The Cruciform Life: Ruth

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Texts: Ruth 1:8-18; 4:13-17; Luke 1:46-55

This morning I am wearing a rose-coloured stole. I am wearing this stole because this Sunday is celebrated as “Laetare Sunday” or “Rose Sunday” in some Christian traditions. The colour Rose is a symbol of joyful praise.

Today, we are half-way through Lent. Traditionally, Lent involves abstinences and self-reflection. Sometimes, Lenten disciplines can be pretty demanding. So, beginning in the Middle Ages, halfway through Lent things were allowed to ease up for a day. That small relaxation allowed observant Christians to anticipate the joy coming at Easter.

*Laetare* is from a Latin word that means “rejoice.” Laetare Sunday gets its name from the Latin introit traditionally chanted at the beginning of this service. It starts with words taken from Isaiah 66, “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her— that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Well, it’s a happy coincidence, I think, that this Sunday presents us with maternal imagery. Because, in my discussion of the cruciform paradigm, there is one metaphor I have not explored. That is the metaphor of birth. Perhaps I have saved the best for last.

The story of Ruth is a story of love in the midst of hardship that leads to transformation. It has all the features of what I have been describing throughout this series of sermons as the “cruciform” or “cross-shaped” life. First, there is movement. This is represented by the journey from Moab to Bethlehem in Judah. Naomi, her husband and two sons emigrated to Moab, now part of present-day Jordan, because there was a drought. There, Naomi found wives for her two sons. But at the beginning of today’s lesson, Naomi and her daughters-in-law are widows. Naomi has decided to return to Bethlehem because she has heard that the drought has ended. There is nothing to keep her in Moab: her husband and her sons are dead.

What will her daughters-in-law do? They are not Judahites; they have no stake in Bethlehem. Best, therefore, to make a last tearful goodbye and let Naomi return to her ancestral home while they return to theirs. But Ruth refuses to go.

Ruth’s determination not to abandon Naomi finds expression in the familiar moving words of the King James Version: “Intreat me not to leave thee, orto return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall bemy people, and thy God my God.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Underneath this expression of determined love lies an important value in biblical religion. In the translation we read this morning that concept is represented by the phrase, “to deal kindly with someone.” Underneath the concept of “dealing kindly” is a value that comprehends both human relationships and God’s relationship with Israel. “To deal kindly with someone” actually means to remain faithful in a covenanted relationship. In fact, the book of Ruth depicts faithfulness to covenant relationship on two levels. For Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi and her dead husband mirrors Yahweh’s faithfulness in his relationship with Israel.

In parallel with the cruciform paradigm, Ruth’s actions also entail suffering, including social conflict. She immigrated to Judah as an impoverished foreigner. Her love for her mother-in-law overrode her love of her native country, her people, and even her ancestral gods. Does this sound familiar? Think, for a moment, of Abraham.

At the end of the story there is transformation, the third mark of the cross-shaped life. Though reduced to penury in Bethlehem, Ruth is determined to deal kindly with Naomi. Her unstinting commitment even in the face of harsh conditions leads to an amazing outcome. For, Ruth becomes the grandmother of David, the prototype of every biblical Messiah including Jesus Christ. Providentially, her act of covenant love reflects God’s determination to act in covenant love with Judah. That will happen through the kingship of David, whose birth Ruth’s faithful love has set in motion. In that sense, the story of Ruth is a parable in which we see God’s love for Israel mirrored in the committed love of Ruth for her husband’s people.

Covenant love also manifests itself in the song of Mary that we know in the Church as “The Magnificat.” The title, “The Magnificat” comes from a Latin word meaning “to magnify.” And that’s how Mary’s song begins, “My soul magnifies the Lord…”

Here, in the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, we encounter another young woman determined to maintain covenant love even in the midst of social obstacles. Betrothed—so not yet fully married— Mary carries a child who is not her fiancé’s. She ought to be scared; she ought to be afraid for the future—a young girl, who has never given birth before and under circumstances that will certainly set the neighbours’ tongues wagging. But Mary is not afraid; she is filled with joy, because she knows that she bears within her womb the saviour of her people.

