

## HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

*St Andy's; November 1, 2009*

Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34

Home....a complex word with many meanings:

our natural habitat

the place we live

the town or country where we've been brought up

our house

a family unit

a place where we experience rest and security

This morning, I invite you to consider several stories of home:

our Old Testament reading, our Gospel reading, and this—

*our* narrative as “beloved community” here at 111 Larch Street.

Our Old Testament story this morning

talks about some of the ways people experience “home.”

It's the story of a family—a saga, really,

taking us through two generations in the short bit we heard today,  
and continuing further in the Book of Ruth into the third generation.

If we were to travel forward into the New Testament,

we would find Ruth named in Matthew's genealogy

and be able to follow the family line

all the way from Ruth to the birth of Jesus.

Here's how today's chapter begins:

*In the days when the judges ruled, there was famine in the land.*

Famine in the land.

When there's famine in the land, life changes, doesn't it?

When there's not enough food on the table,

someone else has to go out to work and home becomes a different place.

When there isn't enough money to pay the bills,

people get stressed and worried and edgy,

and home becomes a different place.

When there aren't enough jobs to go around,

someone has to leave home to find work somewhere else,

and home becomes a different place.

When there's famine in the land,

a certain man of Bethlehem in the land of Judah

goes to live in the country of Moab—a strange land—  
and home becomes a different place.

They make their adjustments, this man and his family from Bethlehem.

They don't have too many options.

They aren't able to bring their extended family with them to Moab—  
no grandmas and grandpas, no aunts and uncles and cousins.

Naomi, the wife and mother, has said her tearful goodbyes

to the friend who used to babysit for her,

and to the neighbour who always had a pinch of salt or a spoonful of honey  
when Naomi would run out of things in the middle of baking.

And Elimalech, her husband, has sold his tools and his workbench—

for a pittance, of course, nobody has any money these days—  
but not before fixing the roof of his aging parents' home.

And the two boys—

well, they're still young and they started out pretty excited about the trip

but now, since arriving at their new place of residence,

they've begun to miss their little buddies from Bethlehem

and Mahlon has been having bad dreams at night.

But, as I said, they make their adjustments.

They have no choice.

This new and strange place is now their home.

And so they do what we all do when home becomes a different place:

they give themselves to the task of making a house a home.

Not only do they set up housekeeping,

they get involved with their new community

and make friends with their neighbours

and work together and shop in the marketplace

and sing songs on festival days

and exchange recipes

and play in the street.

They are a family, and there is food on the table and a roof over their heads.

Their new neighbours have welcomed them into the community.

This is home now.

And even later, when Elimalech dies,

Moab is still home for Naomi and the boys.

It is still a place of rest and safety.

By this time, Mahlon and Kilion have grown up

and are able to provide for the family.

In fact, they have both married Moabite girls—Orpah and Ruth.  
And for many years, home remains a happy place.

But then—as suddenly as it always seems to—tragedy strikes.

Both of the brothers die.

The family is shattered.

What does “home” mean now?

These women who have been so bereft

turn to each other for comfort and strength.

That’s all they have now: each other.

And the meaning of home shifts again.

No longer is the focus on the house in Moab.

Naomi begins to feel that old, long-buried yearning for Bethlehem,

for the friends and relatives she hasn’t seen for years and years.

And Orpah and Ruth—

two young women for whom Moab has always been home—

they realize that, for them, home is where the heart is.

And their hearts are with Naomi.

So when Naomi takes the plunge

and decides to go back to her old home-town,

where she won’t be a burden to her daughters-in-law

where just maybe she can find an old friend who might take her in

where she can wail and lament the tragedy of her life—

Orpah and Ruth are determined to go with her.

They almost convince their mother-in-law.

The three women are already on the way to Bethlehem

before Naomi seems to realize that this might not be

the best thing for these girls.

Perhaps she remembers how hard it is to adjust to a new home

as she and Elimelech had done all those years ago

when they came to Moab.

Maybe she’s thinking of the mothers of Orpah and Ruth—

how devastated they will be if their daughters move so far away.

It could be that she is very much aware of how tough life will be in Judah—

trying to scabble out an existence after so many years of famine,

for one thing,

and then there’s the whole foreigner issue....

Ruth and Orpah are still young women;

how will they ever find someone to share their lives with

in a culture that doesn't easily accept the stranger?

Orpah gives in to Naomi's wisdom,  
although it is with reluctance and tears  
that she says goodbye to her beloved mother-in-law.

But not Ruth.

Ruth seems to know that home for her will always be connected to Naomi.

