

Ruth 1:1-18  
Mk. 12:28-34

St. Barnabas  
Proper 26

Jesus is walking in the Temple; and the chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees---one after another---are trying to trip him up. One of the scribes, observing how well Jesus has answered their questions, approaches Jesus and asks him which of the six hundred and thirteen commandments is the most important. Jesus replies with the words of the Shema, the Jewish profession of faith: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one." The scribe applauds and elaborates that answer; and in return Jesus commends him saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Every morning and every evening the Shema is prayed by faithful Jews to declare that God is God, the only God. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one," they say. A rabbi once tried to explain to a friend the significance of the Shema. It seems the friend had asked the rabbi to promise him a visit the next day. "How can you ask me to make such a promise?" replied the rabbi. "This evening I must pray and recite 'Hear, O Israel.' When I say these words, my soul goes out to the utmost rim of life.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I shall not die on that rim this time, but how can I promise to do something at any time after that prayer?"

What is it like to be at the utmost rim of life...not far from the kingdom of God? What is it like to be at the end of our own resources with no known prospect in sight? Perhaps this feeling is best expressed in the words of an American Indian totem animal: "Send me out into another life, lord, because this one is growing faint. I do not think it goes all the way."<sup>2</sup>

You and I in our various ways have been learning to live these last 20 months at the utmost rim of life. Some of those rims, like the edge on which that rabbi teetered, have encompassed dreadful loss: Some of us have lost dear friends and family to disease and death. Some of us have lost familiar rituals that nurture and sustain us. Some of us have lost favorite practices like 4<sup>th</sup> of July parades, picnics, and family gatherings at holidays. For the majority of us, all the old familiar places have grown faint over the last 20 months; and we have discovered that old habits do not go all the way. Sometimes it feels as if we are only holding on by our fingernails.

Living with underlying uncertainty and change is hard. But life must change from time to time if we are to go forward in our thinking. As what we know grows faint, we learn to live another kind of life, a chance to be extant in a different version. And that is a hopeful statement. Any time I've stepped in my own footprints again, I haven't felt renewed. Though I'm susceptible to the pull of the known, I'm just slightly more susceptible to surprise and mystery. I find I like living at the utmost rim of life. It's like being alive twice. Yet still we ask, "Where is this stepping off point taking us?"

St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the church in Magnesia [8:2], "...there is one God who revealed himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word which proceeded from silence...." Silence. Is silence what's at the rim of life? An emphasis on God's transcendence, his unapproachable sublimity? The Bible tells us God is with us, with us not just when we are faithful, with us not just when it is convenient and comfortable, but with us even when it seems that all hope is lost and nothing can rescue us from certain disaster. "How can this be," we ask ourselves. Are we destined to be forever dreaming of an absence on our way toward the presence of God?

Finding a way to live with hope for an unknown Who is an absence which haunts our lives is in some respects a rhapsody, a recital of an untouchable abstract beyond all experience, even a dream. But

---

<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor.

<sup>2</sup> W. S. Merwin

our lives are not abstract, and from dreams we awaken. More often than not our lives are burdened with the weight of responsibility, and our feet are firmly planted in daily routine. For mortal human beings persevering in hope is a choice, a constant choice. One thing we know, and one thing only: God comes out of the future, opening that future.

Looking to the horizon of the future is the schematic purpose of the book of Ruth. The story begins with an escape from Judah during a time of famine. A man whose name means “my God is king” takes his wife Naomi and his two sons, whose names mean “sickness” and “destruction”---there’s a hint to what’s coming, don’t you think?---and the four flee east across the Jordan river to Moab. There they dwell as immigrants for ten years, threatening to become expatriates from their homeland and from their Jewish faith. Naomi’s husband dies, and the sons take foreign wives, Moabites whose roots, customs, and religion are alien. Then the sons die, famine strikes the land of Moab, and food is plentiful again in Bethlehem. So Naomi determines to return home to Bethlehem of Judah.

Naomi seems to think her daughters-in-law could find new Moabite husbands, that the easy thing for Ruth to do would be to stay in Moab. But in Ruth we find a woman balancing on the rim of life. She is about to cross the great rift valley, moving from a desert of emptiness, a plain of despair, a prospect of harshness into a sacred space. Ruth is choosing the treacherous journey from Moab to Bethlehem. To say she is making this choice out of loyalty to Naomi is to skim the surface of this story; for the density of this text holds many layers of meaning. As a Moabite Ruth is beyond the boundaries of Jewish law, at the fringe of deeply ingrained rules of community, an outcast. Her decision carried religious, political, social, and cultural meaning.

To leave behind all she has known is one thing, but to bring the future into the present is quite another. She begins by speaking of the future: “Wherever you go, I will go. And wherever you lodge, I will lodge.” Then she declares something different. Not a pattern of the past or a hope for the future, but a reality of the present moment: “Your people IS my people, and your god IS my god.” Leaving that present reality to step into the future, she is to become the great-grandmother of King David, the ancestor of Jesus.

The stories of the Bible are the product of the discovery that God can be found in human affairs. Their purpose is to convey values, to establish cultural identity, and to describe people to themselves in their relationship to the world and to God. These stories are deeply steeped in the human struggle to convey the truth about the human situation and to describe life correctly. They tell us “All my hope on God is founded,” the hymn [#665] whose music was written by Herbert Howells after the death of his nine year-old son.

You and I live on the utmost rim of life. We are in this world and yet our allegiance is to a deeper level of reality than is apparent on the surface. Daily we are confronted with the challenge of living a life of faith in a hidden being. But ours is not a surface involvement in this world; for there is no faith without ethics. At the stepping-off point of living our faith, our choices matter. Our life is not a shallow pond with no outlet; it is a river flowing deep to the sea. Those who choose to live as if there were no God become locked within themselves and stagnate. Creating gods in their own image, to serve their own ends, and to sanction their own aspirations, they empty themselves into a shallow puddle fed only by selfishness and are therefore doomed to dry out in cynicism and despair. The presence, power, and purpose of God’s rule---the kingdom---underlie the surface reality of this world; and it was for our world made God’s future kingdom that Jesus died.

How, then, are we to live with one foot in this world and the other in God’s future? How are we to move from our figurative Moab to Judah? One way is by making sacred space in our lives.

In the years after Jesus died and rose again, the church was a small gathering of believers, living on the precipice of life and death. From that rim they made sacred space to worship God in their homes, in small gathering spots, in catacombs. After 313 years Christianity was tolerated, and in 380 Christianity was made the state church of the Roman empire. From faint beginnings Christian faith grew from small sacred spaces to encompass great cathedrals imbued with the prayers offered over generations.

Sacred spaces are dynamic, carrying us when we cannot pray ourselves. The boundaries of our spaces have changed over the last 20 months. But when we gather together, whether in our beautiful sanctuary surrounded by stained glass, on the patio surrounded by the beauty of the natural world, here in the parish hall in an environment of loving relationship, or on the air waves of the internet, we are on the utmost rim of life, invited to open our minds and hearts to the presence of God among us. Here is sacred space, the space in which we discover the kingdom...of God.

(The Rev.) Judith M. McDaniel, Ph.D.