Her song of joy is also a song of covenant love. Above all it praises God’s covenant love for Israel, and the Mighty One’s resolve to deal kindly with the descendants of Abraham. The “Magnificat” anticipates a world in which the Lord will fulfill his promises to God’s people; when messianic grace will produce a society in which abusers are banished and the downtrodden finally cared for. It’s as if Mary imagines that there is parallel between her pregnancy and the way the Holy One is about manifest God’s self in the world. In fact, Mary acts out features of the cruciform life: she dares to endure the suffering of social disapproval and the pain of childbirth to bring into the world the power that will transform it. And God will do the same through Christ’s suffering on the cross and the transformation we call “resurrection.”

At the beginning of this sermon, I suggested that there was an analogy between the cruciform life and birthing a new reality. In fact, another name for Laetare Sunday is “Mothering Sunday.” In England, Mothering Sunday was a day when servants were free to join their families and make the journey to their “mother-church,” to the parish where they were born and baptized.[[3]](#footnote-3) And on this fourth Sunday of Lent, we are offered the opportunity to contemplate a couple of connections between birth and the cross-shaped life. In each case, we are also presented with possibilities for realizing the presence of God in our lives.

The first possibility combines images of Mothering Sunday and the story of Ruth. What connects them is the resolve to resist forces that lead to broken relationships. Ruth steadfastly refused to give up on the relationships she had forged with her mother-in-law. In England, Mothering Sunday once provided an opportunity to affirm family relationships that were threatened with brokenness because of economic hardship.

The resolve to stand against forces that break relationships is also the theme of the Lenten litanies we have been using over the past few Sundays. Repeatedly, we have heard the words, “During this season of Lent, let us repair the breach.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Of course, the Church awaits the day when all breaches will be repaired and every broken relationship mended. But until that day, like Ruth, the Church’s determined nurture of its covenantal relationships can give birth to the messianic hope. We can be thankful that the Presbyterian Church in Canada remains in covenanted relationships with people and groups across the globe. Like Ruth, the Church’s acts of covenantal love carry in them the potential of birthing God’s presence in the here and now.

A second analogy between the cruciform life and birth may be found in the idea of Laetare Sunday. In fact, the maternal imagery used in the introit for Laetare Sunday is so striking, it’s worth repeating, “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her— that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.”

I think the reason these verses have been chosen is that they combine the motif of present mourning with future consolation. This is a combination that is appropriate for the middle of Lent. As we journey with Christ towards the cross, Laetare Sunday symbolizes a way to perceive the presence of God under challenging circumstances.

It is often difficult to perceive the reality of the Christian hope. We only have to read the newspaper, watch the news, or think about our own flaws to perceive that we and our society seem rather far from realizing the kingdom of God. It’s easy to despair and it is easy to doubt if God is really present in life and in the life of the Church. But this set of circumstances has echoes in Mary’s experience as well as our own.

Mary also lived in very challenging circumstances. But the “Magnificat” symbolizes a strategy that we can adopt in our spiritual lives. Somehow the holy moment that Mary knew was coming was actualized through an act of worship. There is a deep connection between this kind of spiritual practice and pregnancy. Every woman who has ever given birth knows what I am talking about. Long before a child is born, that little one is being imagined into being by the one who is bearing her.

The psalmist tells us that God is enthroned in the praises of his people. In fact, this has always been the experience of the Church. There is spiritual wisdom in praise. Why else would Christians have produced so many hymnbooks over the centuries? Even in the midst of hardship praising God somehow has the potential to change the way we look at ourselves and the way we look at the world. As we worship we are actually imagining into being the reality that God has resolved to bring to birth. The hymns of the Church are pregnant with the presence of God.

In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to sing a hymn of praise. Such moments allow us to perceive that God is pleased to deal kindly with us. They also furnish us with an opportunity to deal kindly with God. Worship nurtures us with the knowledge that the Spirit of Christ has come into the world and continues to come into it. Even more, praise enables us to know that the God whom we hope will become present, is in some mysterious but real way present with us now.

1. Isaiah 66:10-11; see the article on “Laetare Sunday,” <https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Laetare_Sunday.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ruth 1:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Mothering Sunday,” *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mothering_Sunday> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Janet Ryu-Chan, *PWS&D Lent 2019 Liturgies* (Toronto: Presbyterian World Service & Development, 2019). <https://presbyterian.ca/pwsd/2019/01/06/lent-2019-liturgies/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)