

SERMON TITLE: "A Summer Road Trip: A Highway to Home"
SERMON TEXT: Ruth 1:1-22
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 9, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I want to say "thank you" again to Dani Bell for coming this morning to speak to us for a few minutes about the Lantern House homeless shelter. Our church has long supported the Lantern House and the St. Anne's Kitchen with dollars, volunteers, and weekly produce from our community garden. I know some of you made donations for the Lantern House during the drive-through Ice Cream Event in our parking lot on July 19. And, now that the Lantern House is our Mission Emphasis this whole month of August, we can give even more to help the shelter in their essential care of our neediest citizens.

As I think about The Lantern House, I'm mindful that an emergency homeless shelter isn't meant to be permanent housing. But, like the name of the shelter program in Salt Lake City implies, hopefully the temporary shelter, case work, and resources provided there can set the residents on "the Road Home."

This notion of a transition or path to housing fits well with the theme of our worship service today. In this month of August, we're taking some biblical road trips, and today's scripture tells us about Naomi and Ruth, who were setting out on their way home to the land of Judah. So, let's think about what this journey looks like. What are the sights to see and wisdom to gain on this highway to home?

1—HIGHWAY TO HOME INCLUDES TRAGEDY

In this story in Ruth, chapter one, the first signpost that we see is that the highway to home often begins, or at least includes, some kind of tragedy. Most of the time, people don't move just for the fun of it. Very often, we creatures of habit will stay put in one place unless something bad happens. Frequently, it takes some drama or trauma to get us to pack up and move.

And that's what happened in this Bible story. In Ruth 1:1, we read that there was a famine in the land of Judah. We aren't told if the famine was due to drought or flood or an infestation of bugs. But, for some reason, the crops were insufficient to feed to the people. That desperate hunger was what caused Elimelech and his wife Naomi to take their two sons Mahlon and Chilion and move from their hometown of Bethlehem in Judah. They went east, across the Jordan River to the other side of the Dead Sea, to the land of Moab. Today we wouldn't think of that as really far away, but, in those days, it meant leaving everything that they knew and starting over.

In Moab, there must have been more food to eat, but the family trauma continued with the death of Elimelech. Eventually Naomi's sons came of age, and they married Moabite women. Maybe now they could really settle in and make this new place their home. But, ten years after the family had arrived in Moab, both of Naomi's sons died. We aren't told if the young men got sick, or if they were killed in some kind of accident or violence. All we know is that now the older Naomi is bereft not only of her homeland and her husband, but also her two sons. Her grief is overwhelming, and she can't bear to be in that sad place any longer. She tells her two daughters-in-law that she wants to leave Moab and go back home to Judah.

For many of us, the highway to home has been initiated by some kind of tragedy like a death, a natural disaster, a divorce, a job loss, a bankruptcy, an act of violence, or a sickness. This isn't a happy reason to go seeking a new home or to return to an old home. But it's true, isn't it? Bad things happen in our human lives, and that pain often motivates us to move to a different place.

Four of us from our church are taking an online class with some Methodists and Presbyterians from Salt Lake City. The class is called *The Genesis of Exodus*, and it explores why so many Central Americans from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have felt the need to leave their native countries and go north. Certainly, leaving their communities, their traditions, and their language isn't their first choice. But the prevalence of poverty, hunger, domestic violence, murder, rape, gang violence, natural

disasters, and corrupt and ineffective governments are some of the tragic and traumatic reasons why immigrants uproot themselves and set out on a difficult highway to a new home.

2—HIGHWAY TO HOME INCLUDES OPPORTUNITY

Fortunately for us, the highway to home isn't always initiated by tragedy. Sometimes the reason we set out in search of a new home or to return to an old home is because of positive opportunity.

That motivation is clearly present in this story of Naomi and Ruth. It wasn't only because Naomi was overwhelmed by grief and pain that she wanted to leave Moab. The widow had also heard the good news that the famine was now over in her native land of Judah. The barley crop soon would be ready for harvest. A return home held the realistic hope that there would be sufficient food to eat. And, like many returns back to a former home, there would be the opportunity to re-establish relationships with some old friends and relatives and enjoy familiar customs and traditions once again.

