

Life Flight

Ruth 1:1-17; Isaiah 40:28 – 31; Psalm 121; Romans 8:35, 37-38

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The strength and the majesty of Eagles in flight is a wonder to behold. There is an island in the Mississippi River north of St. Louis that is a nesting place for eagles. One can go there and stand on the bank of the river and watch the eagles as they fly onto and off of the island. Eagles are giant birds with great wing spans that lift them up into the air with such seeming ease. As they teach their young to fly, they bear them up on their wings until the baby bird flutters its wings and flies on its own. The strength and the protection of the eagle's wings become a symbol of the strength and protection of God in our lives. It has been so throughout the ages; it is true today; it will continue to be so.

Visit with me a family who can tell you of God's strength and protection during all of the circumstances of life. Elimelech and Naomi are a young couple who live near Bethlehem. They have two young sons, Mahlon and Chilion. There is nothing that we know about them that would set them apart from the ordinary folks of the city. We can assume that they were simply engaged in providing a good home, earning a living, participating in the life of the town's social and religious activities. They live in Bethlehem which literally means "house of bread" so it seems a cruel twist of fate that the land is overtaken by famine.

Desperate to provide food and care for the family, Elimelech and Naomi move the family across the Dead Sea, out of Judah, into the land of Moab, the land that we now know as Jordan. It must have been a difficult decision, for the Hebrews and the Moabites were not on the best of terms. But, Elimelech must provide for his family, and there they find food to sustain life; there they have escaped the famine.

But there they have now become refugees in a strange land among people who do not worship Yahweh, who worship gods that are strange to them
But to Elimelech and Naomi we can say, "Nothing can separate you from the love of God, not even famine."

(Congregation sings the chorus: On Eagle's Wings)*

But while there is food in the land of Moab, life is difficult in other ways.

Elimelech dies and Naomi becomes a single parent with two sons. It is a culture in which women are very dependent upon the financial resources of family to provide a means of support. Somehow Naomi finds strength within herself that she did not realize she possessed. The boys grow into young adults. The boys marry. Naomi must have thought that at last life was going to be good again, at last all of the pieces were coming together, and her old age would be secure and full of grandchildren. But tragedy strikes again and both sons are taken from the family. Now there are three widows and no children or grandchildren to bring them joy or hope. Death has left them feeling utterly alone. Death has stripped them naked of the security and protection that they have known.

But to Naomi and Orpha and Ruth we can say, “Nothing can separate you from the love of God, not even death or the peril of your uncertain future.”

(Congregation sings the Chorus: On Eagle's Wings)*

News reaches Naomi that after ten years the famine is over in Bethlehem. The harvest is plentiful once more. We can almost hear her thoughts. We can almost feel her emotions as she reasons to herself,

- my family found sustenance and made a life in Moab, but
- I am still a refugee in a foreign country;
- I have no means of support that will guarantee my future;
- I also must think about Orpha and Ruth who are young enough to marry again, but I have no family sons to give them;
- I live in a land that doesn't worship my God;
- I have family and land in Bethlehem;
- I know the famine has ended;
- I will go home.

As we would say in the language of today, Naomi would have said, “It's a no-brainer; I'm packing up the U-Haul; I'm going home.”

Perhaps one of the most poignant, best known scenes in the Bible is that which takes place between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. She is concerned for them. If they go with her to Bethlehem, they will become the refugees; they will become the aliens in a strange land; they will be living in a strange culture.

Orpha is finally persuaded to remain with her family in Moab, but Ruth utters those famous words,

“Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.”

Ruth has made a decision to live in the present, not knowing what things may come in the future. But to Ruth we can say, “Nothing can separate you from the love of God, neither the things in the present nor things to come.”

(Congregation sings the Chorus: On Eagle's Wings)*

Naomi and Ruth arrive home. The city of Bethlehem is a buzz with the news that Naomi has returned. Old friends gather to welcome her and Ruth. They probably said all of those things that we say to one another when we haven't seen each other for ten years, “Naomi, you haven't changed; you look as young as the last time we saw you.”

