

Ruth 1:1-17
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
A Sermon for Every Sunday, 2021

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark

So begins a poem called “Home,” by Warsan Shire, a British writer born to Somali parents in Kenya.

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied

Shire's poem goes on I'll break off to say: Elimelech and Naomi did not leave home because they wanted to. The desperation described in Shire's poem reflects the

desperation these ancient figures must have felt – though they weren't fleeing war. They were hungry. There was a famine in their homeland. So they were *HUNGRY*. *Their children were HUNGRY*. “No one puts their children in a boat, unless the water is safer than the land.” NO ONE walks toward the territory of MOAB (that's how people would have said it – freakin' *Moab*) – It was a place they believed to be hostile, even God-forsaken. *NO ONE* takes their children to *MOAB* unless home will not let them stay, and they have nowhere else to go.

There was no wall to prevent them. No soldiers to separate children from parents at the border. No cages to detain . . . no laws to prohibit them. Maybe Moab wasn't *THAT BAD* after all. Elimelech and Naomi and their sons settled down. They began to make a life in Moab. But as too often happens, when *troubles* chase a family from their home, *this family's struggle* seems to follow them. Elimelech dies. Now it's just Naomi and her sons. Both men marry; they marry Moabite women. And things continue for 10 years – *10 childless years*, which is surprising in this context and probably points to a different sort of struggle. Then the two sons unexpectedly die. And here the Bible's lens comes to focus on Naomi. She is *all* we see: an aging woman, without her children, without her husband. Seemingly alone.

Naomi was *not* alone. We'll hear more about her daughters-in-law soon! But the way the camera zooms in on Naomi . . . it reminds me of something Nicolas Wolterstorff said in his book, *Lament for a Son*. He said that grief isolates. It was important for Wolterstorff to realize that, after his own son, Eric, had died. Because Wolterstorff's grief *ISOLATED HIM* – not only from people who were happy, but even from members of his own family, who also were grieving. That's because they all were grieving differently! Each person's loss had its own unique character, as each person's relationship with Eric had its own unique character. The *dynamics* of their sorrow were different, too: more intense one day, less intense another, hardly ever in sync. This is how Naomi was alone in her grief – without her two children, without her husband. No one understood exactly what that was like.

Naomi was alone, but she wasn't alone. And one thing that's striking about this story is the way the three women grieve together – the space they give to their lament. Pastor and professor Marilyn Pagán-Banks drew my attention to that. She observed that we don't often allow ourselves the chance to truly lament – not as the church, and certainly not as a society. “We've gotten really good at moving on, [she said – at] “figuring out” what to do next, creating lists, making arrangements. We are not so good at lamenting.”ⁱ But some powerful grief is expressed by the women in this story, and, though the story moved quickly as it mentioned the moments of death and loss, the story lingers upon the women's expressions of grief – how they weep and will not be silenced. Pagán-Banks wondered why. She wondered if Orpah and Ruth's tears gave Naomi permission to say out loud what she'd been feeling deep inside, that *the hand of God had turned against her*. It can be hard to admit something like that. Maybe Naomi's lament set Orpah free to return to her mother – to do what was best for *herself* in that moment. (The Bible does not judge Orpah; nor should we.) Maybe Naomi's tears were what drew Ruth all the

closer. Perhaps, as she wept with Naomi, Ruth came to understand where her deepest loyalties lay. To share grief can be powerful for people; it can be exactly what we need.

But it's hard, isn't it? Even just to sit with folks in their grief . . . it's really hard. Kate Bowler, who was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer at the age of 35, has written about this – how, when something terrible happens, we rush in with explanations and reassurance. She believes that one of the main reasons we do this is that we want to believe life is durable. We want to think that if we live carefully and well, we can avoid danger . . . we can avoid illness . . . we can avoid heartache. We live with what Bowler calls a *thick cultural script around positivity*. There are religious aspects to that script, like the idea that “It's all part of God's plan,” and “God won't give you anything you can't handle.” There's also just the popular notion that today may be hard, but tomorrow will be better . . . that if you work hard and have the right attitude, you'll rise to the top. Those notions are compelling, Bowler says, especially for those of us who are trying to find agency in our lives, or if no one has ever told you to believe in yourself. To hear that *the best is yet to come* . . . it's compelling! But these notions can be inadvertently cruel, like for people who are living with chronic illness. Or for folks who can't *live their best lives now* because they are caring for somebody else (aging parents . . . sick and disabled children).ⁱⁱ Or for people like Naomi, whose home has chased them away, whose loved ones have died, whose lives have unraveled. Bowler says, “I think our culture makes us feel really embarrassed for the terrible things that happen to us. It makes us feel ashamed and lonely and fundamentally like a loser.”

Bowler says that, since getting sick, she's come to embrace the idea of the “precarity” of life. *Precairity*. It's the idea that things are contingent . . . they're delicate . . . they aren't always sure. Bowler says she's latched on to the word *precairity* because, “It means I don't have to pretend that things were once durable, and that I'm supposed to (as a suffering person) *get back to durability*. Our lives are built with such delicate material [she says.] It doesn't take a lot to topple the whole thing over.”

Naomi and Ruth and Orpah knew that too well. And they didn't try to look on the bright side. They didn't try to cheer each other up. They just wept and held onto each other as best they could.

We don't hear more of Orpah's story, but we do know (or we *CAN* know, if we'll read to the end of this book) that for Ruth and Naomi, the story ends well. A good man marries Ruth and gives both Ruth and Naomi safety in his home. Ruth becomes pregnant and has a healthy baby boy. Naomi hugs this child to her chest, and the whole neighborhood celebrates her gladness. This baby becomes the father of Jesse, and the grandfather of David, Israel's greatest king. Who'd have thought! It's all understood to be the work and the will of God. So if you and I had been there, knowing what we know, we might have wanted to say: *Hang in there ladies. God loves you and has a plan for you. Tomorrow will be better*. But not even the all-knowing narrator does that, here in the midst of these women's grief. The story is patient. The narrator is restrained. The women are left to feel what they feel, and their grief does its mysterious work.

Part of what I appreciate about this story is the way it begins, so unassumingly. So far, other books of the Bible have started dramatically, with God beginning to create the heavens and the earth . . . or as the Israelites came into Egypt, with households that were fertile and became prosperous . . . with the Lord calling to Moses from the meeting tent, and Moses addressing all the Israelites . . . with Joshua leading God's people across the Jordan, into the Promised Land. It's very obvious in those stories: big things are afoot! *THIS story* starts with a few people whose lives have unraveled, who are desperate, who fear they have nothing left to live for. *THEY command our attention*, only because the narrator knows they *DESERVE* our attention. The narrator knows that *sometimes*, God is most powerfully at work when we are least inclined to believe it.

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ⁱ <https://revgalblogpals.org/2019/10/08/permission-to-lament-ruth-11-17/?fbclid=IwAR1kt4gIOthBJYfYmdffg3j0C0XSdasbglMNCbHCabwvzeH1TeW57Q3CAdA>

ⁱⁱ These comments are drawn from watching Kate Bowler in a lot of YouTubes! This is my favorite. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewRub_TCGEs The following quote comes from this video.