

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Last Sunday, an illustration I used was from a seminary experience. I think that it is fairly common for pastors to mention situations from seminary. I'm not sure why that is, but my guess is that theology is really *gooey and sticky*, and it can clog all the synapses in the brain – like neurological trans-fat. Thus, a seminary graduate really can't process clear thoughts anymore – because of all the gooey, sticky stuff in their head. ???

With THAT in mind, I'll continue.....
That was a pun: that - in - mind.....

Continuing, when I went to seminary, I was able to find a very, very cheap place to stay. It was an old, neglected, run down two bedroom house. The landlord was the previous occupant, and he admitted that he hadn't cleaned the house in seven years. And, I believed him.

That first evening in the old house, with boxes still piled in every room, Jessica, my eldest daughter, discovered that our microwave oven could not be used while the coffee maker was on– because when she did, all the electricity went off. Apparently, there was one circuit breaker for all the outlets.

With the day's light waning, I did a thorough search of the house, looking for the electrical box. I couldn't find it, and concluded it was in the basement.

THE BASEMENT: The basement was an Alfred Hitchcock Basement. Earlier, during the day, I had ventured 3 steps down the basement steps, lowered my head and looked around. [] It was a damp, partial basement with visible holes in the foundation that was made of field stones. Most of the house was over a dirt crawl space, the basement part was only about 10 feet by 20 feet—a place for the furnace and water heater.

When I scanned the area, I noticed numerous bones in the dirt area. I also remembered that the basement section was filled with rusty old things, with cobwebs everywhere.

BUT, now it was dark, and I didn't have a flashlight or matches, and I don't think I could have found any.... because ALL WAS DARK.
Even so, I had to go down into the basement to find the circuit breakers.

So,..... I opened the basement door, and heard things scurrying away. I hoped they were little things, and NOT big things.

Standing in the threshold, I looked down into the darkness and realized that I would have to *feel my way* to the circuit breakers,.... and then I paused.

My choices were:

I could stay in the dark upstairs, in the familiar and wait it out until morning..... or..... go down into the unknown.

I was STANDING IN THE THRESHOLD.

Throughout our lives, we will find ourselves standing in assorted “Thresholds” facing the Unknown with the call of the safe and familiar behind us.

Ruth, from our OT lesson, was standing in a threshold.

Before her were the options to join her Mother-in-law, Naomi, and go into the UNKNOWN—the land of the Hebrews OR.... to remain in her homeland of Moab.

The Ruth story is a rich, wonderfully written story.. with deep meaning.
Even the characters’ names have meaning.

Naomi means “Pleasantness.”

Her husband was obviously a very religious person because his name was Eli-melech (K).... which means “MY God is King.”

They had two sons: Mahlon, and his names means “sickly”.... and Chilion—which means “wasting away.”

I think it is safe to say that we can make some assumptions about the two sons, based on their names.

The family live in Bethlehem – the “city of bread.” YET, it came about that there was famine. So, needless to say, the city of bread... had NO bread.

Really, you have to admire OT writing.

So,.... in the need for food, they went to live in Moab, a country to the East.

And,... wouldn’t you know it, not long after Eli-melek died, the two sons marry two of the local girls.

This would be like going on VS in Texas, and while there, our children marry Texans.

Most parents really hope that their children marry IN-culture.

Anyways, the two women are: Ruth – her names means “Beloved.”

And Orpah – which means “SHE who turns away.”

I think their names are clues???

Before long, unfortunately, “Sickly” and “Wasting Away” die – surprise, surprise!!!

Then, Naomi,.... husband-less and son-less.... learns that the famine back home is over, and decides to go back.

She encourages her daughters-in-law to stay in their native land–Moab, which makes sense, and really was the prudent thing to do.

The custom, in those days, was a brother of their husband would marry them, but no brother existed. So, the logical thing would be to stay with their family of origin, in their familiar land,.... Instead of joining Naomi to an Unknown land... and then feel like aliens / out of place.

However, the two women had learned about the Hebrew God, Naomi's God – Yahweh. They'd discovered the nature of Yahweh, so the decision was not that easy. Nevertheless, Orpah,... does the logical thing and chooses to Stay.

Again,... “Surprise, surprise” Her name means “She who turns away.”

Rumour has it that she remarried to a Mr. Winfrey, and went on to host a popular talk show..... [Orpah Winfrey.....]

Ruth, on the other hand, decided to venture into the unknown– to embrace a new family and their God - Yahweh, declaring to Naomi, “Where you go, I will go.... Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

And, it was a good thing Ruth did go, because she later became the Great, Grandmother of David – King David.

Yet, Why NOT Stay where things are predictable and safe?
Why... risk leaping into the unknown??? Why???

What made her willing to risk so much – to Go and embrace the Hebrew God and the children of the Hebrew God???

Why?

Hold that thought!

Centuries later, Jesus was asked by a Temple scribe to state the essence of the faith.

Jesus recites the sacred SHEMA, which every devout Jew says three times a day.

The SHEMA: “Hear, O Israel. Yahweh, our God, Yahweh is ONE – meaning the “only God.” You shall love Yahweh your God with all your thinking, understanding and with all your will and passion, and strength.”

Then Jesus adds, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

The scribe agrees and declares “THAT IS Right” and repeats what Jesus said, BUT....leaves out the line, “With all your will and passion.”

Jesus responded, “Oooooooo..... you are close, REAL close, and MAN, it is too bad we're NOT playing horseshoes” because you're close.

The Scribe knew most of the right answer, all but one small part. – THE PERSONAL Part – the Faith Part – the “will... and ... the passion” part.

