

March 3rd 2019 A Sermon,
Kathryn A. Rickert,
St. Augustine's in the Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland, WA

Naomi, Ruth, and Transfiguration

I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you Ruth 1

Luke 9:43a And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday before Lent begins. We have just heard two lessons on the Transfiguration, preceded by the opening of the Book of Ruth.

So what does the Book of Ruth have to do with Transfiguration? It's not in the lectionary that way.

I was to preach on the Book of Ruth in Nov. when it was in the Lectionary. That was postponed until now, so that today we have this very interesting pairing, something like a pairing of food and wine in a restaurant, of the last Sunday before Lent, otherwise known as **Transfiguration Sunday** with the Book of Ruth.

What is Transfiguration...?

I was thinking about this during the snow, sometime into the second week of snow... and that was when a definition of T. came to me....

Transfiguration is like what the snow did for us. Here we were in the same places on this beautiful island, looking at the same trees, hills, valleys, beaches, fields we have looked at for years.

And yet every bit of this island was *transfigured* by the snow into something that we did not recognize as familiar, because we had not seen that way before.

The snow, a form of transfiguration, allowed us to see what is here, has been here all along... and to notice what we may not have noticed before. It changed how we see our island.

The snow is gone, yet we remain with those experiences and memories and are different because of them.

Back when I was preparing to preach in November and reading about the Book of Ruth, I was stunned by the *relevance* of that ancient story for our situation today. Many of us have read this book, we have some idea of what's in it... but mostly what comes to mind is...

Ruth 1:16-17 do not persuade me to leave you
or go back and not follow you.
For wherever you go, I will go,
and wherever you live, I will live;
your people will be my people,
and your God will be my God.
17 Where you die, I will die,
and there I will be buried.
May [God] punish me,
and do so severely,
if anything but death separates you and me. Holman Christian Standard

...a song sung at weddings, a beautiful expression of faithful, loving relationship,
but rarely the focus for a sermon.

What earlier did NOT come to my mind about the Book of Ruth....

was the awareness that it is a powerful, transforming (if not transfiguring) story about
starvation, migration, intense, divisions and social conflict among long standing worst
enemies and some "least likely" yet profoundly faithful behavior in such circumstances.

Starvation + migration + intense divisions and social conflict among long
standing worst enemies...

sounded like something worth spending some time on, *now*.

So here on Transfiguration Sunday I would like to suggest that

as Peter, James and John had not before seen in Jesus the greatness of God as
they came to see Him after that powerful experience on the mountain top, ...

so we too might see in the Book of Ruth
something of the greatness of God
that gives us "hope and courage to act with boldness" in our own setting of
great economic disparities, starvation, migration, intense divisions and social conflict
with long standing worst enemies...

Thus, this sermon is an appeal and invitation to you read, study, and explore the Book of
Ruth. [I will say more later on.]

To "read, mark, and inwardly digest" the wise teaching found in one of collects is one
of the ways that we are strengthened and built up in our Faith;
part of how it is that we find "hope to act boldly." (as it says in the Epistle)

For that to happen though, we need to find suitable ways of exploring Scripture that fit
who we are and how we live here and now.

So, the other day I was reading something about the on-going plans coming from
General Convention last summer, for the revision of the Book of Common Prayer.

Those plans include setting out specific qualities for the way our prayers are written; thus, in order that the Book of Common Prayer might be more useful and more understandable to more people, the language needs to be “inclusive and expansive.”

And, since the Episcopal Church actually includes the people of sixteen difference nations, speaking English, Spanish, French and Haitian Creole, those preparations require that when someone translates the Bible or the Liturgy from one language, here Hebrew, into another language, for us, English, that translation meet a very high standard of translation.

**As I understand it,
these high hopes for communication across differences and divisions,
place the responsibility for making the story understandable
in terms that make sense to the listener
upon the shoulders or/ in the mouth of the story teller.**

That is, in this case, when hearing the beginning of the Book of Ruth read in worship listeners should not need to be wondering what-- if anything beyond mere names-- the words Elimelech, Bethlehem, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion, Orpah, and Ruth mean. The translation will, *as naturally as possible*, include that.

Thus, a partial translation of our Old Testament Lesson from Ruth 1:1 - 9

...a certain man from a city called the House of Bread in Judah,
whose crops had failed and cattle died,
went to live in the country of his worst, long-standing enemies.

The man's name was My-God-is-King,
his wife was called Pleasantness;
and his two sons were named Sickly and Wasting Away.

They were a prominent family,
yet starving at home, and spent many years in the land of their worst enemy.

Against all tradition and completely out of the ordinary,
Sickly married Fawn-Neck, (later said to be the grandmother of Goliath)
and Wasting Away married Companion, mother of Jesse and grandmother of David.

Both of these women from the land were the daughters of their worst long-standing enemies.

After ten years, My God-is-King died, and then Sickly and Wasting-Away died.

When Pleasantness heard that God had once again given them food in the House of Bread, she planned to return there.

And while The House of Bread was “home” to Pleasantness, for Fawn-Neck and Companion the House of Bread was the land of their worst enemies.

[And, here comes the transfiguring part of this story...]

Thus, Pleasantness says... to Fawn Neck and Companion

You have treated me and our dead with tender mercy and kindness.
Please, go, return to your mother’s homes that God may deal tenderly and kindly with you, that God may provide for you homes and families to sustain you.

But Fawn-Neck and Companion said,

“No, we belong together!
Even though we are the daughters of your worst enemies,
we are family to each other.

We will go with you to your people.”.... **PAUSE**

here is much more to this story.... this is only the beginning.

The story continues with event after event that goes against the grain of what is “expected”, normal, even against what is seen to be WRONG...

Yet the greatness of God shows up in the least likely places and against all odds ...
that we might live with hope and courage.

I hope that we might continue this reflection.

May this Lent be fruitful for us...may we harvest from the least likely and against the odds.

O that we would see the greatness of God in faithful relationships of self-giving

O that we would treat the children of our worst enemies with tender mercy and kindness

O that we would be open to My-God-is-King showing up in the least likely places and against all odds...

that we might live with hope and great boldness even in very difficult circumstances.

Thus... you are invited to read the Book of Ruth some time before Dec.

I am more than willing to read with you at a time that suits you,

or to hear what you find on your own...

You can read it, listen to it, watch it as a movie, listen to someone else read it to you...

May we be transfigured and see more of the greatness of God.

Amen.