

Among the many things that mothers are and do mothers are in fact our first teachers. For better or worse we all learned things from our mothers. And, there's a large group present today for which this means – you are still teaching because a mother's work is never done regardless of the age of her children. Perhaps it was your mom who taught you to cook, or to read, or to love sewing or painting or crafting. Perhaps it was your mom who taught you to love shopping and hunting for a bargain, or maybe she taught you to play games or how to fold clothes or study for exams. In my house growing up if you wanted to do well on the test you studied with mom because she was going to ensure you knew word for word every single thing on the study guide and quiz you until it was perfect. If you wanted to watch tv while sorta kinda studying the paper then you would ask dad. If you wanted to do well at the science fair then you started early and built a model of the heart with mom like Bek did. If you wanted to procrastinate and forget about the science fair until the night before then you stayed up all night with dad making stuff up about mold. Moms are important. Or, if you dedicated your child to the Lord here at Carbondale then you've done exactly what Pastor said – it was you who taught your child what to laugh at and what to cry at. You modeled what it was to love your spouse and love the Lord. Mothers are teachers. For that reason we look at the life of a mother in Scripture to teach all of us listening today something about what it means to follow the Lord in difficult times.

But first we turn to John 6. Jesus had been teaching the people for some time and when it got late that evening He'd fed over 5,000 people with 5 small barley loaves of bread and 2 small fish. This had created quite the additional number of followers because who doesn't want to follow someone who is performing miracles and multiplying food! Jesus recognizes that people are following Him for what they could "get" from Him. They ask him for more

miracles. Basically this new found crowd of followers want Jesus to perform tricks on demand. It's fun to follow Jesus. It's the new cool thing to do. But, then Jesus tells them the true miracle – the true work of God is this, “to believe in the one [God] has sent.” Jesus then declares His is the bread of life and the people who believe in Him will never be hungry or thirsty again but will be forever satisfied. He lays out the plan of what He's come to do and He calls the people to a place of decision – what will you now believe because belief will require something of you. The crowd said – well, this is getting hard. In fact, the direct quote from the crowd in John 6:60 was, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” When the going gets tough and following Jesus isn't easy and isn't what you thought you signed up for, when all isn't perfect and when all the prayers aren't answered the way you thought they would be, and that whole take up your cross and follow me part of Jesus seems a bit heavier and more difficult than the hey cool He multiplied fish part and following Jesus is costing you more than you thought – that's when you realize following Jesus will require something from you. It will require you to make a daily decision. So,

From that time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” John 6:66-69

When things in life get hard do we turn away from the Lord or do we lean in that much more knowing that He has the words of life? And, for the best example of what this looks like we look to a mom in the Old Testament who has much to teach us this morning.

The book of Ruth introduces us to a family of 4. Naomi, her husband, Elimelech, and their 2 sons, Mahlon and Killion, were living in Bethlehem during the time when the Judges of

Israel ruled the land. If you're reading the whole Bible with us this year then you know from having just read the book of Judges that this was an insanely sinful time when evil was rampant and hardly anyone was looking out for others or planning ahead. So when a famine comes to the land the people were left without many choices. Elimelech chose to take his family to Moab to wait out this famine. Now the Moabites were descendants of Lot – of the famed Sodom and Gomorrah story – it's a terrible story about Lot and his daughters and the son they named Moab and you can read it in Genesis 19. Later the nation of Moab refused to help Israel as they left Egypt and then they did this whole hiring a prophet to curse Israel thing that backfired but still resulted in God saying – yeah, because you tried to curse my people and failed to offer basic hospitality to them when they traveled through your land you're not permitted in the assembly of my people for 10 generations. So Moab and Israel aren't enemies at this point but they aren't truly friends either. They're 2 very distinct and separate nations. The fact that Elimelech takes his family there is a sign of how truly bad things were in Judah – that you would trade one evil nation for another evil nation but at least they had food.

They get there and Elimelech dies leaving Naomi to finish raising her boys as a single mother. Her boys get married and then they die as well. Naomi has no husband and no children and no land in a time when there was no way for a woman to provide for herself. She's an immigrant woman with no benefits in Moab. Things are, to put it mildly, really hard for Naomi. She's a God-fearing woman who had trusted in the Lord, but we by passed fun quite a while ago and we're living in the valley of the shadow of death and there's not much to show for it. What she does have are 2 Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. She can't provide for herself or for them, but then she hears that the Lord has come to the

aid of His people and is providing food for them back in Judah. A mother who has lost everything but her hope that God will still provide is a force to be reckoned with.

