

Call Me Mara
By Pastor Barbara McCoy

Theme: Allowing God to Share our Sadness and Pain
Suggested Call to Worship: SDA Hymnal Reading #799, Do Not Worry
Opening Song: Praise to The Lord,#1, SDA Hymnal
Closing Song: Blessed Assurance, #462 , SDA Hymnal

We have all heard of some sad stories that bring tears to our eyes, but one recently caught my attention in a book written by Katherine Paterson called “Gates of Excellence.” Katherine tells of the struggle that her eight year old son had as he wrestled with the loss of his best friend who was struck down by lightning. In the book she states:

He is not fully healed. Perhaps he will never be, and I am beginning to believe that this is right. How many people in their whole lifetime have a friend who is to them what Lisa was to David? When you have had such a gift, should you ever forget it? Of course he will forget a little. Even now he is making other friendships. His life will go on, through hers could not. And selfishly I want his pain to ease. But how can I say that I want him to “get over it,” as though having loved and been loved were some sort of disease? I want the joy of knowing Lisa and the sorrow of losing her to be a part of him and to shape him into growing levels of caring and understanding, perhaps as an artist, but certainly as a person.

This morning do you also know what it is like to have a loss? Perhaps it is not the same loss as David has had, but none the less it is a loss to you. Perhaps it had been the death of a lifetime mate, or a divorce. Perhaps you have felt pain for a loved one who has turned their back on the Lord. Or maybe this morning your pain comes from news you have received that cancer or another disease has invaded your body and loss is soon to occur. Perhaps your loss is a financial one and you are totally unsure of where you are going to go from here.

It doesn't matter what the loss is, because for each of us that loss is significant, and we must each deal with it individually. To help us with that today I would like us to meet someone in the Bible who also had to deal with loss. Perhaps in meeting her we can learn something that will help us grow or cope with our own loss. Please turn with me to the book of Ruth the first chapter.

The book of Ruth opens to us the lives of very ordinary people, much like ourselves with everyday joys, difficulties and sorrows. The scene is set in a time of Israel's history when the judges ruled. As we look at verse one and two we are introduced to the family of Elimelech who live in Judah. We discover that a famine has entered the land and this family decides to make a move from the land of Judah to the land of Moab.

Verse 3 tell us that while in Moab, Elimelech died and left Naomi, his wife, with 2 boys. Both the boys in time took wives of the women of Moab. But sometime after dwelling for 10 years in

Moab, the boys also died, both of them. Verse 5 says “and the woman, Naomi, was left of her two sons and her husband.”

We can easily see Naomi has gone through a great time of trauma and loss. She has left her home town because of famine, she has entered a new land of different people, she has suffered the loss of her husband and now her two sons. So death has brought an end to her earthly fellowship with loved ones. But her situation goes even beyond this. For now there is no heir to carry on the family name or the inheritance. And for a widow at this time in history that was a serious problem. “Her men have died, and so have their names!” (Atkinson, David, *Wings of Refuge*)

The Bible author here is displaying one disaster upon another in Naomi’s life, giving us a jolt that one person should be called on to suffer so much. Surely the suffering was undeserved and definitely unexpected.

Now Naomi is left alone! Left to go on with her life. Left with the question of why? What does faith in God mean for Naomi at this point? Where can her faith take her? I think we’ll discover that her faith means having a willingness, although not easy, to leave some questions unanswered. It means holding on in confidence knowing that God, in the past when things were brighter, has shown Himself to be trustworthy and still in charge in spite of the difficulties.

Notice how Naomi demonstrates her faith even in the midst of her tragedies. (Read Ruth 1: vv. 6 & 7) We see that after she hears that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread, she decides this is the place to be and onward she moves. Her perspective is still angled in the direction of God. Naomi hasn’t forgotten her God, for although she lived in Moab, her heart was still in Judah. Her eyes were open to the news which reaches her even in Moab, that Yahweh has not abandoned his people, and that the famine is over. Naomi is heading home!

Naomi’s faith is an excursion of trust and growth. A faith that trusts that when some parts of our lives sweep for a time into the dark shadows, that they will also again emerge into the light as they have many times before.

