

December 1, 2019 – 1st Sunday of Advent - Still Hope

1Matthew 1:2: *Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,*

Ruth 1: *(with pashmina over head.)* Shalom. I am Naomi. I live during the period of the Judges, in the region of Judah. Judah is named after one of the sons of Jacob from whom my people and the people of my husband came. Judah is a descendant of AVraham, Yssock, & Jacob. I am from the town of Bet-leHem, which means “house of bread.” Ironic, because famines were not uncommon in Judah. During one famine, Judah, all his brothers, and his father Jacob had to relocate to Egypt for food. Just like my husband, our two sons, and I had to live for a time in the kingdom of Moab.

Oi vavoy. Moving to Moab was not easy, because the people there were despised by Hebrews like us. Although Lot, the father of Moab, was the nephew of our ancestor AVraham, the origin of his son Moab was unlawful according to the Torah. But I cannot judge, since our family line came through the unlawful union of Judah & Tamar.

But more of my tale of lost hope. While in Moab, my sons married, but before having children, they & my husband died. Please understand that during my time a woman relied upon her husband, sons, or grandsons to care for her into her old age. Like I said, for me hope is gone.

Then word came that the famine in Judah was over. So, I set out, with my two daughters-in-law, to return home. I looked forward to seeing my people again. But then I realized that Orpah & Ruth should go home, too. I said to them, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May Adonai show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands & to me. May Adonai grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” But they wept & insisted on going with me. I tried to dissuade them, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Even if I thought there was still hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of Adonai has turned against me!”

Oi. Vavoy. I knew I was wrong in accusing Adonai, who had done so much good in our family’s history. For Judah also had 2 sons who died before having children. Yet Judah’s daughter-in-law, Tamar, intended to wait for the young 3rd son of Judah to reach adulthood for her to marry him. But Judah did not honor the marriage custom. He refused to give his youngest son in marriage to Tamar. Still she found a way. Despite Judah’s refusal of duty, through Tamar Judah gained an heir for the family line to continue. As with Judah & Tamar, somehow in some way is there still hope for me?

Hope would not come through Orpah, who finally went home to her people. But Ruth clung to me, crying, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, & where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people & your Elohim my Elohim. Where you die I will die, & there I will be buried. May Adonai deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

Ruth spoke of Adonai with great faith & hope. Oi vavoy. The hope & trust in Adonai of this Gentile woman was greater than mine. Could the possibility of hope come to my people, through Ruth the faithful woman, who once embraced my son. For through my son’s influence on her, Ruth now embraced Adonai, me, & my people.

Ruth reminded me of other great women who lived during the time when judges ruled.

One woman was Aksah, the daughter of Caleb, given in marriage to his nephew. To his daughter Aksah, Caleb gave land in the Negev & also precious springs of water. It was unheard of for a

married woman to have possession of land & water rights. Yet Aksah was granted each. Remembering Aksah, I wonder if hope is still meant for me, Naomi?

Hope also stirred with the memory of another woman. The judge Deborah ruled, just after the kingdom of Moab was made subject to Ysrael. Although married, it was she, not her husband, who led the people. She heard court cases as judge. Deborah was also a prophet. Elohim spoke to her. She heard from Adonai. She even gave instructions from him to the commander of the army of Ysrael. Through these instructions, my people had victory over the king of Canaan. Thru Deborah hope came to Ysrael. As a result, Deborah sang praise to Adonai. She sang of hope & promise. Under her leadership, the land had forty years of shalom.

Would hope & shalom perhaps come to me and my people, and to the land provided by Adonai?

I admit that bitterness had taken Ruth in me. I stilled complained about Adonai & blamed the affliction of my misfortune on him, but deep down the promise of the Messiah made to my people by Elohim rose afresh in me. For just as Ruth & I arrived in Bet-leHem, the barley harvest was beginning. The first crop after the cold of winter came. The festival of firstfruits was upon the Hebrew people. The famine was over. Sovereign Elohim provided. Praise be to Adonai for hope had grown again. Could it be that there is still more hope to come in our future? Oi vavoy. It remains to be seen.