The highway to home is a pathway to positive change and hopeful opportunity. After my husband Steve and I finished our first round of graduate school, we moved to Buffalo, New York, for our jobs. Things didn't go very well for us there. Several of our dreams were dashed, and there was no reason for us to stay in that eastern city. So, after about two and a half years, we made plans to move back to the west. We moved to Denver, where I was able to attend The Iliff School of Theology and begin working toward my ordination in the United Methodist Church. Over the 33 years since then, many positive opportunities have come to us because we set out on this western highway to home.

The leader of the United Methodist Men's organization in Nashville recently wrote a letter to the men of our denomination. The Rev. Dr. Rick Vance wrote, "Like you, I hoped we would be further along in the recovery from COVID-19 by this time." Rev. Vance warned that—in a disaster cycle, as time goes on and stress builds up—optimism wavers, and it's easy to be overcome by discouragement and cynicism. He suggested that—as we navigate the pathways of COVID-19—United Methodist Men would

do well to develop the positive coping skills of exercising, talking with trusted friends, thinking compassionately, living with gratitude, and believing that God is with us. In other words, staying focused on positive opportunity is essential on the highway to home.

3—HIGHWAY TO HOME INCLUDES FAMILY

A third feature of the highway to home is family. Whether we're trying to leave some traumatic tragedy in the past or seek a positive opportunity in the future, the highway to home usually also includes the creation, restoration, and development of family.

This is a big part of the Naomi and Ruth story. Even though Naomi's husband and two sons have died, she does still have two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Once Naomi decides to return to her homeland of Judah, Naomi expects that Orpah and Ruth will stay in their home territory of Moab, marry new husbands, and have children there. Orpah does, in fact, decide to do that. But Ruth doesn't make the same choice. Instead, she chooses to go with Naomi. Because the words she spoke are so beautiful, this commitment is often used in marriage ceremonies: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16).

As the story of Naomi and Ruth moves beyond chapter one, we learn that Naomi has other relatives in Judah. One kind relative named Boaz helps the women gain employment and food, and eventually arranges for Ruth to become his wife. The birth of their child Obed was a cause of much rejoicing for Grandma Naomi. By traveling the highway to home, Naomi made it possible for her family tree to grow to include King David, and many centuries later, Joseph and Jesus.

As we know from this story and our own experience, family is sometimes biological, and sometimes family is chosen. In addition to those whose genetics we share, we choose mates, blend families, and adopt children. We also develop close friends who become like family to us. We speak of the congregation as our "church family" and our "church home" because we so value our Christian relationships of spiritual and community nurture.

I told you about *The Genesis of Exodus* class that several of us from our church are taking along with some Methodists and Presbyterians from Salt Lake City. Besides all the traumatic reasons why Central Americans need to flee their countries of origin, many of them also have relatives who have already come here to the United States. Their desire to reunite with parents, children, and spouses creates a huge draw. Likewise, many of us have moved from one place to another because we need to be closer to aging parents or to our caregiving adult children, or because we want to enjoy time with grandchildren. The highway to home very often involves family.

CONCLUSION

While I was on my staycation a few weeks ago, I heard an episode of *Radio West* on Utah Public Radio. Doug Fabrizio was interviewing a man who had studied and written a book about old pathways. He said that the routes of our current day highways were very often dirt roads, wagon trails, horse trails, human foot trails, and maybe even wild animal trails before that. These old paths provide convenient ways to travel, but also tell the story of the environment and human civilization. Even in our present time of COVID-19 social limitations, hiking trails and bike paths provide wholesome places for us to exercise our bodies, think deep thoughts, and maintain our sanity.

The highway to home is kind of like that. The story of Naomi and Ruth may have taken place thousands of years ago, but it's a story that replays itself over and over again. Whether the path circles us back to an old place where we've been before or takes us to brand new possibilities, the highway to home often includes an escape from tragedy and trauma, a route to positive opportunity, and a means to develop helpful and wholesome family relationships. As we step out on our spiritual journeys, may we all find a highway to home.