What will happen when we return to Bethlehem? I don't know, I can hear Naomi saying, but I heard God is providing there. Where will we live? I don't know, I just know that God is providing. How will we get there? I guess we'll walk? I just know that I've heard that God is doing something miraculous in Bethlehem so we can't stay here. And, like those who had come before her she sets out to leave one place to go to another based solely on the word she'd heard from the Lord. Abraham had heard a voice calling him to leave his home with no other direction but with a promise that the Lord would show him where to stop. Joseph was sold into slavery, falsely accused and thrown into prison, and yet held fast to the dream God had given him as a teenager because when the word of the Lord comes to you you hold onto it even in a distant land. Moses had led his people for 40 years with no end of the journey in sight but with the promise that God's presence would go with him. Joshua led the people into new territory and places they'd never been before because the word of the Lord had come to him and said be courageous and go take the land. So, when Naomi hears in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of His people she knows the word of the Lord can be trusted. She needs no further proof, needs no other evidence, needs no other information, asks no further questions. The Lord has spoken, the word of the Lord has reached me all the way in a foreign land, the voice of God who called and spoke to our forefathers in the past has reached me here in this desolate, difficult place. Surrounded by death and tragedy, broken dreams, and hopelessness Naomi gets word that the Lord is providing and that's enough. She takes Orpah and Ruth and leaves the place of despair and sets out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah with nothing more than

a promise in her heart and the assurance of the word that had come to her in Moab – the Lord is still providing.

The three of them set out for Judah and I can only imagine how difficult the journey was for women traveling alone. The scripture tells us nothing about any servants or fellow travelers. We're told only of these three women. Perhaps as they set out they were playing classic road trip games – slug bug, and alphabet games from billboards along the interstate. Maybe they're singing the greatest hits from the days of Joshua. I don't know. But the further they traveled the less fun the trip became and the more Naomi realizes what she's asking of them – to leave everything they've ever known. Having left her own homeland 10 plus years before she knows the difficulty that lies before Orpah and Ruth. Starting over in a new country, new culture, new challenges. She knows it's not going to be easy for them. She'd come with her family, but they were arriving with no bright future. Yes, things were hard in Moab with no husband and no children, but things are about to get really difficult. Naomi then says to her daughters-in-law – go back. Go back to your own mothers. I'm your mother-in-law but go back to your mother. She'll care for you and help you. You'll find new husbands and new providers. Turn back now and go home. They wept together for a while but pledged to stay with Naomi. They thought through all they would be giving up and leaving behind. They counted the cost. They'd go on to Judah. But, Naomi pressed them again making sure they understood exactly what they were in for – staying with me is no guarantee of a future. I'm not having any more children and even if I did today you're not going to wait for them to grow up to marry them because you'll then be too old to have children and you'll be no better off then than you are now. You'll still be husbandless and childless in a culture that relies on those relationships to sustain you. Besides, Naomi says,

can't you see that the Lord's hand has gone out against me? This time Orpah decides it's too hard a thing to go on to Bethlehem and so she makes a decision and leaves. There's no judgment here, no shame for Orpah and the choice she makes. But, it's a reminder to us all that choices must often be made in life – and usually it's a crisis point in our life when the most important ones come to us.

The word of the Lord comes to us in places of both desolation and abundance and in either case initially we're determined to follow what He's spoken and put in our heart to do. But, then comes someone who says – have you really considered how difficult that's going to be? I know God called you to be a missionary at kids camp but I don't think you'd really thought that through what that would require of you as an adult. I know God asked you to foster children and open your home but did you really think about how difficult that would be? I know you thought God was calling you to take that leap of faith and start your own business, but that's before we knew there was going to be a pandemic and inflation and the economy was going to turn and maybe God didn't see that coming either when He told you now is the time. Maybe you should reconsider.

Or maybe the Lord is calling you today to make a decision to truly follow Him – to go all in in faith – but turns out following Jesus is harder than following Naomi to Judah. The road He's gonna take you down is scarier than the road to Bethlehem. For the crowd in John 6 when it required something of them they just stopped. When Orpah thought it through it was time to turn back. So, Naomi turns to Ruth – will you leave me too?

And, like Peter years later Ruth responds, "Where else would I go?"

"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there be buried. May the Lord

deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”

Ruth 1:16-17

It's a beautiful portrait of the call of discipleship. You can turn back now or you can press forward into all that God has for you – all that God is calling you to do. Yes, it will cost you something but the reward will be worth it.

Ruth declares if you're going then I'm going for where else would I go? Your way offers a chance at new life.

Peter declares if you're asking us to go with you Lord then I'm all in for where else would I go? You have the words of eternal life.

We have the opportunity today to declare – if you're asking Lord, then the answer is yes, and I'll go where you're going for where else would I go? You're offering life and life to the full and eternal life in your presence after that. Which means for us not even death will separate us from the One we're choosing to follow.

Ruth's choice wasn't flippant, it wasn't easy, it wasn't spontaneous. Three times she affirmed she was going with Naomi. Three times she counted the cost. Three times she thought through all she would be giving up – her home, her plans, her own dreams of the future, her family, her culture, her way of life. She would become a foreigner in a foreign land. She would abandon and turn away from the false gods of Moab and embrace the One True Holy God of Naomi and the people of Israel. The One who was providing. She counted the cost and made the most important decision of her life. She was all in now. She was following Naomi no matter what. **“When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem.” Ruth 1:18-19**