He left out the part that shows commitment and that we strive to live what we declare.

He knew the legal / sterile aspect of the right answer. Basically, he was right, but being **Right** does NOT make us **righteous**.

That is worth repeating: Being Right.... does Not make us righteous.

Using our will to **choose** God's grace and accept God's love and forgiveness is.... essential for personal transformation... and our salvation.

Being Transformed is NOT merely saying the "right" words, but involves, with the help of God's Spirit,... **being** the message of Love: the Shema, and the grace of God to others..... and ourselves.

Perhaps, that is what Ruth witnessed. Perhaps, through others, she witnessed that Yahweh is the true God, and a God of Love.

Perhaps,..... since she chose to believe in God and love and sought to experience that love..... There is NO other apparent reason for her to go against logic / choose against her culture and to NOT abandon Naomi—which is an act of love. She chose the way of Yahweh, even if it meant.... passing through the threshold into the unknown.

As Richard Rohr stated, "God's Kingdom living is often in the threshold, somewhere between this world and the next."

As followers of God, we often will find ourselves called to let go of the familiar, of the past and of our security and safety... to go out into the unknown.

Gerald May said, "True Spiritual surrender engages mystery and is open to the unknown."

But, this way of living / way of being is NOT easy, and... leaping into the unknown is NOT natural. Our human nature cries for us to hide in the safety of our limited, self made security – to remain in place and Not risk FAITH LIVING.

Common sense / logic beckons that we ask, "What is in it for me" – last Sunday's theme –..... and to proceed in life following cautious paths.

Yet, more often than not, God calls us into the unknown.

God leads us to the threshold..... To chose between our humanity and the divine.

Listen to these words from Frederick Buechner:

"Who knows what will happen?

Except that in a world without God, in a way, WE DO KNOW.

In a world without God, we know at least that the thing that will happen will be a human thing, a thing no better and no worse than the most that humanity itself can be.

But, in a world with God, we can never know what will happen, because the thing that happens IS GOD'S THING, ... and that is to say, a NEW and unimaginable and Holy thing that humanity can guess **at only** in its wildest dreams."

Buechner adds that our hope is in God, and that "...it is madness to peer beyond the possibilities of history for the impossibilities of God."

But,that is what Ruth did, and that is what you and I are called to be.

God invites us to : venture into the unknown WITH God; to risk, for the sake of love and relationship, and to hope beyond our wildest dreams..... to hope, beyond our wildest dreams.

Another story from my Seminary years:

A good friend of mine, Bernhard, has a log cabin he built in a remote area of Kentucky. While living in Kentucky, I often went down there with my German Shepherd dog, Louie. During one of my visits there with Bern, we decided to hike the 2-3 miles through the woods to an isolated pond.

Bern and I, and Louie, sat by the pond, mesmerized by nature and good conversation. My dog, Louie, just listened.

So enthralled were we that we lost track of time, and before we knew it, the sun had set, AND.... the woods became very dark.

I was a little worried, but Bern assured me he knew the woods like the back of his hand. So, I put Louie on his leash, and we walked into the darkness.

I had never done that before: hike in a pitch black forest, running into branches and tripping over logs and things.

It is a weird, unnatural thing to do. It was eerie, too. We, literally could NOT see a thing. The sky was overcast, and there was NO light in the woods.

One hour of groping went by, then another.

I don't think Bern knew the "Back of his hand" in the dark.

We had no idea where we were; everything was Black and unknown, and... I was beginning to think, ... "Maybe it would have been better to remain by the pond for the night,... at least it was familiar."

Even though familiar in Kentucky, meant Copperheads and Rattlesnakes prowl in the quiet of a sleepy night.

We stopped to assess our fear level,... and then it hit me:

We can't see a thing, but Louie can sense and see in darkness much better than we can.

So,... I took him off the leash, thinking at least he might go in a straight line and get us out of the woods... by any path.... It didn't matter how.

We followed Louie's sound of foot prints. Within 15 minutes, we reached a clearing.... just above the log cabin. We could barely see the cabins vague silhouette in the meadow.

Louie kept going as if it were broad daylight, up onto the porch... to his waiting food and water.
WE WERE HOME.

When we trusted our own human abilities, we wandered in circles in the darkness, wishing to go back to the familiar – the pond.

It wasn't until we faced our lostness – our hopeless condition of being lost ... AND... our need for EXTRA-human help that we discovered Home.
True, in this case, it was just a dog in the woods.

BUT, in our daily lives, whether we like it or not, there will be times when WE WILL find ourselves at the threshold peering into the darkness of the unknown.
And, the easy way back, may not be the best way, the way home.

Sometimes,.... redemption is ONLY found through the darkness of the unknown.
Like circuit breakers in a dark and spooky basement, into the Mystery, LIGHT IS FOUND.

And sometimes, we will have to choose between the “apparent” safety of the familiar–of our humanity.... OR... the call from God to venture into new areas / new challenges / new places – the unknown.

Ruth chose the unknown.
Ruth chose the unknown because THAT WAS HER WAY HOME.

It was the way to her NEW home, realized in the love of God.

God's love gives us a new family, a family of believers, AND...
God's love– God's Spirit can embolden / inspire our PASSION and WILL to be / live in God's love,.... and perhaps reflect the light for others who are groping in the darkness.

Yet, The frustrating and difficult part is that we can not be the light, we can NOT own the light or control the light.
The answers are NOT handed to us.
The truth is: Tomorrow is always a surprise

However, **Who** we follow into the unknown IS UP TO US.
It is our choice.

