

Cameron Barr

October 31, 2021

## God's Misery Budget

### Ruth 1

One way to read the book of Job - I'm not saying it is a good way to read the book of Job, just that readers inevitably turn to this - is to relativize Job's suffering. No matter how bad things get for me, one might think, but it could be worse. At least I'm not Job! The name of Job is often synonymous with those among us who have experienced deep, excessive, compounding suffering. These are the people in our lives who seem to absorb far more than their fair share of misfortune. They are the stories that make us cry out - Why? O Lord? Again? Don't you think it's someone else's turn? I'd like to think there's some logic to suffering, that it follows certain rules or cosmic law. Or at least a budget. In your prayers tonight, please advise the Lord not to spend all of his misery in one place.

But if you were worried that all this hardship might be wasted on men like Job, we can see God's commitment to gender parity in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Their suffering is much like Job's. The tragedies come in waves for Job, beginning on the margins of his existence and steadily reaching closer and closer to his person, losses intensifying in each round. First he loses his livelihood and wealth, then the loss of his wife and children, and finally he falls ill and faces death himself. Naomi's losses come in similar waves. First a famine strikes her homeland, forcing her to flee Judah for Moab with Elimelech, her husband, and her sons. So it's drought and hunger, then exile. Once they're settled in their new home, Naomi's husband dies and she is left with her sons Mahlon and Chilion. The young men take Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah, but both sons also die

unexpectedly. So Naomi is left in a new home in a foreign place, grieving losses of her husband and sons, having no means to earn a living for herself and now burdened with two equally helpless and grief stricken daughters-in-law. As in the tale of Job, the losses accrue from the outside of her life and steadily reach closer and closer to her person. “And she was left,” the text says twice, “and she was left.” After each loss, she was left more and more diminished. As the plot moves forward, all we know about Naomi is that she is as lost and alone as Job. Did God really have to spend all of heaven’s curses on one person?

Some people say they’re not going to let their suffering define their whole existence. Job, for example, resists all that he has lost in 38 chapters of argument, protest, and lamentation. His story concludes improbably with a happy ending - an unbelievable, even farcical conclusion. His wealth is magically restored. His family is revived. But Naomi doesn’t live in such a fairy land. If anything, Naomi actually leans more into the suffering that she’s experienced. She embraces it and befriends it. At the end of Chapter 1, after Ruth insists on staying but before they make their way to Bethlehem, in a twist on the old Jewish naming tradition, Naomi marks her losses with a change in her identity. It’s almost as if she is mocking God - mocking the sacred costumes that accompany God’s covenant. If Sarai and Abram changed their names as a sign of God’s goodness and presence, Naomi says she’ll change her name as a sign of God’s terrible absence. “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?”

The moral of her story is more about grit and perseverance; maybe even good humor in the face of her mounting losses. She is saved by the resilient insistence of her daughter-in-law, Ruth, to accompany her back to Judah. In one of the most musical hymns in biblical poetry, Ruth reflects on the covenant she shares

with Naomi. “Do not press me to leave you, or to turn back from following you,” Ruth insists. “Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well if even death parts you from me.” Naomi consents to Ruth’s accompaniment, and their faithfulness to a shared covenant with each other leads them to a new life back in Naomi’s original home.

Actually, that pledge of faithfulness to one another is what saves them in the end. Their deliverance takes place together, for both of them, or not at all for either of them. So while Job is a story about a solitary man left entirely alone by friends who never join him in suffering, the book of Ruth is about the promise of solidarity with each other. Ruth then is a powerful image for any community called into a shared covenant. In famine or exile, in pestilence or plague, in suffering, in grief, in loss. Throughout the pandemic. When misfortune settles in among us. When God is a spendthrift and blows the divine Misery Budget. Would you rather have three friends like Job? Or one friend like Naomi? Is such solidarity not the love of Christ? Love joining with us, God joined with humanity.

To me that is the value of belonging to our church. This is a place where we strive to live faithfully in the midst of a covenant, a promise to keep solidarity together, to walk through life together, to accept each other as we are. While most of our relationships with others are momentary or transactional, at United Church we seek to make a place for each person to belong. That does not mean that nothing is asked of us. Hardly so. We are here in the presence of God and so everything is asked of us. To be faithful to the covenant we share is to offer all that we can to the community that we share. Every part of our lives is touched and claimed by our calling into this covenant. Our spiritual lives are touched and claimed. Our relational lives are touched and claimed by the covenant we share. Our vocational lives. Our private financial lives. We approach the season of

stewardship this fall - and consider how to let our light shine, how to share our gifts with the covenant community where we all belong. It may help to remember what the church has been for us in the past year of solitude and dispersion. In this year when God well overspent on suffering. Here we are seeking to be Ruth to Naomi. Sticking together and walking with each other across such a great distance. Coming to be with one another even when it might be easier to go alone. Seeking to model with each other the very love of Christ.

Amen.