They arrived in town just as the barley festival was beginning. There was reason to celebrate. There was food in Bethlehem again – the famine was over. Bethlehem means House of Bread and once again it lived up to its name. From there we can see the rest of the story. Ruth meets Boaz who is a close relative of her father-in-laws. He owns the land where she goes to pick up leftover crops. He redeems the land that would have belonged to Elimelech, restores Naomi's place in society, revives Ruth's broken heart, and receives them into his home when he marries Ruth. The book of Ruth ends by telling us how the story continued from there – Ruth and Boaz were the parents of Obed. Obed became the father of Jesse and Jesse was the father of David. And David, we know, is anointed to be king over Israel. The book of Matthew picks up the story to let us know that David's line continued – through exile and silence, waiting and speculation until back in that same little town of Bethlehem, the House of Bread, another young couple forged from a difficult set of circumstances, Mary and Joseph became the parents of Jesus, who is called the Christ. And this is the same Jesus who in John 6 declared to the crowd, **“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”**

John 6:35 In a famine, in a foreign land, a difficult place, it matters not when you've made the choice to follow Jesus. Jesus appears to you, in a dry place, a place of despair, a place of tears and mourning, a place of hunger and need and offers himself and promises you'll never want again. But, like Ruth a choice must be made. Like Peter you must resolve in your heart – I'll go no where else but to Jesus regardless of the circumstances that are present around me. For the Bread of Life, Jesus, is offering eternal life.

Now remember, Mothers are teachers and these two mothers have taught us a few things this morning. Let's review.

Remember you aren't the author of your own story. God is.

From incredible loss comes lasting legacy. Imagine if Naomi had decided to curse God and shrivel up and die at the beginning. It would be a foot note regarding the famine. There was a famine and a family of 4 fled to Moab and all died over the course of 10 years. What if Naomi had believed that while God might still be providing for some people He won't provide for me. What if she'd ignored the word of the Lord? Imagine if Ruth had given up on the road to Judah and hadn't continued. What if Naomi had decided the story stopped when she arrived in Bethlehem bitter and full of heartbreak without ever opening her heart to future possibilities? What if Ruth had said I'll just sit here and die with you Naomi instead of making her way to the fields? The point is when they arrived in Bethlehem their story was still just getting started. You don't decide when the story is over – God does.

Don't think your story is over and there's nothing more for you because you may only be in the middle of the story that God is writing with your life and the best may yet still be ahead.

Don't stop listening for the word of God to come to you.

Wherever you are – in a season of loss or a season of plenty are you listening for the word of the Lord? Many times in the Scripture God uses famine to position His people in just the right place. If there hadn't been a famine the family wouldn't have moved to Moab. If they hadn't moved to Moab they wouldn't have found Ruth. If Ruth hadn't returned to Judah the entire line of Jesus would have looked different. Did God cause all those tragedies to happen? No, but did God use all those circumstances to position His people into the right places? Yes. Don't despise the crisis or the difficult or painful moments in your life, but instead listen for the word of the Lord to come to you even in that moment. As the song

says – even when we can't see it He's working. Hold on to the word of the Lord, listen for the word of the Lord, and then obey the word of the Lord.

Take a step of faith to follow the Lord wherever He is calling you.

Following Jesus will always require something of us. It required something of Ruth, but she was willing to give up everything to follow Naomi. It required something of the people following Jesus, but not all were willing to surrender everything to follow Him. It is not without reward, but to be clear there is a cost to follow Jesus. If it were easy the larger group of those who called themselves disciple in John 6 would have continued to follow Jesus. If it were easy to step out in faith in the new direction that God is calling you then Orpah would have followed all the way to Judah too. Whether or not it will be easy is the wrong question. Will following be the obedient or disobedient response – is one question. Will it be worth it – is perhaps another one. But, easy, is not the determining factor for whether or not you should take a step of faith to follow the Lord this morning. I think if you asked Ruth today – was it easy she would say no. Would she do it again, my guess is she would answer yes because it was so worth it to be part of the legacy of Jesus Christ.

What is Jesus asking of you today? To take that initial step to surrender your life and believe in the One who sent Him to earth to die on the cross and raise Him up again three days later? Is He asking you to lay down something in surrender? To obey by taking a new step in a new direction by faith? To trust Him in greater ways for your marriage, your children, your finances, your career? What's the question the Lord is asking you today? Will you be obedient or disobedient? In the years to come will you look back on this Mother's Day and think – it wasn't easy but it was worth it to follow the Lord or will you think it cost me so much more to disobey.

Look again at your current situation through the lens of Heaven.

When we lose sight that this life is not all there is we lose sight of an important perspective.

You see Naomi heard while in a distant land that God had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them, but it was so much larger than that – it was about positioning people for a future day and future provision. For in that same place, Bethlehem, God would come to the aid of His people once more centuries later by providing a Savior to deliver them from lack for all who would believe. In our own stories we should always stop to ask where Jesus might still appear? From the lens of Heaven what might God be up to? What is He planning? Where is He about to reveal Himself to you?

This morning, learn some lessons from Naomi and Ruth and like them pledge today that even in a place of pain, a season of difficulty or even a time of great blessing you'll still listen for the word of the Lord, you'll commit to go wherever He leads, and you'll look to Jesus to reveal Himself in your midst.

Let's pray.