And so we read those beautiful lines,

those age-old promises that pour out of Ruth as she clings to Naomi:

*Oh, don't press me to leave you!*

*Don't make me turn back from following you!*

*Where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live.*

*Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.*

*Where you die, there I will die—and be buried beside you.*

*May the Lord do all sorts of things to me and more besides,*

*if even death parts me from you!*

Home is where the heart is.

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In the gospel lesson from Mark,

we meet up with a pillar of the Jewish community: a scribe.

This man is one of the few people in his town who can read and write,

and so he has a particular status—

he's indispensable and influential.

People respect him or, at least, recognize that they need him around!

Most of his job entails helping people figure out

how to live life with meaning and purpose and faithfulness.

People expect him to know and understand and interpret for them

the wisdom of the law and the words of the prophets.

And yet this man is not satisfied.

He's a seeker.

And his seeking ears have heard about Jesus...

He approaches Jesus,

sensing from what he's heard and observed

that in this off-the-wall rabbi

he will encounter the kind of wisdom he's looking for.

He asks Jesus to hone in on

what is the ultimate meaning of faith  
what is the bottom line, really  
what should I be focusing on the most?

Jesus gives an answer that the scribe has heard many, many times before.  
*Everybody* has heard this many, many times before.  
Even the folks who can't read and write.  
Even little children.

What Jesus says to the scribe  
is the call to worship that everyone has grown up with:  
*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one!*  
*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart*  
*and with all your soul, and with all your mind,*  
*and with all your strength.*  
*And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*

The words hit home.  
The scribe knows in that instant that this *is* the ultimate truth  
that resides in the deepest places of the heart.  
This is the core of meaning in a life of faith.  
This is what it's all about, in the beginning and at the end.  
This is what makes life worth living,  
this is where our identity blossoms,  
and this is where we find our rest and security.  
This is the heart of life.  
This is the place of home for the seeker.

Home is where the heart is.

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The people of Israel had a house of worship that was home to them.  
That spiritual home went through some transition periods.  
It started out as a tabernacle in the wilderness—  
a huge tent where the people gathered for worship  
during their nomadic days in the desert.  
Then later, when they had finally settled in their new homeland,  
they built a massive stone temple,  
a glorious structure that took decades to complete  
and that stood, except for one major hiccup in the middle,  
for a thousand years.

That temple became the heart of the Jewish nation and identity,  
the central symbol of all that it means to be Jewish.

Then—as suddenly as it always seems to—tragedy struck.  
Destruction.

And the Exile to Babylon,  
where there was no temple,  
only memories of the way things used to be.

And the children of God learned  
how to make a spiritual home in new ways,  
journeying through humility and lament to a rediscovery  
of what it meant to be faith community in covenant with God.

Without a central temple, the focus turned to the writings of the prophets  
and the exclusive theology of the Jews as God’s people of promise  
began to widen to include all the nations as partners in hope.

Home is where the heart is.

And we?

What of us, gathered here at 111 Larch Street?  
Like the Israelites and like Naomi and her family,  
we know what transition feels like.

Our history as a denomination is rooted in change—  
three denominations, and later a fourth, uniting together  
to create one new entity.

More than once, St Andrew’s has experienced  
the transition of moving from one building to another.

We’ve gone through seasonal changes—  
a new curriculum, a shifting demographic, fresh modes of inclusivity,  
unfamiliar theological terrain....

Indeed we are not strangers to change.

And, in the face of those changes, we have had to remember  
that home is where the heart is.

For us, today, our congregational home is in this building—  
this sanctuary where we gather every week  
to celebrate God-with-us and us-with-each-other.

But even now, we are considering changes and adjustments,  
both to our building and to our ways of using that space,  
because we recognize that being church means being on a journey.

We cannot stand still and be faithful.

Another thing that is in flux here

is the way we plan and offer worship at St Andrew's.

Some people welcome that,

but there are those who find some of those changes hard to negotiate.

We aren't always comfortable with new words to old hymns

(or brand-new hymns altogether)

or rearrangement of the sanctuary

or "unusual forms of creativity in worship"...

But I think we know deep down that sometimes

we are being called to travel to Moab

and figure out how to make a home in unfamiliar places.

And, like the scribe in our Gospel lection today,

we continue to be seekers, pilgrims on the Way,

people of the Book and people of the journey.

There will never be a time or a place in this life

that we can simply plop ourselves down

and sigh with relief because we have arrived.

I have sometimes wished that that could be an option.

But it is not.

And that's why we gather.

That's why we keep showing up on Sunday mornings

and other times—

to remember and celebrate who we are as covenant community

and to remember and celebrate who God is in our midst.

Yes, we are refugees and seekers,

ever yearning for a place we can call home.

And we are also children of God,

finding home in the One who makes a home in us

and who calls us beloved.

Thanks be to God!