

TRIAL BY JOURNEY

By Kitt Watts

Theme: God is With us on Life's Journey

Suggested Call to Worship: Guidance, #802 SDA Church Hymnal

Primary Bible text : Genesis 28:10-17 and Ruth 1:18-22

Opening Song: Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah

Closing Song: The Lord's My Shepherd

Some journeys are hard to make. Journeys we hadn't planned on. Journeys to uncertain destinations and to unknown outcomes.

I'd like to reflect on two such journeys today. They are familiar Old Testament stories. But I find new meaning and spiritual energy in them when I put the two side-by-side, seeing how they are alike and how they are different.

I call them "Trial by Journey." They are the stories of Jacob and Naomi, and, I think, they are our stories, too.

Some of us take journeys like Jacob's. Forced marches brought about by our own headstrong choices. Journeys where we flee our past but find it hard to elude its shadow. For when we make mistakes, even sincere ones, we find it hard to change—hard to change our minds, our ways, ourselves. Often, only harsh realities coupled with God's grace make us into new persons. That is a "Trial by Journey."

Others of us feel, like Naomi, that our journeys begin because of an "act of God." That's what we call it as we try to make sense out of calamities and disasters. Driven by circumstances we can't control, we also learn in a "Trial by Journey." In these wanderings, these times of exile, we long to know if the hymn is right when it asserts that it is God who stands "within the shadow, keeping watch above His own."

Today, let's compare Scripture with Scripture, and journey with journey.

Naomi and her family were hounded out of town by famine. By the prospect of starvation. And so it sounds paradoxical to us when Naomi says that she left home "full." What did she mean? She meant she set off on this journey with a good husband and two promising sons. Yes, they had to find their way in a foreign land, but they had each other. The family nucleus was a small, protective insulation against the culture and customs of Moab.

By contrast, Jacob left home "empty." He went out alone; he carried with him only his staff, and it was small comfort. The staff was a tool of his vocation, not a weapon. Jacob was a homebody, a shepherd

and gardener—not an athlete or a fighter. He disliked the rigors of the wilds as much as his twin brother, Esau, thrived on them.

With only a staff Jacob was defenseless and alone in the wilderness on this sudden and unexpected journey. He didn't doubt for a moment that his brother, the one renowned for his hunting skills and prowess as a warrior, was tracking him down. Whenever he looked over his shoulder, Jacob wondered if Esau—or God—would be there to spring on him and spear him down. He feared to sleep, he feared to pray. Jacob's was a journey on the run.

II

By contrast, Naomi and her family left Bethlehem not so much in haste as in urgency. They journeyed not so much in fear as in doubt. Where was the God of the Chosen People? Why had the Almighty deserted them? Why did the land which had flowed with milk and honey now shrivel under a blasting sun? No rain, no food; no crops, no harvest. Why had God turned away? And why did God leave them no recourse but go to Gentiles—to their enemies—for help?

Naomi left Bethlehem full but became empty. In Moab, without the benefit of old friends or her family, without the support of the usual religious rites, Naomi buried her own dead. First Elimelech—her strength and companion. Then one son. Then the other. Her outpoured prayers seemed to be a waste; nothing stopped the grim reaper.

The hunger Naomi came to know was not for food, but for faith. A famine stalked her spirit. She was on a "Trial by Journey."

Jacob, by comparison, did leave home with God's blessing. But it was a stolen blessing. Within the hour it became a curse. As Ellen White puts it in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, in one short hour Jacob made enough work for a life-time of repentance (see page 180).

Jacob extorted Esau, tricked his aging father, and manipulated God's will. Now he lay under the stars listening to the large sounds of night—far from his mother's tent and his father's fields, a fugitive and a thief. He waited for the sound of galloping hooves or the zing of a bow string.

His loneliness and his sin crushed his spirit. He was on a journey not of his choosing, but certainly of his own making.

Helpless in his despair and fatigue, Jacob dozed. And then the heavens opened. The God he'd cheated caught up with him. Dazzled, Jacob watched angels streaming up and down the stairway at his feet. God spoke, forgiving him his sin, and promising him better days in the Promised Land.

III

By contrast, Naomi had no visions and heard no words of comfort. Stranded in Moab, what was she to do?

She did not sit, or wait, or whimper in a corner. Not Naomi. Emboldened by her grief and need, Naomi stood up to God. *Where are you, God?* she cried. She looked into the heavens and she prayed again—but no ladder, or angels, or reassurance came. And so Naomi pressed her case, lodging it directly with the Almighty: "You have afflicted me and brought misfortune upon me," she cried. Naomi was an importunate widow. Like venerable Job, she argued her own cause at the very gates of heaven.

Then—almost like modern day people who carry a placard or wear an arm band to declare their issues—Naomi when public in her protest about her plight. She changed her name! Summing up her case against God she declared, "I am no longer who I was. Therefore, call me Mara, for I am bitter."

Some day, Jacob also would take a new name. Journeys can change you. But that night at Bethel, Jacob was only beginning his journey. Not until 20 years later—after he had wrestled with God beside the brook Jabbock and finally faced what he was now fleeing—only then would he earn the new name, "Israel."

IV

Naomi left Bethlehem to escape a famine. But now that she was widowed and childless, she faced an even more desperate condition. As a poor migrant (and probably an illegal alien, besides) she had no rights in Moab. She was an outsider without resources. And even God Almighty seemed to have vanished.

