**Our Immigrant God**

A Meditation on Ruth 1

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church July 4, 2021

Lou and I had the opportunity to catch up with an old friend recently. Over lunch he told me that he was reading through the Bible in a year, an hour a day, and was going to be so thankful when he finally made it through Leviticus. If you haven’t read it, Leviticus can be a little dry. It’s a big book of rules. Behind all these rules are the peoples’ interpretation of how to live in harmony with God, how to flesh out God’s presence in the world in their context.

Hear these words from Leviticus 19: 34

*Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.*

These words were spoken to God’s people after they had been freed from slavery in Egypt, a reminder that, having known oppression, they must not recreate oppression for others.

We hear similar words in Deuteronomy and Psalms, and from the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Zechariah.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The story of God’s people is compiled of the voices of immigrants and refugees, exiles and strangers. From the very first people God imagined, to the very presence of God, in Christ, we witness and learn from their stories. We gather insights, we glean wisdom, we practice compassion inspired by their stories.

Adam and Eve, longing to be as knowledgeable as God, were sent out from that first, perfect garden. They were sent out to farm the land. They left home, and that new way of living put them in touch with the earth, gave them the chance to grasp God’s love for the earth, an understanding which is born of laboring together.

To their story we add Sarai and Abram, who traveled wherever God called them to go. We add Cain, marked by God for protection, and sent out to make a new home after making such a horrible mess of things. We add Joseph, who himself was sold into slavery by his brothers. An alien and exile, he found a way where there was no way, and, finally, provided the family who had abandoned him with rescue from famine.

The central story of immigrant life, of course, is the story of the Hebrew people, enslaved by Pharoah, set free by God, and lead by Moses. Wanderers for 40 years, they then displaced others to claim a promised land. But it is upon that story, that story of knowing what it is to be an alien, a stranger, that God teaches them to show to others the compassion they had not known. “Love others as you love yourself.”

We could spend months exploring stories of immigrants, exiles and refugees in scripture, but for today we will turn to the book of Ruth. Why this particular narrative? Because in this story, all the main characters - with the exception of Boaz, are immigrants. As they journey back and forth between one another’s homelands, they will carry a most precious possession: compassion.

There is a famine in Bethlehem (House of Bread), Naomi’s home. In search of food, Naomi, along with her husband, Elimelech, and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion

set out for Moab. This isn’t like taking a vacation to Florida. There was history.

In Deuteronomy 23 : 3 - 6 we learn more about the Moabites: *Moabites can’t belong to the Lord’s assembly. Not even the tenth generation of such people can belong to the Lord’s assembly, as a rule, because they didn’t help you with food or water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired Balaam…to curse you.*

How desperate you must be to pack up your family and seek mercy in a land where your ancestors were denied mercy. But maybe things had changed in Moab, maybe past wounds had healed? Whatever the case, they made a home with the Moabites. Their sons found wives: Ruth and Orpah. Families from different lands, distinct faiths, diverse customs were woven together, and for ten years they lived in hope. But then Naomi’s husband died, both of her sons died. She became a very vulnerable woman in a still foreign land, and the wisest option she had was to return to Bethlehem.

Naomi sets out on the road to Judah, her sons’ widows traveling with her. Three women, stronger, safer together than on their own. But as they are walking, Naomi stops them and insists that they return to their families. Why does she do this? It must have been a comfort to have them by her side. A reminder of better days, of her sons’ happiness, even. Maybe she didn’t want them to have to know what it feels like to be an immigrant, a stranger. It must have been frightening enough for Naomi to migrate from Bethlehem to Moab, and she had her sons and husband for companions. Risking her own life, traveling alone, would be one thing. Asking Ruth and Orpah to take that risk – simply too much?[[2]](#endnote-2)

Or perhaps she feared the burden they would be to her when she arrived home. Surely, she, widowed and grieving too much death, would find a relative to take *her* in. But would she find anyone who would be willing to feed three mouths? Would she risk rejection if she returned with these Moabites? Did she have the energy to teach them the customs, orient them on the streets of her home, comfort them when they encountered discrimination? How could she do all these things when she was still lost in grief?

She knows what she can do: she finds the strength and grace to give them a blessing as she urges them to return to their mothers’ homes. She wants for them what she will not have for herself: “*May the Lord provide for you so that you may find security, each woman in the household of her husband.” (Ruth 1:9).* Security – something Naomi hasn’t known in many years. Not deeply. Not since the famine. She wants them to know “rest,” “comfort,” “quiet.”

