

**Rev. Adrienne Meier**  
**September 5, 2021, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

### **A Complete Work in Progress**

*Ruth 1:19-2:3, 17-23*

*So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?' So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.*

*Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.*

*So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. Her mother-in-law said to her, 'Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.' So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, 'The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.'*

*Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!' Naomi also said to her, 'The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.' Then Ruth the Moabite said, 'He even said to me, "Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest." ' Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, 'It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.' So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.*

Long ago, I gave up on believing that God has a plan. Well, let me pause for a second and say, if the idea that God has a plan is a comfort to you, do not let me dissuade you: the relationship of God to time and to our lives is a mystery. If it consoles you, let it. Personally, I have found comfort in seeing God not as having a *plan*, but as having a *goal*.

God isn't working with turn-by-turn directions, but with a destination. Darrell Joddock, professor emeritus from Gustavus Adolphus College, wrote an article for the *Living Lutheran* magazine on Lutherans and politics. In it he wrote, "Because God has a goal rather than a plan, humans are invited to participate in the decision-making. There is more than one way to get from here to shalom, and humans have been given minds and hearts to figure out at least one route." If God has a goal instead of a plan, then, it is no longer a sign of failure every time grief has sent me back to the drawing board. There's no prescribed route that I have to discover, floundering on my own, suffering, sorrowing. I'm free to revise my story, to write multiple drafts, to trust that what I did not achieve, to trust that what I did not gain, to trust that what I lost, is still part of the fullest expression of me. Our lives in Christ contain multitudes, and even as we draft and revise the story of our lives, we are constantly becoming who we already are in Christ.

Ruth and Naomi had dreams for their lives. And this was not it. This was not the two-story house with the white picket fence, two kids, and a dog in the yard. It was not the retirement to dream about—dinner at grandma's on Sunday, lots of time for travel and hobbies. That hoped-for future was a thing of the past. That past contained magical words like *and* and *we*. Once, before, their lives look like a written book, a set script they were only too glad to follow, but what is before them now are blank pages, the story yet to be written. And what will be written will be a future that could not be without the frustration, tragedy, and sorrow of their past. The person about to redeem them, about to change their story, would have had no reason to be in their lives at all, were it not for their great losses.

Last week, I mentioned the poet Maggie Smith, whose book of collected stories and short quotes *Keep Moving* has been among the works inspiring me throughout this series on Sorrow Lament and Hope. Ms. Smith writes about a conversation she had with her eight-year-old daughter. Smith's daughter was asking the deep questions of childhood, about her own death, and the deaths of those closest to her. In attempting to soothe her worried daughter, Smith told her, "Life is a long—a long book...and you're only on the first chapter. Who wants to ruin a book by worrying about the end the whole time? Who wants to know how a book will end?" In answering her daughter, Smith found a metaphor that gave meaning to her own loss and sorrow: if life is a book, then maybe we're a draft, maybe there is space for revision.

I think this is hard for us. We want to be living in the final draft—the best draft—of our lives, the neatly narrated, whittled-down truth of who we are. We want a compact storyline where other characters move in and out with ease. We want to trust that the ending is sweet and satisfying, and that there are no loose ends. And that desire is understandable, and also impractical. That is not who we are. We are contradictions, at times, failures. We complicate our lives and have them complicated by relationships with complex people. Like the poet Walt Whitman wrote, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" We are like the painting that contains under the surface another completed masterpiece. And, it turns out, like a Van Gogh painting, or a Pulitzer-prize winning novel, our completeness is not in our

achievement, it is in our complexity. It isn't in our ends, but in our journeys. It isn't in our hope alone, but also in our sorrow.

One of the wonderful things about baptizing infants—welcoming babies into this community faith, into our fellowship that endeavors to be almost entirely love, is the clarity with which we can see this truth. At the moment they are washed in the waters, they will be both the final masterpiece and the roughest draft. They will be complete *and* a work in progress, as you were, on the day when water and word joined together to shower you with grace.

Beloved, you contain multitudes. All your secret struggles, the things you hope will end up on the cutting room floor when your biopic hits the big screen, the dreams that have been left by the wayside, the blank pages left to you when your partner left, your spouse died, the pregnancy ended. You contain all of these, all of these multitudes, and that is a miracle. Perhaps the greatest challenge, then, Beloved, beyond accepting this truth for ourselves, is to accept it about one another. This means, on the one hand, that we forgive one another, because we are all still becoming. And, on the other hand, when the moment is right, to remove the things that block or impede our sibling in Christ, as they become more fully who they are in Christ. Think about that broadly, Beloved—we are drafts, revisions, that contain a multitude of pasts and possibilities—and that includes the friend who snubbed you, the co-worker who is always critical, and the person sleeping on a park bench. And we are called to them all, to see and hold and marvel at the multitudes they contain. Because, Beloved, what is true for us individually, is true for us together, for the body of Christ: there isn't a straight path, clear and easy to follow, but that in every plot twist, every dream deferred, every hope we hold, every life pointed toward God's goal—all of it—is part of who we are, completely in Christ.

Amen.