

God in the Messiness

Gathering

*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle. This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of preparation. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

Gathering

We continue our preparations for Christmas and our exploration of the women who appear in Matthew's version of Jesus' family tree.

Over the last two weeks, we have met Tamar and Rahab. Today we meet Ruth. Ruth has a whole book of the Hebrew Bible to herself, but I wonder how much we know about her story...

Light Candle

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

Acknowledgement of Country

As we look upon the hills and valleys, the oceans and rivers of this place, we see the love poured out upon this Land by those who have cared for it since time beyond measure.

This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here.

We honour those who have gone before and those who are yet to come.

May we be mindful of the calling God places on all humanity to care for Creation.

May we take our lead from the Wadi Wadi People of the Dharawal Nation, whose stories are entwined with the stewarding of this place.

May we learn from them and walk with them.

Advent Candles

As we prepare for the celebrations, we tell an ancient story - we are reminded of how it speaks to us from generation to generation.

We come to this circle of light to share in its promise.



She Is a Tree of Life to Them

by Frank Wesley, from the book *Frank Wesley: Exploring Faith with a Brush* by Naomi Wray, Pace Publishers NZ. Used by permission.

The first flame banishes darkness, inviting us to hope.
The second flame is to bring balance and the promise of harmony and peace.
The third flame is to bring delight and rejoicing.

This is the candle of joy.

Let us honour the Light!

Call to Worship

Let us gather around the word,
let us listen to holy songs,
songs of justice and hope.

Let our souls magnify the Lord.

Let us speak into the world the good news of God
and of the renewing of all that is broken.

Let our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour.

Let us dare believe in the songs of the faithful women
who have spoken hope into the world.

For the mighty One has done great things.

Let us join the singing,
setting free justice in the world
and light in the darkness,

for holy is God's name.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, Resources for 4 December 22, p.27

Sing - Here in This Place (TIS 474)

We sing a song of invitation and praise, of anticipation and celebration

Here in this place new light is streaming,
now is the darkness vanished away,
see, in this space, our fears and our
dreamings,
brought here to you in the light of this day.
Gather us in, the lost and forsaken;
gather us in, the blind and the lame;
call to us now, and we shall awaken,
we shall arise at the sound of our name.

We are the young, our lives are a mystery;
we are the old, who yearn for your face;
we have been sung throughout all of
history,
called to be light to the whole human race.
Gather us in, the rich and the haughty,
gather us in, the proud and the strong;
give us a heart so meek and so lowly,
give us the courage to enter the song.

Here we will take of wine and the water,
here we will take the bread of new birth,
here you shall call your sons and your
daughters,
call us anew to be salt of the earth.
Give us to drink the wine of compassion,
give us to eat the bread that is you;
nourish us well and teach us to fashion
lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

Not in the dark of buildings confining,
not in some heaven light years away,
but here in this space, the new light is
shining,
now is the kingdom, now is the day.
Gather us in, and hold us forever;
gather us in, and make us your own;
gather us in, all peoples together,
fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

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Prayer

God of cosmic contradictions,
you are distant and unfathomably strange
AND you are one of us,
fellow-traveller in all the ups and downs of life.
You are pure and incapable of doing wrong
AND you are here with us,
caught up in the messiness of life, and its sorrows.
You are complete, needing nothing from us
AND you reach out to us in love,
hoping that we will love you in return.
What are we to make of the ancient stories that are supposed to help us understand you
and yet leave us more confused than ever
with all the different pictures that they paint?
Stories of human greatness and stupidity;
stories of women and men who are just as flawed and fallible as we are - and just as
confused;
stories of hope and stories of despair.
Loving God, we thank you that their stories are our story
and that you figure in them all.
We are grateful for the unlikely heroes
and the unnoticed heroines that we meet in the stories of our faith.
If you cared about them, then surely you care about us too.
If you were able to use them, then perhaps you can use us too
to make a difference in the world;
to bring about your purposes of good.
Our brains hurt when we try to understand these things;
our words run out when we try to explain them.
So, help us for a moment or two
to stop thinking,
to stop speaking,
and simply to be in your presence...
shivering in the mystery of your greatness...
relaxing into the warmth of your embrace.
Silence
Be with us as you were with your people in the past;
do great things with us
and in spite of us
as you did with and in spite of them. Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, Resources for 27 November 22, p.27

Listening for God's Voice

Intro to readings

As I mentioned earlier, Ruth has a whole book of the Hebrew Bible to herself!
Many of us will be familiar with the first part of her story.
Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, is a widow living in a foreign land, Moab.
Ruth and Oprah are married to Naomi's sons and, tragically, both the sons died.
So the women are left without men to protect them - remember this is a patriarchal society.
The women are left unprotected.