Deuteronomy 8:1-16: (*Remove pashmina off head.*) There was more hope to come, but first came more hardship. Consider what Scripture reveals about famines. One description is in Deuteronomy 8, written after the Hebrew people returned from Egypt, where they escaped the famine in Canaan. The land of Canaan had been promised to Abraham, Naomi's ancestor. After Egypt, the promised land of Canaan was given over by God to the Hebrew people & the new nation gained the name of Israel. But not without God's certain expectations, conveyed in Deuteronomy 8:

1Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter & possess the land the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. **2**Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. **3**He humbled you, causing you to hunger & then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. **4**Your clothes did not wear out & your feet did not swell during these forty years. **5**Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.

6Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in obedience to him & revering him. **7**For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land— a land with brooks, streams, & deep springs gushing out into the valleys & hills; **8**a land with wheat & barley, vines & fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil & honey; **9**a land where bread will not be scarce & you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron & you can dig copper out of the hills.

10When you have eaten & are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. **11**Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. **12**Otherwise, when you eat & are satisfied, when you build fine houses & settle down, **13**and when your herds & flocks grow large and your silver & gold increase and all you have is multiplied, **14**then your heart will become proud & you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. **15**He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty & waterless land, with its venomous snakes & scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. **16**He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble & test you so that in the end it might go well with you.”

Here ends the reading from Deuteronomy 8.

But all did not continue to go well, for the Hebrew people. As in the time of the judges & in time today, people forgot the Lord God & failed to observe his commands. They fell deeper into sin. And just as certain judges had acted as deliverers in the history of Israel, the people needed someone to deliver them from their sin. Then at some point during this time of forgetting the Lord and when the Hebrew people stopped listening, God stopped speaking to them. There were no more prophets.

But the promise of a deliverer had been given beforehand to the people. The promise of the Messiah, who would save them from their sin. For without a deliverer, there was no hope for them or for us.

Without repentance of sin, still more hardship came upon the Hebrew people, forced to live under the cruel reign of the Roman empire.

While in Israel, I, your pastor, learned that, at some point during the years when there were no prophets, another famine fell upon Bethlehem. This famine caused a mass evacuation for the town's people to look for a more fertile place to live, just as did Naomi, her husband, & their sons. Many people then left the dry & dusty area of Judah. They traveled north to the more fertile hills of Galilee. There they settled a new town, which is named still to this day, "Nazareth." The name means in Hebrew "offshoot." Nazareth is an offshoot of Bethlehem. Now this is not recorded in Scripture, but is known among the people who live in Israel as part of the history there.

Back to events in Scripture. Finally, after five hundred years of silence, following the prophet Malachi, a new prophet was conceived by a couple, who were well beyond the age of childbearing. Then the priest Zechariah & his wife Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Their son John was born to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. During that same year, the long-awaited Messiah was conceived in the womb of Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, a virgin, from the same lineage as Naomi. Joseph, Mary's betrothed, came too from this family line &, therefore, also from the town of Bethlehem.

As followers of Jesus, we know, coming from Nazareth to this little town of Bethlehem, to "the house of bread," our eternal hope was born. The Living Bread come down from heaven, whose body was broken for us, to save us from our sin, arrived on earth. Our eternal & everlasting hope, Jesus, whose name means, the one who saves, was born in Bethlehem. He came as an infant human child, born of Mary. He came to die for us and to save us from our sin. Then he rose from the grave & went into heaven, to prepare a place for us there.

Therefore, no matter what, we should not lose hope, for Jesus will come again. Every year during the season of Advent, we wait in anticipation, not of his birth that already occurred, but of his second coming. Let us await the 2nd coming of Jesus, the Messiah, with great hope. Amen.