

Come Home
Ruth 1:1-22, Psalm 84:1-12

Introduction

I would like to invite you to imagine one thing, before we jump into today's bible story. Please think about the word "home." When you think about home, what kind of scene comes to your mind? "Where are you? What do you see? What do you hear?" "The wooded glen, the apple tree, the winding gravel road that leads me home; the salty air, the sparkling sea, these things are in my blood. The red and gold of maple trees, the bounty of the harvest in the fall, the winter snows, the springtime breeze, these things are in my blood - they call to me. Come home, come home, I can hear them calling me by name. Come home, come home. I will never truly go away." This is a beautiful song I learned from Damaris' choir. When I sang this song, I thought that some of Canadians might recall this kind of image, when they think about home. What else can we imagine? Some of you might imagine that you are sitting on a couch, watching a Netflix with a glass of beer, and saying, "It was such a long day. Finally, I am home."

I lived as an international student or international student's wife for 8 years. In my shelf, there is a pile of documents that is related to our visa status. That is one of things that I would carry when I hear a fire alarm because I know that immigration paper work is so exhausting. Pablo and I should always be alert the expiration date of our visa. When I get frustrated with this, I would say, "I want to go back home. No one questions about my status there." For me, home is like a safe place where I have a full right to exist without being questioned of who I am.

These days, one of the biggest issues in South Korea is a debate whether Korean government should accept more than 500 of Yemeni asylum-seekers or not. I was watching internet news and saw a picture. One asylum-seeker was watching news about his home country. Bombs were exploding and a town was consumed with fire. For some, the image of home might be associated with war, famine, loss, oppression, and violence. I wish their home could have remained as a beautiful place, but that is the reality they have to face. Now they are seeking for a new shelter.

Home is not only a physical space or geographical location. I spent three days with my mom before she passed away. When she woke up with pain, she saw the landscape and spring

flowers outside the hospital's window and said, "This is so beautiful. Heaven would be much more beautiful than this." She was looking for an eternal home. The Hebrew word translated as home means a place where one can find rest and a sense of security. Whether it is a physical space or a spiritual comfort, I believe everyone wants and needs a home.

Emptiness

In today's passage, we encounter three women who are looking for a home. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpha and Ruth. They experienced a terrible tragedy in their lives. They all lost their husbands. Naomi's lamentation expresses deep grief and pain of a widow who lost two sons. Naomi refuses to be called by her name, which means beautiful and lovely. She asked people to call her Mara that means bitter. "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?" It is not necessary to interpret this verse as if God was the one who brought affliction to her, but Naomi felt like that. It also echoes the despair of people who experience great loss. As we lose our job, health, home, and precious people, we feel like life is bitter and empty.

There are also people who cannot just remain in grief. The three women had to survive. It seems like they had difficulty in finding food in Moab where they lived. When Naomi heard that they might find some food in Israel, which is her hometown, she decided to go back. However, she felt sorry for Orpha and Ruth who are Moabites, and asked them to return their home and find another husbands. I believe it was the best thing that Naomi could offer her daughters-in-law. So, Orpha decided to go back her home. No one can blame Orpha's decision. Living as a widow and even caring for an old mother-in-law in a foreign land at that time was much more difficult than today. Hardship caused by their ethnicity, gender, religion, and marital status was waiting for them. However, Ruth insisted to follow Naomi. This leaves us with wondering why she chose to follow Naomi. Anyway, Naomi and Ruth, two hungry widows are standing on the border of a town called Bethlehem. Interestingly, Bethlehem means the house of bread, and it was the season of harvest. They are looking at the yellow field of ripen barley and hoping to find a new shelter. Would they survive?

