

Women's Loss, Love and Loyalty in War
Sermon on Ruth Chapter 1
Remembrance Sunday November 8, 2009
Trinity United, Ottawa
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***“Where you go I will go...your people shall be my people
and your God, my God.”***

This week's scripture, in the context of Remembrance Day, carries me into that folksong from the American revolutionary war, in which a brave young woman sings to her soldier lover: “Will you let me go with you?” “Yes, my love yes.”

On Remembrance Day, we honour the courage and loyalty of men who fought in wars for freedom. We remember and grieve those who lost their lives, resurrecting for this day, old loves who didn't come home. Through our grandfather's eyes my generation may travel back to November 11th, 1918. With our father's stories, we may feel some of the horror and glory of 1945. Through the eyes of sons and grandsons of this congregation, we fly today to Afghanistan.

Love, loss and loyalty are some of the emotional themes of this day, when we face up to war. These are also the themes of the biblical Book of Ruth. This compact story has women heroes who live those values. As does every war.

Naomi is first a famine refugee, uprooting her family to another country to survive. Then she is a widow, perhaps when her husband gets sick and dies. But why would both of her young sons have died suddenly? We are free to speculate that they, like most young men throughout history, were called to fight in some battle.

Naomi lost all her men. Imagine her grief. Her Moabite daughters-in-law lost their husband protectors. What they had then, was each other. The relationship of love

and loyalty between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, in the face of the loss of their men, is emblematic of women's love and loyalty.

This week, I feel the The Book of Ruth inviting us to remember and honour women's loyalty, love and losses in wartime. Like the young woman in the folksong, many women bravely chose to wear uniforms in World War II. Others took the risk of coming to this country as War brides, for love of their Canadian soldiers. And there were also the unsung heroic women who loyally embraced back the soldier they had loved, who returned 'not himself,' 'shell shocked' - with what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. There have been so many different kinds of women 'survivors' of war - loving and loyal in the face of untold losses.

Some women who saw the Second World War are still with us. I took the opportunity to talk with a few of them about their memories this week. Let's honour their war stories today, along with our men's.

Neta Carmichael, who celebrated her 95th on September 15th, was a Nursing Sister Lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Medical Corp. When I asked her if she signed up for loyalty or for adventure, she responded "Both!" "It was more of a man's time, if you know what I mean...but I was working at the children's hospital, and a friend who had signed up talked me into it." Neta worked for 2 years in the operating room of a field hospital outside Cannes, France. She nursed Allied soldiers and POW's alike. At times, she admits "it was scary", but far enough back from the lines, what she recalls mostly was "feeling fortunate...other people were being killed by bombs and we were safe."

Brenda Winch experienced war from a different perspective, as a young teenager living in an orphanage in London. Unlike the children with families, the orphans were not sent to the countryside during the war. Brenda remembers watching a building in her orphanage burning when it was firebombed. Many times over 4 years, she was uprooted from her bed in the dorm by an air raid, and spent the rest

of the night sleeping on a church pew. (I wonder what safety a church was supposed to provide the children?) Once, during an air raid, Brenda found herself amidst a crowd making a dash for safety in the underground. Someone fell on the escalator and 64 people died in the ensuing crush.

The most terrible air raids, Brenda recalls, near tears, were the 'doodlebugs' - the unmanned bombers. "You would hear the plane...and then the motor would cut...you'd listen to the silence...and then the big explosion. "I would think; it wasn't me! But what did it do to somebody else?!"

Brenda 'escaped' all that by marrying her husband Dick, a Canadian private she met in London. At the age of 15, she and Dick were married in Westminster Cathedral and she came to Saskatchewan with him. She says her postwar blessing was coming into the United Church of Canada and discovering "the God of love, instead of the God of fear" she had known throughout her childhood in a Catholic orphanage. "That changed my outlook on life."

Our Joan Paterson was another brave British woman. She signed up - to drive trucks. "I was a pacifist in my teens" she recalls. "But the day war broke out I knew the country was in trouble and I was full of patriotism." She lived in Kent, on the coast "the Gerries playground they called it, because we could see the cliffs of France and the planes coming right across the Channel."

As a member of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, Joan was soon in uniform, with a gas mask, delivering vehicles to troops stationed all over the west coast of England and Scotland. "I volunteered for whatever came along" she told me. Out on convoy, women paired up to keep each other company, and they often slept on cots in the cavernous 'ballrooms' of local hotels. Joan's war was about loyalty and full of adventure. But today, at 90, she says "I can't believe I'm really seeing another war. It's awful!"

Joan is seeing war up too close again. This time, the loyal young man she loves who is going to war is her grandson Andrew, age 26. In May, he will move from Petawawa to Afghanistan. “For him its all about human rights,” she says proudly. Then Andrew’s mom, Joan’s daughter-in-law Debbie enters our conversation. She says that her son going to war “is on my mind, every minute of every day...and he’s not even over there yet!”

Love, loss and loyalty, in the Book of Ruth, and in every wartime, we are moved by these human experiences. Women and men together, we turn to the God who is love, who is always loyal, for comfort and healing in all kinds of losses. For hope that we will see a time of world peace.

May we grieve and heal our way honestly, together, toward a just world where peace can reign. God will help us. Amen.

Holy, Holy, Holy VU# 994