

**Where Do We GO From Here?**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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*Ruth 1:1-22*

We've asked a number of big questions over the summer... Where are you from? Where does it hurt? What do you need? And today the final question of the preaching series is, Where do we go from here?

This may feel a little bit like we're putting the cart before the horse because what we're really wondering about is... Where is here? Where are we exactly?

Things have been turned upside down over the last year and a half and to state it quite simply, it doesn't seem that they are right side up quite yet.

It feels very much like we are neither here nor there, but somewhere in between.

This is what spiritual director Susan Beaumont describes as liminality - a quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during transition.

Parents of freshman going to college may feel this DEEPLY in these weeks and months... when a person or group of people is in between something that has ended, but has not yet arrived at what will be.

Transitions (of course) happen all of the time, and if you pay careful attention you might notice they generally follow a predictable three phase process.

The first phase is SEPARATION, this is a time in which a person or a group is stripped of the identity and status that previously defined them. This is why the act of moving one's household is so stressful on relationships, every individual in the home is going through their own time of separating from their environment, their supports, their community and friendly surroundings.

The second phase of transition is DISORIENTATION, that liminal period of non-structure or anti-structure that opens new possibilities. I distinctly remember dropping off our oldest at Southern as a freshman, helping her get her bags to her room, lofting her bed and taking pictures of what it all looked like. And on the drive home, I listed off in my mind all kinds of ridiculous questions, like, how will she know how to do her laundry in those

ancient dorm machines? Will she remember to eat, or will she live off vending machine snacks? Not having all the answers.... Disorienting.

And then we have the third phase of transition is REORIENTATION, a performing period in which the person or the group adopts a new identity. They're granted a new status, and they design new structures more appropriately suited to the emerging identity. Just you wait until Thanksgiving or Christmas break... no doubt, the young adult that will return to the nest will surprise you with who they have become!

We read stories in Scripture about this 3 part process, all the time, literally...

In the beginning, when humankind leave the garden... that's separation. As humanity trudges along their ongoing journey towards right relationship with God and each other, there are multiple phases of disorientation, saying goodbye to that which once was before reaching the promised land.

In many ways, that, my friends, is Ruth and Naomi's story.

The first phase of separation happens almost as soon as the story opens. We learn that by verse 5, all of the men in their lives are dead. The emotional trauma of the loss of so many husbands and sons must have been a terrifying crisis. The identity and status that previously defined Naomi, Ruth and Orpah – gone, in a flash. In the patriarchal and patrilineal world in which they lived, having no men left them vulnerable in the most frightening ways. Women had almost no means of independently supporting themselves economically and absolutely zero social standing.

So Naomi does the thing she thinks will save the daughters in law she has come to love... she tries to send them away so that they might attempt to piece something of their lives back together. Maybe their families of origin will help, it's worth a chance.

But Ruth will have none of it. So together, they enter into that liminal period in which they have to explore new identities and subvert norms in order to survive. We see this in the story when Ruth gives up her identity as a Moabite and attaches herself to Naomi, instead of returning to Moab.

And while it's not necessarily obvious to us in the text, this is a shocking development. Ruth leaves behind her family of origin, choosing instead a people who she had been raised to think of as enemies. And then in chapter two, Ruth begins to show up in the fields and glean behind the workers, which would have been considered completely out of bounds as an

unaccompanied woman, but she and Naomi needed to eat. So, to hell with the rules.

It happens again in chapter three, when Naomi creates a plan that subverts all kinds of norms, when she arranges for Ruth to meet Boaz on the threshing floor in an incredibly risky attempt to secure a future.

We of course know the rest of the story. In the third phase of reorientation, everything has worked out! Ruth meets Boaz, Ruth eventually becomes the great grandmother of King David and then becomes an important link in the lineage of Jesus. And we tend to focus on that ending. It's a fairy tale. Ruth, playing Cinderella, Naomi the fairy godmother and Boaz the Prince Charming, and everyone lives happily ever after.

But none of that would have been possible, but for the moment of separation.

After their men were taken from them, when they stood alone-together in the middle of the desert and Naomi asked, Where do we go from here? That's what we hear Ruth say "Where you will go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God."

Note that Ruth didn't give GPS coordinates to a specific location, but she did commit to HOW they will go... We go together.

This is our story, too... or at least the one we might write, when and if we are willing.

We have been through the first phase of transition... the separation.

I can't imagine a more accurate description of what the pandemic did to our lives.

Time stopped.

The days ran together.

Almost everything familiar to us: routines, habits, travel, relationships, school, work... they did not, they could not proceed. Including church.

We continued the work and ministry of Jesus... but did it in a different way. In order to keep the community safe, we figured out how to worship together, but apart. We began to partner with community organizations in ways that we hadn't before. We gathered virtually when it was appropriate, and in person with precautions, and found the flexibility to be a blessing.

This is liminality... unlearning old behaviors, challenging the status quo, experimenting. Taking risks and learning as we go.

Obviously, we are not quite yet at our fairy tale ending, we still have some things to work out. The pandemic is not exactly over. We are still in liminality. We are navigating when and where and who needs to wear a face mask, and what events are okay to hold or attend. When can we sing together? Are we ever going to go back to the way things were, (and do we even want to?) Where do we go from here?

There's a risk that in the future, church will be thought about only in terms of convenience. Consultants have begun to suggest that even if people are able to attend worship in person, they won't, because they might prefer to watch while still in their pajamas. They worry that through this pandemic, church has become a commodity we consume, rather than a community in which we participate.

Where do we go from here? This is where the text guides us, so that we might orient ourselves to take the next fateful step, even if we don't know exactly where we're going.

When we are in the midst of moments of great loss or danger or conflict or chaos it's difficult to see that there might be any new life ahead or (frankly) any feelings that are unlike the turmoil that we are experiencing in the present. Of course it's in those moments that it's most difficult to even think about where we go from here.

Reverend Aisha Brooks Johnson writes *this* "we have experienced a lot of death, grief and loss in the midst of a global pandemic, racial brokenness, economic disparity and political division. Can you imagine a world in which we took spiritual oaths, like the one we found in the book of Ruth? What if we resisted the temptation to fight or flee? In the face of grief, pain, and oppression..."

Dream with me for a moment... What if we took these kinds of vows with members of our human family, our church family, our chosen family? Imagine saying to one another, "Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God, My God. Your troubles will be my troubles, and your happiness, mine. By the grace of God, we are bound to one another."

It will be through this commitment to one another that we will get to wherever God is leading us in this season, together. May it be so. Amen.