But Naomi has changed, and to her credit, she acknowledges that she is not the hopeful, optimistic woman who left Bethlehem. She is bitter; she feels victimized; she blames God. Give her credit for being honest. She owns her feelings and her emotions. Without that degree of

honesty, she might always have been the victim, but she would never need to accept responsibility for how she deals with it. Because she is honest and struggling with God, there is the possibility that she can regain hope and peace in her life.

Naomi and Ruth have returned to Bethlehem at the beginning of harvest season. It is well beyond planting season, so they must now find a way to have food for the meantime. Ruth is energetic; she loves Naomi and decides to be the provider for the household; she goes to the fields to glean after the harvesters.

The corners of the fields of grain were never harvested. These were left for those persons, like Ruth, who had no other way to provide their families with grain for making bread. In addition, the gleaners were permitted to follow the harvesters and gather from the ground that grain which had fallen during the harvesting process. It was the food pantry of the day.

Ruth finds herself in the field of Boaz, a relative of the household of Naomi, who assures her safety while gleaning, gives her water for her thirst and food at noon time, and provides for her shade from the sun. Boaz has heard of Ruth's loving care for Naomi and now, without her knowledge, he seeks to provide the same for her. And Boaz gives Ruth a blessing. He tells her, "May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose *wings* you have come to seek refuge."

How simply great love stories sometimes begin! Ruth goes home in the evening with the news of the day. Naomi has a stirring deep within her soul. Hope is being born. Perhaps God has not forgotten about her. Maybe new life is dawning. Naomi, the matchmaker, is born!

Naomi sets about making a marriage between Ruth and Boaz. She instructs Ruth to bathe and put on her best perfume and her best clothes and go down to the threshing floor where she will find Boaz. She instructs Ruth to wait until Boaz is asleep and then to uncover his feet and lie down at his feet. When Boaz awakes during the night Ruth is to ask him to cover her with the corner of his garment. It is a strange marriage proposal, but Boaz knew what it meant. Even in those days it seems that the man didn't always have to do the asking. Interestingly enough, the word that is interpreted as garment in the text would be more accurately interpreted as "wing." Cover me with your "wing." Boaz sets out to make the marriage a reality.

To Ruth and Naomi we can say, "Nothing can separate you from the love of God, for God through the great love shown us makes us more than conquerors in all circumstances."

(Congregation sings the Chorus: "On Eagle's Wings")*

It must have been a grand wedding! It must have been like a great new day dawning after a long, painful night.

In due time, a son was born and the women gathered once again around Naomi, this time to bless her. The blessing reads: "Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without next of kin, and may his name become great in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."

May his name be great in Israel.
His name was Obed,
who was the father of Jesse,
the father of David,
the ancestor of Joseph,
the husband of Mary,
of whom was born Jesus who is called the Christ.

This story in many ways mirrors the stories of our lives. We can say to one another with confidence, God does bear us up on wings of love to give us strength both to run and to walk through all of the circumstances of life.

God's wings give us support when we have not the strength to support ourselves. God's wings give us cover when we need protection from the harshness of life. God's wings enable us to soar higher than we ever could alone.

The mother eagle teaches her little ones to fly by bearing them on her back and soaring into the heavens. At some point she drops away and the little one is flying. The mother eagle hasn't deserted the little one. She has become the little one's teacher, the little one's enabler, the little one's equipper to live life to the fullest.

And so with us. No matter into what country we may go, no matter what the circumstance in which we find ourselves, no matter the decisions that we must make, nothing can separate us from the love of God that we know in Christ, not:

- Tribulation
- Distress
- Persecution
- Famine
- Nakedness
- Life; Death
- Angels; Spirits
- The circumstances of the present or the future
- No power
- Nothing

May you always know the strength of eagle's wings, but more than that, may you always know that you can never be separated from God's love.
Amen.

*"On Eagle's Wings" chorus:

And God will raise you up on eagle's wings,
bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun,
and hold you in the palm of God's hand.