Naomi had originally travelled to Moab from Bethlehem, so she decides to return home where she has relatives who could take care of her.

She suggests that her daughters-in-law stay in their homeland and re-marry.

Orpah decides to stay.

But Ruth makes her commitment to Naomi and to Naomi's God:

"Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay.

Your people will be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

So Naomi and Ruth return to Naomi's home town in Bethlehem.

They had no money, no partners, no children, but Naomi had friends and relatives there.

They arrived in the town at the start of the barley harvest.

Jewish law said that travellers and poor people were allowed to follow the reapers in the fields and to pick up any ears of grain that had been dropped. This was called gleaning.

The law also said that the grain around the edges of the field was to be left for the gleaners.

When they had found somewhere to stay Naomi sent Ruth, a stranger to the town, to glean corn in the fields surrounding Bethlehem.

As Ruth worked in one of the fields, the owner of the field arrived. His name was Boaz and he was a relative of Naomi. Boaz notice Ruth gleaning in the fields and asked his servant who was in charge of the reapers who she was and what family she belonged to (Ruth 2:5).

The servant told him that she is the woman who came back from Moab with Naomi, that she had asked to glean in this field and she had been there since early morning.

Boaz then spoke with Ruth and told her that she could stay in his fields and to stay close to the women who were reaping for him. He told his young men to leave her alone, and he told her she could help herself to water from his water pots.

Ruth asked him why he was helping her. To which he replied that he had heard her story and the way she had cared for Naomi.

"May the God of Israel, under whose protection you have come for shelter, reward you." (Ruth 2:12)

So Boaz looked out for Ruth and made sure his workers left enough grain for her to collect.

When Ruth got home, she told Naomi what had happened and that Boaz had told her to stay in his fields until the end of the harvest. Naomi told Ruth that Boaz was her relative, and she thanked God for being kind to them.

Ruth stayed gleaning in the fields belonging to Boaz until the end of the barley and the wheat harvests.

In the meantime, Naomi had been thinking...

What she and Ruth really needed was security, and security within Hebrew culture meant a man to care for them. Either of them could have re-married.... there were wider family members who had a duty to care for them, but if Ruth remarried, she was young enough to have children and Naomi could become a grandmother.

So let's listen to Naomi's plan and what happens next...

Reading: Ruth 3:1-18; 4:13-17

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ²Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. ³Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

⁴When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.’ ⁵She said to her, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’

⁶ So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. ⁷When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. ⁸At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! ⁹He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.’ ¹⁰He said, ‘May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹And now, my daughter, do not be afraid; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. ¹²But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. ¹³Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.’

¹⁴ So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognise another; for he said, ‘It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor.’

¹⁵Then he said, ‘Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.’ So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city.

¹⁶She came to her mother-in-law, who said, ‘How did things go with you, my daughter?’ Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷saying, ‘He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, “Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”’

¹⁸She replied, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.’

4 ¹³ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.’ ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Reading: Luke 1:46-56

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God!

Video - My Soul Magnifies The Lord

<https://vimeo.com/user112495940>

As we reflect on Mary's song, I want to play you a contemporary version. Written by Glen Powell, and performed by 4 women from the UCA, Glen says this: Mary wasn't meek and mild and she didn't bring her son up to be meek and mild either. Mary's song is a rebel song, with God on the side of the poor and oppressed.

Reflection

Let's pray,

Ancient of Days, as you have moved amongst our ancestors, move amongst us now.

In all our messiness, may we know your presence.

And as we ponder our own life decisions, give us courage and wisdom, that whatever we choose will bring your light and love to the world. Amen.

How many of us have heard this part of Ruth's story?

Sure - we have heard the part where she pledges her life's commitment to her mother-in-law, Naomi - but what about this part?

And now that we have heard it, what do we do with it?

So let's take a step back a bit.

Over the last few weeks, we have been exploring some of the lesser known parts of Jesus' ancestral line, accounts of which are found in both Matthew and Luke.

Matthew, in particular, names a number of women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba [next week]) but they are there in Luke's account too - just a bit more hidden.

The thing is, these are not women who are "pure" or "virgins" as Luke would have us believe about Mary. These are not even women who have led simple or uncomplicated lives. These are women who have had to use their initiative, who have had to be courageous, who have risked everything, to provide for themselves and their families.

On first glance, Ruth is a "safe" inclusion. While Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite, her commitment to Naomi and Naomi's people is held up as an example of exceptional loyalty.

"Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay.

Your people will be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

But what about chapter 3?! The lectionary skips over it, and we won't have heard about it at Sunday School (or even youth group!). But here, like Tamar and Rahab, Ruth is asked to take a risk in order to secure her protection and that of her mother-in-law.