Finding a Home

Ruth chapter 2 through 4 tells us an interesting story. Ruth went out to find some food. She happened to glean at a field of a generous man, Boaz. This plot is very similar to a Korean Drama. A poor girl and a rich man. Anyway, Boaz did her a favor. He allowed Ruth to glean in his field, gave some water to drink, and protected her from danger. As a result, Ruth went back to Naomi with 23 liter of barley. I don't know how she carried it. When Naomi heard this story from Ruth, Naomi plans a project called "Finding a home for Ruth and Naomi." Naomi knew that Boaz was her close relative, especially kinsman-redeemer. According to the Israel law, Leviticus 25, "If someone sells a house or a piece of property to pay a debt, there is a right of redemption, and the nearest relative at the time is bound to buy back that which was sold and thus restore the possession of the family." A kinsman-redeemer also has a responsibility for a dead man's widow. Long story short! Boaz and Ruth married. Mission accomplished. So, it seems like Ruth and Naomi found a home and they lived happily ever after. So, marriage with a generous rich man is the answer! I should have read this story earlier. Bummer! If this is the answer that the Bible is teaching us, I would rather watch a Korean Drama than reading it. Actually, it is true in the ancient patriarchal society that women can find security through marriage. Naomi sincerely wanted to help her daughter-in-law to find security and happiness, and the plan worked well. However, the story goes beyond this Korean Drama plot.

Hesed

There is a keyword that penetrates the book of Ruth and it is Hesed in Hebrew. Hesed refers to an extraordinary act of self-giving. In the English bible, it was translated as steadfast love, devotion, faithfulness, favor, kindness, loyalty, or mercy. Psalm 23 describes God as a shepherd, and said "Surely goodness and Hesed will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. According to an Old Testament scholar, John Goldingay, he suggests "commitment" as a translation of Hesed.

In the book of Ruth, Hesed appears for the first time in the chapter one as it describes how Ruth loved her family members. Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "May the Lord show Hesed to you, as you have shown Hesed to your husband and to me." On the way to Israel, Ruth continues her Hesed toward Naomi as she decided to follow Naomi and cross the border

together in spite of all the hardships waiting for her. Even though Naomi persuaded her to go back home, Ruth said, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” With love and compassion toward Naomi, Ruth decided to cross the border of ethnicity, culture, and religion and choose to be vulnerable. She committed herself to Naomi, and even to Naomi’s God whom she does not know well.

When Naomi came back to Bethlehem, it was big news. Boaz also heard about the story how Ruth committed herself to her family and God. For this reason, when Ruth asked him why he gives her a favor, he answered: “May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” Boaz believed that the God of Israel whom he serves is the God of Hesed who wants to cover those who are looking for a home with God’s wings. Boaz practiced what God wanted to do toward Ruth and Naomi.

Just a few days ago, at the gate of Bethlehem, Naomi lamented for her devastating losses and emptiness. “Oh Lord, You are killing me!” Now, when she saw 23 liter of barley bag that Ruth brought, she remembered the God of Hesed. She said, “Blessed be he by the Lord, whose Hesed has not forsaken the living or the dead!” There was a hidden player in this story. It was the God of Hesed.

Characteristic of God

So, this romantic story with happy ending is not just telling us that marriage with a rich man is the answer. This story invites us to meditate on the characteristic of God. Who is God? From the time that world was created, with affluent love, God committed Godself to all creatures. God wants to provide everyone a home and experience the fullness of God. “Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar.” This is God that the scripture reveals.

Nevertheless, we live in a narrative of this world, the narrative of scarcity. The law of scarcity, which is the basic concept of Economics, already captured our mind. Resources are limited. Not everyone can have enough. Sometimes this idea creates fear in us. If they come

here, we will lose our job. If they settle down here, we will lose what we are enjoying now. As I watch Korean news regarding Yemeni asylum-seekers, I was saddened because majority of Koreans including Christians refuse to accept refuge to Korea. More than half millions of people filed a petition to the president saying, we don't want refugees. Their fear became hatred, and the border is shutting down. You may well know that this is not only happening in Korea. Huge number of people is at the gate of house of bread. Would they survive? Would they find a home?

Come home

In the Jewish tradition, the book of Ruth is read during Shavout, the Feast of Weeks in May, which is connected with the acceptance of Torah by the Jewish children. The festival reminded them of the covenantal relationship with God. They remembered how God saved them as they lived as foreigners in Egypt, and they learned how to practice the love of God to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow among them. In the book of Ruth, actually God does not appear. There was no miracle or a supernatural intervention. There were only people who practiced God's Hesed to one another. It does not mean that only the rich can practice Hesed to the poor. Ruth, who was a gentile poor widow, also has shown her Hesed to Naomi and Boaz. As they practiced extraordinary self-giving of love, there was a happy ending. Yes. Ruth and Naomi truly found a home under God's wings. This story calls us, come home, come home. There are enough spaces for you in God's house. Come home and enjoy, and also, be a home for others.