At this point, Naomi decided that if she was going to die she was going to die at home. She had prayed for miracles. But the Lord did not rain down manna. No prophet strode into her town to call forth flour and oil from empty vessels. Ravens did not airlift provisions to her from heaven.

So with failing strength, Naomi got on the road. It was only as she actually began her journey to Bethlehem that she realized she was *not* alone. Ruth was there. Ruth whom she loved; Ruth who loved her.

And Ruth chose the journey not for hope of better things, or for promise of better days. Ruth chose it only for love. She loved Naomi—a woman who had been faithful to her family to the end. A woman who had wrestled with God. And yes, a woman destined to prevail.

On his journey, Jacob also found love. A girl named Rachel met him beside the well. She was beautiful. He loved her. The Scripture says that the seven years he worked for her flew by as though they were but a few days. That is love.

But Jacob the deceiver was deceived. Jacob had once impersonated Esau to gain the birthright his father did not want to give him. Now Leah impersonated Rachel whom his uncle did not want to give

him. Of course, Laban "graciously" said Jacob could still get Rachel if he would just do another seven years of labor. Definitely a "Trial by Journey!" A tiresome, frustrating journey that ultimately would be woven through with jealousy, ten changes of wages, and endless family quarrels.

Likewise, Naomi and Ruth's journey was long and circuitous. Their hopes were whispered in the shadows of harvest time, and late at night on Boaz's threshing floor. Their journey wound through half-forgotten customs, and staggered in the noon day heat of legal proceedings with the city fathers.

Plot and counterplot intertwine. If we find ourselves holding our breath as we *read* these ancient stories what must it have been to *live* such stories?

V

What is it like to take such a journey? Many of us know. Many of us have been or are now on a "Trial by Journey."

Like Jacob, some of us have hoped that God would choose us to receive the birthright or privilege, prosperity, and spiritual leadership. Like Jacob we may even have sinned boldly to get it.

And so, we also know Jacob's anguish. Often what we have wanted was good and right, but we have seized it by our own will and for our own ends. Sometimes it is not until we become fugitives that we take time to reflect. Sometimes it is only when we are plunged into darkness are we ready to seek light. Yes, some of us know what it is to sleep on pillows of stone.

Like Jacob we have learned how costly such a journey can be—how pain and perplexity can stretch over an entire lifetime. We see that even when Jacob finally got the victory and became a new man he limped for ever after. Our mistakes, our struggles, and even our victories leave their mark. That is "Trial by Journey."

Others of us, like Naomi, have known an even more puzzling journey. We seem to have as much pain as Jacob—but not as much comfort. When we search for God, God seems to hide.*

When life squeezes us in a corner, when we lose those whom we love, when we are dogged by multiple griefs, when we experience a famine of faith, we long for Jacob's vision. We entreat God to make promises out loud to us—to speak to us audibly from heaven.

Like Naomi, we beat our fists on heaven's gates and cry out in our desolation, "Lord! Where are you?" At times we have had to leave those people, those communities where we expected to find help and compassion. To our surprise, we have had to take refuge with kindly Gentiles.

Sometimes we have found ourselves assuming new roles and taking risky initiatives. Like Naomi, we have dared ask that half-forgotten customs and languishing ideals be reinstated in our behalf.

Like Naomi, we certainly would *rather* have had a "thus saith the Lord" to reassure us. We'd rather have had direct, unequivocal guidance. We would rather wrestle with God—if God would just show up!

Instead, we have had to struggle with the unknown and have spent our strength just the same.

The struggle changes us. Like Naomi, we know we are not who we once were. And we pray that the God whom we do not see or hear will bless us even as Naomi was ultimately blessed.

What is the outcome of journeys like these?

Is there hope for us if our lives are tangled? Is there hope for us if God seems distant and our troubles do not instantly dissolve when we pray?

Some of us may find the God of Jacob. God the active one, the one who intervenes, who surprises us with reassuring dreams, or a miracle, or who challenges us at the brook Jabbok in the dark night of our fears—the God who tests our character and then blesses us.

Others of us may find the God of Naomi. The God who works behind the scenes.* For us, God's providences come slowly, almost imperceptibly, through people and events. God may seem remote and uncaring. It is only over time—sometimes a whole lifetime—that we see the meaning of our journey through trial.

But different as the stories of Jacob and Naomi are, I believe they teach the same thing: God is with us! God is with us on the journey. And our journey will not be in vain!

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- "The Book of Ruth is then a story about the hidden God," says Ronald M. Hals in The Theology of the Book of Ruth (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1969), p. 16.

Biographical Information on Sermon Writer:

Kit Watts, Women's Resource Center (WRC) special projects coordinator, came to La Sierra University in April of 1997 with experience as a writer, editor, pastor, teacher, and librarian, as well as 25 years of advocacy for Adventist women. She was the founding director of the Women's Resource Center for five years.

In the years before coming to the WRC, she had been an assistant editor of the Adventist Review where she coordinated the production of four special issues of the general church paper that focused on issues of concern to Adventist women. She had also served as a member of four General Conference commissions on the Role of Women in the Church and as historian for the Association of Adventist women.

Currently, Kit works full time as assistant to the president for communication, Southeast California Conference.

Early in her career, Kit worked for the General Conference Bureau of Public Relations and as an assistant book editor for the Review and Herald Publishing Association. In 1973, she was the first woman to join the pastoral staff of Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, where her work included a ministry with publications. Her academic training includes an M.A. in religion from Andrews University and a M.S.L.I.S from the University of Maryland.