And, like Tamar, on one reading, she manipulates the man in question, Boaz, to get what she needs. But that all depends on your perspective.

Remember, we cannot judge these women based on our western, 21st century assumptions and sensibilities about morality and sexuality.

Naomi has relatives who were supposed to look after her, but clearly none of them had stepped up except Boaz, who at least let them glean in his fields.

Naomi convinces Ruth to do what she had to do to catch Boaz' attention. Ruth puts on her finest clothes and nicest perfume and then, after Boaz has gone to bed after a hard day's work and a good feed, she gets "under Boaz' blanket" (Ruth 3:4).

Or some translations use the term, "lies at his feet". It is undoubtedly a euphemism.

Ruth takes a huge risk - and she and Naomi know that. If Boaz reacts badly, there is every possibility that they would both be left without anyone to provide for them. If Boaz had been a less considerate man, or if Ruth had become pregnant and Boaz refused to marry her, they would have no means left to them to provide for themselves.

Thankfully, Boaz responds as Naomi had hoped he would.

The Scriptures say that he was initially "startled" when he discovered Ruth in his bed - a masterful understatement, perhaps?!

But then he allows her to stay and sends her home early in the morning with more food and commitment to do what was necessary to enable them to marry.

And he is as good as his word: he checks with Naomi's other relatives and agrees to marry her. Their child, Obed, who is brought up by Naomi, is the grandfather of David (Ruth 4:22), the great king.

It is messy, isn't it?

So what do we do with these stories, these parts of the Scriptures?

Loyalty, manipulation, scheming, courage, risk-taking. Let alone the sexual elements of the stories.

Are these the kinds of behaviour we should condone? After all, here they are, held in the Scriptures, and even more so, highlighted in the family line of Jesus (not all the women, the mothers in the family line are explicitly named).

The thing is:

Jesus is placed in the middle of all this messiness.

God enters all this messiness.

In other words, "Incarnation... means becoming caught up in all the uncomfortable messiness of human sexuality and relationships, and could not have happened without the courage and commitment of many women - not just Mary - willing to risk their lives and reputations for the sake of future generations of God's people."¹

That is, perhaps what we take from this is not that the behaviour and goings-on are ideal, but that this is what life is sometimes, and that it is into all this that God comes, it is through all this that God brings about God's purposes for the world, perhaps even it is in spite of all this that God continues to draw near to us and to invite us into God's way of healing, hope and love.

Alongside Ruth's story today, is Mary's song of praise.

¹ *Spill The Beans*, Issue 45, Resources for 11 December 2022, p.21

Mary reminds us of God's purpose for God's creation, reminds us of what God has already done and is doing in the world.

In choosing to go with the circumstances she finds herself in, she commits herself to the God she praises and to the way she proclaims. It is hugely risky for her, and her fiancé. But this child will remind his community, and all of us, of the way God intended for God's creation - a way that ensures the hungry are fed and the lowly are lifted up (Luke 1:53), that scatters the proud (Luke 1:51), empties the rich (Luke 1:53) and brings down those who think they are powerful (Luke 1:52).

In other words, the old hierarchies are reversed: the rich and powerful ones will be brought down and the poor, invisible, marginalised ones, like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary herself, will take centre stage, essential to the fulfilment of God's plans and the ones to whom the promise of hope is given.

So maybe there are stories in our own families that we have struggled to come to terms with.

Maybe there have been circumstances in our own lives that we are not proud of. But they are what they are.

And the stories of these women might suggest to us that even in the midst of the messiness, God is with us. Even in the midst of the mess and struggle and the things we get wrong or the ways we try to manipulate the world to suit us, even in all that, God is calling us, drawing us, and making a way with us towards the vision of a world that cares for the hungry and hurting, that offers hope to those who despair, that brings peace, joy and love in ways that transform us in the love of our Creator.

Reflective Prayer

If the harvest had not failed

and Naomi and her boys had stayed at home...

If the doctors in Moab had been able to help

and one of those men had got better...

If Ruth had said 'OK' like Orpah did

when Naomi told her to turn back...

If Ruth had said 'No' like any sensible woman would have done when Naomi explained her plan....

If Boaz had said 'No' when Ruth made her bold proposal...

If Mary had said 'No' when Gabriel told her what God has in mind...

If just one of the links in the chain had been broken,

then Jesus might never have been born,

or at least not in the right place at the right time,

into a family with royal connections

and some extraordinary people in its past.

But where does that take us, unfathomable God, and what does it tell us about you?

Are we to praise you for controlling the forces of nature and manipulating our choices so that everything goes as you have planned?

