**Ruth 1:1-22 December 8, 2021**

**Advent Midweek Series II: O Little Town of Bethlehem**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What would cause you to change your name? Marriage? Fame? Celebrities adopt stage names for reasons all their own. What if you feared for your life? The witness relocation program changes your name and gives you a whole new identity. But what about shame? It’s not fear, but shame. You’re still the same person, but you can’t bear the same name, not after what you’ve done or what happened to you. And when it comes to your name, there’s always a place where everyone knows it. When you go to your hometown everybody knows your name, and they think of you in the same way. Unless you changed it. Unless you made a statement. Unless you showed them that everything had changed in your life.

Call me Mara. That is what Naomi says upon her return to Bethlehem. As we continue our Advent Midweek Series looking at the town of Bethlehem we fast forward past the events recorded in the book of Genesis and tonight find ourselves in Ruth. Naomi had went away full, but she had come back empty. Naomi was full indeed when she left: she had a husband and she had two sons. And you know what else Naomi had? An address that was nowhere near Bethlehem. That’s right. Don’t you ever find it strange that Naomi and her family are in Moab seemingly for years? Sure, famines can be severe, and they can occasionally last for many years; but come on now...this family has to be in Moab for quite some time for all of the necessary events to transpire. It’s not like there was never an opportunity to go back. That’s not because life was so much better in Moab then it was in Israel; although perhaps the sons of Elimilech: Mahlon and Killion, might disagree once their father dies. She didn’t go back, because she didn’t want to go back. It’s because life in Bethlehem wasn’t the life she wanted to live. Bethlehem wasn’t a good place to live. Naomi knew what life in Bethlehem was like; and she knew that the only way she’d ever go back there was if the absolute worst case scenario were to unfold before her; a scenario so unlikely, that the odds of it happening were about as good as the odds of winning the lottery. Except people do win the lottery; and today Naomi wins the Bethlehem lottery. First Elimilech dies. A tragedy to be sure. But in terms of survival and the future of the family, Naomi still has her 2 sons: Mahlon and Killion; an heir and God has even blessed her with a spare as some might put it. Naomi still has sons who will takes care of her for the rest of her life. They even get married; not to the most faithful and devout women in Orpah and Ruth, they are after all pagans, but they are still married; and any sons born to either union will secure the family for life. Except, both Mahlon and Killion die before any children can be born, let alone concieved. And what once seemed impossible, is now all but certain: Naomi has to go back to Bethlehem. The last place on earth she wants to go.

Which brings us this evening back to the question and focus of our time together on these Wednesday Nights. Where is your Bethlehem? Where is your place that you desire to never return? Where is your place that anywhere else on earth would be better then? Is it your home town. Like Naomi who changes her name to Mara is your home town a place you dread going? Why? Is it because everyone knows your name? Bad memories? Bad experiences? Bad people? Perhaps your Bethlehem is an old job, where the boss was a nightmare, and the pay was lousy, and every day was more miserable then the day before it. Or perhaps it is the church. Yes, the church can stir up some powerful emotions in people, we often think that those emotions are always joyful, but sometimes they can be painful as well, so painful that some might even swear that they will never enter the doors of this building ever again. And you know what happens when you hit the Bethlehem lottery? You know what happens when all the events line up just right, and you are forced to go back to that town, that job, that church? You left flying high; you had the upper-hand; you had all the cards. You left full, in the words of Naomi. But when you return, you are empty; when you return you are nothing; when you return, you aren’t the same person, and in some ways you change your own name just as Naomi did, to Mara.

Mara means bitter; and isn’t that what you are when you come back? You have come back to the last place on earth that you would ever want to be. But in the midst of that bitterness, there is still hope. Naomi doesn’t know it at the time, but coming with her is Ruth, who will marry Boaz, who will give birth to Obed, who will be the father of Jesse, who will be the father of David, who will lead to Christ. In the bitterness of life, there is still hope. In the bitterness and despair of life not going the way you think it should go, there is still hope. There is the hope that comes only from God and His unfailing promises, the hope that makes for a great faith to which you and I cling. Naomi is full today, not because she has a daughter in law and son in law and grandchildren, and a host of others who will care for her for the rest of her life; but because there is hope, and it is standing right next to her in the person of Ruth.

As you approach your own Bethlehem, your own place that you would rather forget, where do you find hope? Where are you made full once more? Like Naomi, you are made full, by the one whose line includes Ruth. In the midst of all that discourages us and causes us pain, we find our hope in Christ. We find our hope in the one, who went to the out of the way, backwater, mess of a town that is Bethlehem, the town that no one wants anything to do with, to be born, to make His entrance into the world.
 In this little town that for Naomi holds no hope and no promise, in this little town that
now holds Naomi and all those who would call themselves Mara, there is hope, because there is
Jesus. And now in Bethlehem, Jesus fills the empty. He fills you, who have been made empty
by the cold and harsh world that surrounds you, that sends you back to your own house of pain;
He fills you and makes you whole with the hope that He alone provides to those in need, so that
even in the places you call Bethlehem in your own life, you might have the hope that surpasses
all understanding, as you keep your heart and your mind on Christ Jesus.
Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.