Orpah accepts Naomi’s urging, and turns back toward home. We can respect her choice. Ruth, for reasons beyond the text, does not. Maybe home for Orpah was a good place, a quiet place, a place of security, and she knew she could go back. Could it have been that for Ruth, home was not a place to which she ever wished to return? That home was not a place of safety and security, and that the risk of the unknown life of an immigrant – with Naomi - far outweighed the pain of home?

There is an undertone of pleading in the words which pour from Ruth’s lips:

“Don’t urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. **17**Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you.” (Ruth 1: 16 – 17)

Perhaps it is simply the love she has known in Naomi, the only living connection to her husband that drives her forward towards life as an immigrant. Maybe she believes that others in Bethlehem will also be people of compassion. Perhaps she takes the risk out of gratitude towards Naomi for birthing her husband. Or perhaps, she cannot go home again.

With Ruth by her side, Naomi returns to Bethlehem, carrying her sorrow with her. Now the former immigrant, Naomi, is home, and Ruth has become the stranger.

Ruth, the immigrant, eventually marries Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi, and she gives birth to a son. This son, Obed, becomes the father of Jesse, and the grandfather of King David. Naomi, who is not related by blood to this child, celebrates over him as if he is her own grandson. Can you imagine this family portrait of three generations: infant son, mother, father and grandmother? It is a portrait rich with compassion. Naomi for Ruth, Ruth for Naomi, Boaz for them both. They have created a family, and they have created it across cultural borders, across painful histories, across political and religious divides.

Around this world, people flee their homes because of famine, because their children are starving. They leave when crops fail, or the land no longer produces. There are many who are categorized as climate refugees, no longer able to survive due to the devastating effects of global warming. Others leave to escape the violence that engulfs their home. Civil war, gang violence. They flee when home is no longer a place of rest.

And others are simply seeking meaningful work so that they might support themselves, their parents, their children. 272 million migrants on this spacious planet. 3.5% of the world’s population. 74% of migrants are considered working age (20 – 64). They long to live a productive life…but between 2013 – 18, more than 30,900 people lost their lives trying to flee their homes.[[3]](#endnote-3)  Over the last 20 years, 7,200 deaths at the US-Mexico border have been recorded. The actual number is far higher, as many remains go unreported.[[4]](#endnote-4)

What about you? What is your immigration story? We have a small number of people within this faith community who carry the genes of indigenous peoples, but the majority of us are immigrants. My family came from Scotland, possibly via Ireland. I know some of you have researched and tracked down your family’s story in much greater detail than that. Your family had a reason for crossing an ocean to arrive here – were they escaping the past like Cain? Escaping a famine like Naomi? Were they seeking a better life for their children? Perhaps, as when Mary & Joseph escaped in the night to Egypt, your family fled that you might live.

We cannot cry out against immigrants while taking for granted the produce that has been picked by migrant workers, the hotel room that has been cleaned by immigrant hands. Do we wonder about the face of the cook who prepared the meal? Or give thanks for the bricks laid and roofs installed. We seem okay with allowing “them” to do the work that is beneath us: too dirty, too hot, too demeaning. And when speaking of immigrants, do you use the term “illegals” when “undocumented” is more accurate, more compassionate, less stigmatizing?

Imagine, *please*, God transcending time and space to walk this earth with us in the form of Jesus. This earth, created from God’s imaginings, yet foreign to Jesus’ feet. Imagine Jesus, who invited the disciples to become sojourners, wanderers, dependent upon the kindness of those who would feed them, shelter them, clothe them. Jesus led an immigrant life, simultaneously both native and foreigner. Can we strive to see Christ in each immigrant face? When we do, compassion might just overcome fear of the stranger, fear of scarcity, fear of discomfort.

May these words of the poet Jan Richardson be our hope for God’s realm on earth:

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.

Even as we come to God’s wide table, may we continually seek to expand our own.

Thanks be to God, who throughout eternity bears the immigrant’s face. Amen.

1. One list of scripture references can be found on Sojourners: [22 Bible Verses on Welcoming Immigrants | Sojourners](https://sojo.net/22-bible-verses-welcoming-immigrants) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This was an idea suggested by Avery Smith during the Tuesday Sneak Peek session. Avery recommends for further reading, *The Soul of the Stranger* by Joy Ladin, and we will make this book available in the Grace library. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. World Economic Forum, [Global migration, by the numbers | World Economic Forum (weforum.org)](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/iom-global-migration-report-international-migrants-2020/) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. USA Today, [The Wall – An in-depth examination of Donald Trump's border wall (usatoday.com)](https://www.usatoday.com/border-wall/story/mass-disaster-grows-u-s-mexico-border/1009752001/)

Additional sources consulted: [Commentary on Ruth 1:1-18 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-2/commentary-on-ruth-11-18-4),

[Commentary on Ruth 1:1-22 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/ruth/commentary-on-ruth-11-22) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)