What allows someone to believe this in the midst of a crisis? What helps someone to have this type of trust? Probably the greatest thing is to dwell and meditate upon the great acts of God in the past; in the past for His people, in the past for His church, in the past for us personally. Ellen White reminds us that “we have nothing to fear for the future, except we forget how God has lead us in the past.” So do we face no problems in the future? Oh no folks we do; as a church, as a congregation, and as individuals. But as we build a “fortress of faith experiences” from the past it releases us to believe that no matter what comes, God is still in charge. He knows what is happening for He is not asleep. Naomi’s faith clings to this God.

Notice how she continues to give expression to this belief in conversation with her daughter-in-laws. (Read vv. 8 & 9) In verse 8 she mentions “the Lord dealing kindly” with them, and in verse 9 she says “may the Lord grant you rest or a home.” David Atkinson in his book *Wings of Refuge* (p. 44) states that this word kindly in vs. 8 is a word when translated “combines the warmth of God’s fellowship with the security of God’s faithfulness.” (p. 44) And the word home or ret in

vs. 9 refers to ceasing from the troubles and pains that Ruth and Orpah have had to deal with, but also to having the positive experience of God's security and comfort.

Naomi can only speak these words, because she still had the perspective that God "has the whole world in His hands." Her prayer for her daughters-in-law is one of trusting the future to the Lord. Naomi commends the life of her daughter-in-law to her God in spite of the pain and suffering that she herself is going through.

What loss has entered your life today? Can you gain strength and insight from Naomi to believe that God is still there and that He's still in charge in spite of the loss? Dr. David Hocking, a popular religious speaker today, tells of the tragedy that came to his family when they were informed that their little girl had to have a leg amputated. As he shares his pain he relates how at first he was tempted to think that God was not in control, God was too busy walking people across the street to take notice of his daughter. But he finally relates how his faith, just as Naomi's, grabbed ahold of the realization that God is in charge and does take notice. He realized that some things just cannot be explained as to why they have happened, but it does not mean that God has lost control.

With this type of confidence in God, it allows us to deal with the feelings that begin to swell up within us. What are some of these feelings? Were they different in Naomi's time than ours? I don't think so. For we see that Naomi had common feelings of anger and depression just as we sometimes do when things pile in on us and seem out of control.

Notice how she gives expression to these feelings in Chapter 1, verses 12, 13, and 19-21. (Read) She uses some very strong words here; "the Lord has gone out against me, the almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me, the Almighty hath afflicted me, the Lord has testified against me, don't call me Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara (bitter)."

Has Naomi finally lost it? Is she throwing in the towel and saying that's it? I give up on God and everything! No. Naomi is having very real feelings that she has to deal with and she vents them on the only one who can really handle them—her God. She is telling God exactly how she feels about the situation with nothing hidden. She knows that God can handle it!

Do we? Are we afraid we are going to shock God with how we feel when it comes to our tough times? Friends, He already knows, for nothing is hidden from His sight. The psalmist says we cannot go anywhere that God does not see or hear, either to the heavens above or to the earth beneath. We don't need to pretend with God. He is very willing and able to hear and handle our pains and sorrows.

How does Naomi reveal that God can handle her pain and strong words? She reveals it in the choice of her words. Notice that in verse 20 and 21 she states not just the Lord, who was Yahweh the covenant God but also the Almighty was involved in her plight. Who is this Almighty God? The translation is Shaddai. David Atkinson points out that as we trace this name for God back into the book of Genesis where it first appears, we can discover perhaps the meaning it had for Naomi.

Shaddai is first referenced in Genesis 17. Here we have the story of God and Abraham meeting when Abraham is 99 years old. God promises Abraham that He will be with him and bless him with His covenant and with children. What a promise, for Abraham and Sarah have not been able to have children as of yet and it does not look likely in the future, except now for God's promise. So Shaddai here is the bountiful God who transforms helplessness into blessings.

Shaddai appears again in Gen. 43:14. Here we have the story of Jacob, now an elderly man, caught in a time of famine. Ten of his sons went to Egypt to seek food, and were blessed in meeting with Joseph, whom they did not recognize, but who provided food for them. Joseph required that the next time they came seeking food, they must bring the younger brother Benjamin with them. When that time came, Jacob was very reluctant to send Benjamin, but after much persuasion by the older brothers, he consented. As the brothers were getting ready to part Jacob says: "May the Almighty grant you mercy." So here Shaddai infers the hope of God's protection at a time of great stress and uncertainty.

Shaddai appears again in Genesis 49:25 when Jacob, now at the end of his life, is giving his sons his final blessing. When he gets to Joseph he relates how Joseph has suffered, but how the Almighty will continue to give him the blessings of heaven above and of the deep below, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. Here Shaddai is the God who is aware of our sufferings, but who is also present with His blessings.