Or do we wonder and praise you all the more for not stepping in and taking over,

but letting nature take her course and people make their choices,

and sticking with us whatever the consequences may be?

Gracious, life-giving, risk-taking God,

as you have thrown in your lot with us

so may we put our trust unreservedly in you,

and find in the trusting that you are true. Amen.

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Responding

Sing - In Full Flight (Seasons 6-22)

This song will accompany us through the Advent Season - it invites us to be real about the world around us and to trust that in God's love and grace, we too can soar.

We can't quite see what tomorrow will offer.

Nothing's that clear, so little in place.
Yet, "All shall be well," the wise lady whispers;
all shall be well, a goodness to trace.

*Bird in full flight, bird on the wing.
Soaring above, beyond on the run.
Journeys of change, vistas of wonder.
Leading to life through the heart of the One.*

Wonders of birth, pained separations.
Myst'ries too deep, too hard to explain.
Beauty and hope in each new day
dawning,

the presence of joy at play once again.

Bird in full flight...

Ev'ry day moments alive to love's splendour.

Why turn aside for a heaven above?
God in the laugh, the cry and the gesture,
grace in the now, peace through the dove.

Bird in full flight...

We who are called to live out Love's passion.

Those who set out on the journey of faith;
need look to the skies only to fashion
the daring of birds, bold courses they take.

Bird in full flight...

© 2006 Sean Gilbert and Jill Scott, ReCall Music

Prayer for Others (Marion Haigh)

God of unlikely saints and unsung heroines,
we want to hear their stories
and let their songs be sung.

What a comfort it is to know that your grace extends to everyone,
the ones who fit, and the ones who don't.

Thank you that there is a place for all of us in your plan.

We celebrate exceptional women like Ruth and Mary,
who risked their lives and their reputations to do what they knew was right.

We give thanks for quiet, decent men, like Boaz and Joseph,
who would not have dreamt of exploiting their vulnerability.

We remember good, ordinary women, like Orpah,
too easily forgotten.

She did what most of us would have done in her place -
and that took courage too.

All too often we fail to realise that bringing Your kingdom into being,
creating a different kind of world -

one in which the hungry are fed,

the invisible ones are seen,

the silent ones are heard

involves the most unlikely

those who we might push aside and discount.

Loving God,

we pray for those who are hungry right now,
and cannot afford the food they need.

We pray for those who have had to leave home in order to survive
and instead of being praised for their courage
are rejected and maligned.

We pray for those who face the daily struggle of mental illness;
those who endure ongoing pain;

We pray for people,
including some we know,
perhaps even ourselves,
who are dealing with the pain of bereavement
and at the same time having to make massive decisions about the future.

And we hold before you, quietly, the people and places and issues that most concern us:

Silence

God of life and love and joy,
give us the kind of courage and loyalty
that Ruth and Orpah had
to follow the path you call us to.

May we be ready to choose the costly, life-giving way of love.
Amen.

Holy Communion

If you would like to share in Communion and are unable to join with us in-person, please let Rev Kath or Rhonda Back know. We would love to bring Communion to you in your home at a time that suits you.

Offering

As we have received, so we consider our response...

As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money - either here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are generous with our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently because we have encountered the living Christ.

God of all times and seasons,
all places and the people who find themselves living there,
we steal a moment from the hustle-bustle of our lives to reflect on where we are today and how we got here;
all the twists and turns,
highs and lows,
good choices and bad ones
and random accidents of fate
that have made us the people we are, living and believing as we do.

So much that we could not have predicted,
much that we would not have chosen,
but in all of it you have been there,
not mapping out our path
but walking it with us and making the journey worthwhile.
The gifts that we bring today are a token of our willingness
and our joyful commitment to continuing that journey with you,
wherever it may lead us
and however long it takes. Amen.

Sending

Sing - Companions on the Journey

We go singing our song of affirmation of one another and the hope and love we know in the God we serve.

*We are companions on the journey,
breaking bread and sharing life;
and in the love we bear is the hope we share*

*for we believe in the love of our God,
we believe in the love of our God.*

No longer strangers to each other,
no longer strangers in God's house;
we are fed and we are nourished
by the strength of those who care,

by the strength of those who care.

We are companions on the journey...

We have been gifted with each other,
and we are called by the Word of the Lord:
to act with justice, to love tenderly,
and to walk humbly with our God,
to walk humbly with our God.

We are companions on the journey...
(repeat)

Words and Music: Carey Landry

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Sending and Blessing

As we remember Ruth and Mary

let us follow their example

and remember our place in the story of God.

May we realise too the impact of our faith on ourselves
and the world.

Know God's blessing in your days,

in your actions,

in your words.

The blessing of God be with you this day and every day.

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Rev Kath Merrifield

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