

**“Sent to Her Mother’s House” Psalm 146; Ruth 1:1-18 Rev. Michele Ward  
October 31, 2021 Ordinary Time All Saints/Reformation Sunday  
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD**

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband. Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

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But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.’ Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.

They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’

But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.’

Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’

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But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

**PRAYER**

Most weeks, when I call my grandmother with dementia, she tells me the same story--her favorite memory of me. If you’ll oblige me, I’d like to share it with you, too, this morning. When I was in kindergarten, I walked to her house by myself because I couldn’t wait to go over. At the time, my sisters were 3 years old and 12 months old. Translation - my parents were very distracted and did not notice, when I was all dressed and ready to go, that I slipped out of the house and marched myself down to my grandmother’s house four blocks away. I walked up to her front door, rang the bell, and waited. She opened the door and saw me standing there by myself. Surprised, when she saw no one else with me and my

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parents’ car nowhere to be seen, she asks me, “How did you get here?” I proudly tell her, “I walked over.” Her surprise turns into fear. “Do your parents know you are here?” I said, “No, I was ready, so I walked.” My grandmother says, “Come inside right now and call your mother.” And I happily obliged. I was so proud of myself for walking to her house on my own that it never occurred to me that I might be in trouble.

This childhood memory of going from my mother’s house to my grandmother’s house reminds me of the book of Ruth. I hear Ruth’s insistence on going wherever Naomi goes in my decision to walk to my grandmother’s house on my own. I hear Naomi’s insistence that Orpah and Ruth go home to their mother’s house at my grandmother’s command that I call my mother and tell her where I am. I hear Orpah’s decision to go back to her mother’s house, and I do not hear her story in my story. Naomi sends her back, and she decides to go.

I want to dwell on Orpah this morning because I think she has some wisdom for us as we linger on the habits of faith during this sermon series. Our theme for today is ‘sending’ and the story of

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Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth is only fitting. The chapter begins with a famine in Bethlehem, “the house of bread,” in Hebrew. Only desperation would send a family from Bethlehem to Moab. Moab is the home of the descendants of Lot. In Genesis, two of Lot’s daughters get him drunk and have sex with him. They both become pregnant and bear sons. One of them bears the name Moab--meaning “from my father.” The people of Israel viewed the Moabites as incestuous, indecent people. To add insult to injury, the sons of Naomi and Elimelech marry Moabite women. Not only has their family fled to this savage country, their sons have married native women. Now, all of the men are dead. Elimelech, husband of Naomi, and Mahlon and Chilion, sons of Naomi and wives of Orpah and Ruth, are dead.

With no other family and no one to care for her, Naomi decides to make the journey back home to Judah. She had heard through the grapevine that the famine in Judah had ended and she could find a way to provide for herself and rely on extended family there. Both Orpah and Ruth were going to come, initially. But Naomi has a

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change of heart. She realizes that she is subjecting them to a life of poverty and pain, with no prospects of remarriage or security, if they come with her to a foreign country, a country where their people are despised and ridiculed. Naomi tells them both, practically, that going back to their mother’s house is the best course of action for their lives. They will be with family, in the country of their upbringing, where their culture and language are understood and respected. They did not want to leave her--this is how much they loved one another, this is how loyal they felt to their mother in law, Naomi. Orpah follows the advice of her mother in law and she heads back to her mother’s house. The choice to say “mother’s house” instead of “father’s house” implies that Moabite culture is matrilineal (p 119).<sup>1</sup> Israelite culture was a combination of both matrilineal, meaning one’s right to land and claim to Jewish heritage came through the mother, but one’s social standing and power came through the father. Naomi’s insistence that Orpah and Ruth return to their mother’s house is a reminder of Native American culture. She chooses her “indigenous mother’s house over that of the alien Israelite Father,” according to Laura E. Donaldson,

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<sup>1</sup> Moab in the Iron Age: Hegemony, Polity, Archeology Bruce Routledge, 2004, 119

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Cherokee biblical scholar.<sup>2</sup> Orpah’s name in Hebrew means ‘neck or nape of the neck.’ The implication here is that Orpah’s identity is the ‘back of her neck.’ She is named thus for turning away from Naomi and from the God of Israel, and choosing to stay with her people in Moab. Donaldson argues that Orpah is synonymous with “the narrative role of abandoner. Some writers even suggest she later becomes the mother of Goliath, the famous enemy of Israel, and that Goliath himself was ‘the son of a hundred fathers.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

So what can Orpah teach us this morning about habits of faith? She teaches us how to live in place. Not to long for another world, another state, another city. Even in the midst of her significant losses, she chooses to stay. She could start over somewhere new with Naomi and Ruth, and leave her culture, her language, her religion, and her family behind.

Orpah may be seen as a faithless abandoner, a fearful homebody, a cowardly pagan, but I see our congregation reflected in the legacy of Orpah. Like Orpah, Brown Memorial Park Avenue

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<sup>2</sup> Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes,” *Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, 2005, 146.

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chose to stay in Baltimore City. Even when half of the congregation fled the city with the majority of white people during white flight, we did not close our doors. We did not say, it is better to be in the county where everyone looks and thinks and dresses like us. We have been called to this neighborhood and to this city, and this is where we are staying. I see our congregants in the legacy of Orpah. I see our faithfulness is working within institutions to change them as part of Orpah’s life moving through us. I see our political activity and our power organizing as examples of the way we work across a variety of sectors to insist that God’s way is coming if we stay in one place long enough to see it through.

This may not seem like a sermon about sending, but about staying. I’d like to argue the opposite. Orpah did not want to stay in Moab. She wanted to leave it all behind. The grief of losing her husband, the grief of starting over in the same place, the grief of going back home after 10 years of marriage, the grief of being childless. Naomi sends her back. I believe that Naomi was speaking with the Holy Spirit in Orpah, telling her to stay. Telling her to be faithful in the place where she already lived. This is bold in a



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different way. This is bold because it requires trust that God has something new to show Orpah, a new life, in a familiar place. She chooses her people, her culture, her language, her religion. Staying in the new sending--for Orpah, and for us.

We have been sent, too. Not to the four corners of the Earth. Here, on the corner of Park and Lafayette. Here, in Bolton Hill. Here, in Baltimore City. God sends us out of these doors every week, like Naomi sent Orpah years ago, back to her people. The people in the pews and back at home on Zoom are your people. Your neighbors are your people. The citizens of Baltimore City are your people.

So, I ask you, what will you do with this sending? Do you see it as defeat or as an opportunity? Do you see this as giving up or as a deepening your commitment? God is sending us back into our neighborhoods and into our city just like Naomi sent Orpah home. You are here, in this time and in this place, for a purpose. May you have the courage of Orpah to root yourself in Baltimore City as God sends us out, again and again, out of these doors and into the streets. Amen.