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“Going Somewhere?”

Text: Ruth 1:1-19a; 2 Timothy 2:1-13; Luke 17:11-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

You've seen them. Men, women, and children. From Syria, Lybia, Iraq, Sudan, and many other countries. Streaming over the border to the countries around them. Fleeing war, famine, drought. Looking for hope, for life, for peace and rest and safety in another country. Refugees we call them.

That was Naomi, Elimelech and their two sons - refugees. For them it was a famine that made them make the difficult decision to leave Israel and flee to the country of Moab. They probably weren't the only ones. And, we are told, they wound up staying ten years. So they settled in for the long haul. Their sons married native girls, named Orpah and Ruth.

But trouble didn't stay in Israel - it followed Naomi. As if the famine and living in a strange place weren't enough, not only her husband but both her sons died while they were stuck in that foreign land. So when it was time to go back home, Naomi did not return uneffected. She was beat up and beat down. And maybe she didn't want any reminders of this tough and bitter time in her life. Maybe she wanted her daughters-in-law to have a better life than she had. And so she tells them: Go back. Go home. That would be better for you.

But one, Ruth, would not go back. She had been blessed by these refugees. She had received from Naomi and Elimelech and her husband something far more valuable than family, nation, land, or home. She had learned there was something more desirable than an easy life. She had been given the God of Israel. She had been adopted not just into Naomi's family but into God's family. So she would not go back. Instead she says: ***where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.***

The Apostle Paul would not turn back either. He too had received something far more valuable than anything in this world. Arrest and prison could not sway him. Persecution and suffering could not turn him back. His former life was a pretty nice life, you know - he was well-respected, highly advanced, and a pretty important guy. But compared to what he had received, the grace and forgiveness of his Saviour, all that was a Moab to him now. So like Ruth, he would not go back.

And he gives the reason why - a saying, he says, that is trustworthy and sure:

*If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he also will deny us;  
if we are faithless, he remains faithful -  
for he cannot deny himself.*

Now, what exactly does this saying mean? Well, follow along. . . . He starts with baptism. *If we have died with Him* - that's baptismal language for Paul. We die and rise with Jesus in baptism. We die to sin and rise to live a new life. Not the old life, the Moab life, but a new life as a child of God, adopted into His family. And baptized by Him *we will also live with Him*, both now and forever.

But as a baptized child of God, you will face difficulties, struggles, and trials you will have to *endure*. Like Naomi and Ruth. Sometimes for doing what is right. Sometimes for speaking the truth. Sometimes for resisting temptations to sin, for not going along with everyone else. Sometimes with trials sent by God to strengthen you. Sometimes with attacks by the evil one to weaken you. And you might feel walked on now in all this, but *if we endure, we will also reign with him*. You won't just live with Him, Paul says, you will be *exalted* and *reign* with Him.

Some do not endure, though. Some *deny Him*. When the going gets tough, they get going. When the trials get hot, or the temptations get hot, they get out of the church. That's what Israel tended to do in the days of the judges, when Ruth lived. They would fall away from God, deny Him. As a result, *He denied them* His protection and allowed foreign nations to come in and conquer them, in order to discipline them, that they might return to Him.

And when they returned, they found a faithful and forgiving God. For, Paul goes on to say, *if we are faithless, He remains faithful*. And yes, even Christians can be faithless. Even you and I can act without faith, violate our faith, and be false to our faith, turning back to Moab. Such is the case when we do not forgive, but hold on to anger and grudges, *that is going back to Moab*. When we listen to the wisdom of the world and follow it instead of the Word of God, *that is going back to Moab*. When our hearts are captured by the pleasures and things of this world, *that is going back to Moab*. When our mouths which here confess the creed and out there curse and swear and speak words that cause hurt and pain, *that is going back to Moab*. Our Father brought us out of our Moabs in baptism and forgiveness and has given us a new life as His children, *are we going to keep going back?*

But even though we act in these ways not of faith but of sin, *He remains faithful*. We are not constant, but He is. For *He cannot deny Himself*. He cannot deny His Word. He cannot deny His promises made and given. He cannot deny those He has made His sons

and daughters in baptism. He is faithful. He forgives. He restores. He heals. He lifts up.

That's what He did for Paul. That forgiveness. That life. That undeserved grace. Jesus came for him. Jesus knocked him off his high horse and onto his butt, but lifted him up again. Jesus struck him blind, but then enlightened him. Jesus sent him out into persecution and trials, but also strengthened him and remained with him. And so Paul, like Ruth, would not go back. He would suffer, he would work like an athlete, he would endure all things, but he would not go back. But when he did, when he fell, he would repent. Nothing could compare to what he had received.

And so too for that leper. We normally hear this reading at Thanksgiving and the focus is on the leper giving thanks, but hearing it now gives us a chance to hear it a bit differently, and with a little different perspective. *That this leper too would not go back.* He would not go back to his Moab - he *had* to go back to Jesus and fall at His feet and worship Him. He had received so much - not only cleansing, but life, from Jesus. His disease was a death sentence. His disease separated him from his family and all other people . . . except for other dying lepers. His disease made life not worth living. But Jesus bridged that gap, came to him, drew near to him, and gave him his life back again. And not just his physical life, but spiritual life. A life of faith and hope and love.

And so too has Jesus done for you. The disease of sin is a death sentence for us. Sin has driven wedges between family and friends. Sin can make us feel that life is not worth living. Sin means that we cannot approach a holy God but are separated by our uncleanness from Him. But for you just as for this leper, Jesus bridged that gap. God came to us in the flesh in His incarnation, drew near to you in the water of our baptism, and raised you to life. That we who are unclean be clean again . . . and again and again.

So perhaps the song of Ruth the Moabitess, the song of the Samaritan leper, and the song of Paul the persecutor could be the song that *we* are going to sing in just a moment - the words that we will sing just before coming to the altar to repent and receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation of Jesus in His Body and Blood.

We will sing this: *What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me? I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call on the name of the Lord. I will take the cup of salvation and will call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem* (Offertory, Divine Service 2, LSB p. 176).

No leper, no foreigner could do that. No leper, no foreigner could be in the midst of God's people. No leper, no foreigner could be in the courts of the Lord's house. But you can! You have been cleansed. You have been made holy sons and daughters of God in Holy Baptism.

So when you go back and fall back into sin - and you do and you will, no matter how resolute you are! - when you act faithless, return to the one who is faithful. The one who puts Himself and His Word of forgiveness and His cup of salvation here for you. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter what you are going through, no matter what lies on the horizon, no matter what your fears and troubles, He is here for you. To hear your prayers, to take your burdens, and give you His love. And He will be here tomorrow and the next day and the next. The world may say "go back." Many might tell you there's a better way. But there is only one who laid down His life for you, who went to a cross for you, that you might live with Him forever.

*So maybe we're refugees too.* Taking refuge here from a world which seems to be wandering farther and farther from God and deeper and deeper into sin. We've come looking for drink, looking for food, looking for forgiveness and peace and rest. And we find those things here, in the house of our Saviour.

And finding and receiving those things here, perhaps there is a Ruth or two out there who needs them too. From a faithful Saviour who is here to give. And maybe there's a leper or ten out there who needs the cleansing that Jesus is here to provide. Maybe you'll be their Naomi, or their Timothy, or their Paul. To let them know that here is what they need. Here is what we all need. Not just for life here and now, but for when we finally get to go home, *to our fatherland.*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.