John 11:44 Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

What does the resurrection mean to you?

Is it all about some heavenly future?

Could resurrection occur today?

What "tombs" do people find themselves in today?

If people are "in a bind", do we help "let them go"?

Do you know a Lazarus?

Reflection on Ruth 1:1-18, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

Sermon "Witnesses of the Faith"

On this All Hallows Eve, it is appropriate to celebrate All Saints with the readings from Revelation and John. The inclusion of Ruth for the regular Sunday lectionary, however, at first appears to be an interesting choice. What does the story of a woman from a small book during the time of Judges have to do with the saints?

Ruth is an important book not only because she was the grandmother of David and in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1), but her statement of discipleship in 1:17-18 is an example to all of those who wish to follow Jesus. While Ruth was willing to commit her entire future to Naomi, her mother-in-law, how much more reason do we have to commit our lives to Christ. To go where Christ leads us and to dwell where Christ dwells is ultimately a promise of our future life in heaven. To accept Jesus' Father as our Father, his God as our God is to look forward to the coming of God with us as promised in Revelation. The witness of Ruth to walking by faith inspires us to commit ourselves more fully to our own walk.

This is why we remember the saints, to retell their stories and find inspiration for our own faith journeys. It is said that Martin Luther began the reformation on October 31st but why then? Could it be in response to that famous story of Luther's encounter with a indulgence selling monk? The story goes that in order to pay for the new cathedral in Rome, indulgences were being sold. The most successful salesman argued that since the indulgences were to be used for a place of prayer, then everyone who purchased an indulgence bought a little piece of that prayer. If the prayers of the church helped people get into heaven, then how much more powerful would be prayers from the Vatican. In fact, argued the monk, before the coin payment hits the bottom of the box a soul is released from purgatory! Luther was livid! Only faith in Christ and not the church can save someone's soul. Heaven is the home of believers and not simply tithers. During that time of All Saints, Luther stood up against the commercialism of the church and proclaimed it is by faith alone that we are saved. Like Ruth, he too inspires us to stand up and walk by faith. It was through his inspiration of faith which Luther wrote about in his introduction to his commentary on Romans that became a means of grace by which Wesley experienced the living Christ.

Ruth not only inspires us to walk by faith but to commit ourselves that journey no matter where it leads. Ruth says that Naomi's people will be her people and Naomi's death will be her death. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him even to death. This began to become clear to the disciples with the death and raising of Lazarus in John. The promise of the resurrection comes after the promise of persecution for our faith on earth. We must die his death in order to dwell with him. But why will we be persecuted? Persecution comes when we accept his people as our people. Not simply Jews but the least and the lost. Those whom society has bound and placed in a tomb. It is easy to think of only the criminals but Jesus was concerned about those who were bound by oppressive traditions and societal norms. Those who were denied grace and placed in tombs of societal isolation mentally, physically, and emotionally. When we begin to accept his people as our people we place ourselves against the status quo of society. For all the saints who stood up for God's children no matter what society says, it is to their faith that we should look for an example.

The call of Ruth is the call of the great cloud of witnesses calling us to stand up and walk by faith with all of God's children. We are the cloud of witnesses to the next generation. Will they have saints of the faith to help inspire them on their journey?