

Ruth 1:1-18; 4:14-17; Sermon by Tanya Pile
The Desert: Spiritual Growth (The Desert: Lenten Sermon Series)
Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2016

Introduction

Ruth might be familiar to some of you as one of the favored wedding passages. The Book of Ruth is four, well-polished chapters, simply told. Yet, it contains suspense, intrigue, obstacles, and a satisfying ending. There is a wealth of meaning for us. So, today, we bench the love and companionship themes and look at this story with a little bit of a twist.

Move # 1

At one point or another we have all been in the desert. Deserts can be life threatening. It might be a desert of circumstance like Ruth's, or it might be a desert of our own making; it could be the desert of Lent. Yet, God can use us even when we are stuck thirsting in the desert.

Ruth is a person stuck in a desert of circumstance. The odds of success are truly stacked against her. Let's take a look at her Desert List.

Ruth's Desert List:

- She was a Moabite = nothing good comes from Moab
- She was a female = in a patriarchal world
- She was a widow = no prospect of security
- She was a pauper = no financial support
- She was childless = no proof that she was fertile
- She was a foreigner = lots of challenges as an immigrant in a foreign land
 1. new language
 2. new geography
 3. new culture
 4. new God

These are all very serious and legitimate issues in ancient Israel. She was not creating this list out of thin air. Now, I don't have a Desert List of circumstances stacked against me like Ruth; I am very lucky to live where and when I do. But I want to tell you a story about being in the desert, literally.

For vacation, Matt and I thought it would be a good idea to go to Hovenweep National Monument which straddles the southern portion of the Utah-Colorado border. Of course, we were there in July and it was hot, really hot. In order to see the ruins that we came for we had a 1 hour hike, fairly level, and all of it paved. It was more than 100°, but we decided to do it. We tanked up on water and carried water with us. By the time we got back, our kids looked like we had roasted them over a firepit. We drank more water and sought the air conditioning of the Visitor's Center. They weren't sunburned, but they

were clearly flushed from the inside out, and to my way of thinking it took an alarming amount of time for them to get back to normal.

The next day, it was again over 100° and we were in Moab, Utah—yes, very aptly named Moab, home of Arches National Park. We did the driving tour, and Matt and Zach got out and did another “short hike” to the quintessential arch on all the postcards. Three of us did not venture out into the desert. The almost 3-year-old, Grandma, and I stayed in the car this time.

We like to tell this family story of how crazy hot it was, how we saw the fried egg in the parking lot, and guessed how long it would take for water drops to evaporate. But the remarkable thing that stands out in my mind is the life we saw in those places. We saw lots of lizards, we startled a bird hiding in the brush, out of the corner of our eyes we possibly saw a bunny’s tail as it hopped away, and yes, some of those prickly bushes had dried, leftover blossoms. Not to mention the tenacious people that adapted to such an extreme place.

It’s not easy being in the desert. It’s not comfortable, it’s thirsty work, and at times it can be downright threatening and scary, but there is life in the desert. Out of the desert of Moab, Ruth arrives in Bethlehem, and, as we shall see, on occasion, the desert blooms and thirsts no more with God’s help. Whatever our situation, God can use any one of us, even when we wander in the desert.

Move # 2

Change is hard. And sometimes change is forced upon us. Ruth embraced the change and took a leap of faith. She is especially amazing because it seems as if God is silent in the midst of all her tragedy. Ruth has no divinely inspired dreams. She is not visited by angels. There is no burning bush for her guidance. But, she takes a chance and follows an old, bitter, widow woman: to a new country, a new culture, a new husband, and a new God. She tells Naomi that “your God” will be “my God” (Ruth 1:16c). Because she is willing to take that leap of faith; she is transformed into the celebrated heroine of the Hebrew Scriptures. Ruth tackles the opportunities that open up in front of her, like she has no fear. She trusts that her situation will improve, and with God’s help it does.

Ruth is the one who takes the initiative and turns toward God. Ruth’s transformation and growth, **her change**, is a result of giving up her Desert List. It is Ruth’s son who becomes the grandfather of Israel’s greatest triumph—King David, the Monarch Extraordinaire. Ruth did not dwell on that list, instead, she made God the center of her life and growth.

When change comes along my initial reaction is to run in the opposite direction. I have to talk myself into being okay with a new idea. When Matt and I moved to Nashville, Tennessee it was like moving to a foreign country, and sometimes it’s the little things that set you off. It’s hard to give up maple bars, but we did it cold turkey because they don’t have them. It’s hard to open a door to the outside and wade through the air because of the 100% humidity—in October! We stopped eating fast food because you could not

understand a single word from that drive-thru speaker. Even when we walked inside, it was slow, slow, slow food. There was a church on every corner, and no one but the tourists did anything other than church Sunday mornings. It was like culture shock in our own country. I tell you that first month was rough; I was homesick. And, these are just little things. Neither of us had to face tragedy while in an unfamiliar place.

Today, Matt and I can tell you that, by the time we left, we said good-bye to lifelong friends, transformative schooling, and discussed whether we would buy a home there. It was one of the best things we ever did. And, I am sure, with hindsight, God set my good friend and colleague, Donna, in my path.

God sets opportunities in our path, and sometimes it takes hindsight to realize that they brought us closer to God. Today, we worship with Communion and maybe for you and me, our eyes will be opened. God invites us and prepares us for spiritual growth in this sacred space. When we give up the distractions of everyday life, maybe even when we fast from chocolate or soda pop—and especially when we let our Desert Lists die—we are more able to see God’s faithfulness. When we give up our excuses, we can see God at work in our lives.

The world changes constantly. Everyday technology increases, discoveries are made, and the next best thing is in progress. **We** are always changing, too. Even, when we don’t want to. Everyday we grow older and I admit sometimes it is hard to swallow. However, the question we **should** be asking ourselves is: **As** we grow older, are we **growing** closer to God?

Conclusion

Even in the desert of misery, loss, and death, God is with us. Even in Lent, we celebrate, anticipate, and prepare for the Easter Miracle. Today, in the middle of our Lenten Desert, our Lenten Fast, we are invited to the Communion Table to feast at God’s “heavenly banquet” (*UMH*, p. 10). The Feast of Communion reminds us of God’s faithfulness. When we leave the desert and forget our list of excuses, we approach God with our own faith. When we choose to change, to take a chance, God meets us with our own growth and spiritual transformation. The question then becomes: are we ready to grow and thirst no more? God says, “Yes!” God says “yes” over and over to us. We are constantly invited to the heavenly banquet. Let’s take that leap of faith and grow together.