This is the Almighty, the Shaddai, upon whom Naomi now places all of her pain, sorrow and bitterness. This is the God with whom she places her hopeless situation, trusting that in His love even the apparent meaninglessness of her earthly suffering can be coped with if placed in His hands.

At campmeeting this past year, one of the speakers for the Women's Ministries seminar spoke about relating to grief and pain. She shared about her great joy when she and her husband discovered they were expecting their first child. Her expectations were tremendous. But shortly after the child was born they discovered there was a severe lifetime deformity. Of course this created sadness but they went on adjusting their lives with the child. Shortly after, she was informed by the doctor that she could have no more children for the same thing would happen. This was hard to accept.

Then a year later they were informed that the boy had leukemia. What a shock. Shortly after this, while she was home one day, a phone call came for her to rush to the hospital. Her husband had been in a severe car wreck and they didn't know if he was going to live. Fortunately he survived with a great deal of medical attention. Just when she was pulling things back together again she found out she had breast cancer and had to have surgery.

Let me ask you—when she threw up her hands and said, "God, no more," and vented her feelings, did God turn His back on her because He couldn't handle it? Did He rebuke her because she told Him how she felt? No! On the contrary, God knew exactly how she felt. For He himself came to this earth as a suffering servant. He understands every pain, every loss, every separation we can feel or utter. He hears every prayer of pain when we cry "My God, why?" Ellen White in *Testimonies* Volume 2, page 274 says "as dark clouds at times enshrouded you, you could not

forbear inquiring: 'O God, hast Thou forsaken me?' But you were not forsaken, although you could see no way open before you."

Have you taken your pains and sorrows to God this morning? He is willing and able to handle every single one of them. We will not turn Him off or shock Him by how we feel. Instead we'll discover his loving arms of grace surrounding us, and eventually see that His grace is sufficient in our human weakness, even though the pain may continue for awhile. We'll also discover as the clouds begin to part, that God in His providence is personally interested in us and is already working in our behalf.

Notice how God's providence was already working for Naomi, even though apparently in her depression she was unaware of it. (Read 1: 16-18) These verses portray to us the sincere, precious words of Ruth that she will stay with Naomi till death do them part. God was blessing Naomi with a great gift of love, friendship, support, and loyalty through the companionship of Ruth. Ruth in these words was not only committing herself to Naomi, but through the influence of the Holy Spirit and the strong previous witness of Naomi, she was committing herself to the true God. What a blessing Ruth was to Naomi. What a strength in a time of Naomi's very need God was providing.

We also discovered as chapter one comes to a close that Ruth and Naomi came to Bethlehem "in the beginning of the barley harvest." It was in God's providence that they arrived safely just at this time. Chapter one opened with crisis, tragedy, death, and loneliness, but it closes with a time of life and abundance.

Chapter 2 reveals to us that it was because of the abundant barley harvest that Ruth was able to go out and work in the fields to provide food for their needs. It was because of the barley harvest that Ruth came in contact with someone very special. (Read 2:2 and 3). Do you think she just happened to come to that field without any divine guidance? Was it just an accident or a coincidence? Here she is in the field of Boaz, a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's dead husband. As chapter 2 unfolds we discover that Boaz is aware of the dedication Ruth has had for Naomi and the suffering they both have been through and he therefore takes it upon himself to provide abundant supplies for their needs.

Is God's providence at work? You bet it is! In fact, as Ruth goes home after this first day of work and relates to Naomi what has happened, it suddenly begins to dawn on Naomi how God is working. (Read 2:19-23) Naomi even pronounces a blessing on Boaz for she is now aware that God is providing.

As the story closes let us look at chapter 4:13-17. (read) What a happy ending for such a sad beginning. A story of tragedy now turns into a story of blessings far beyond what could have been humanly planned or expected. What a revelation of God's care and concern in times of need.

Has a situation of loss engulfed you lately? Has it overshadowed you in such a way that you can't see God's providence? Let me assure you this morning that no matter what your situation is, God has not abandoned you. He's still there. I can't guarantee you that your situation will turn

out as Naomi's did, but I can guarantee you that God is working in your behalf, just as He was I hers.

There was a young boy playing outside when he suddenly notice a turtle. Curious, he went over and picked it up and began twisting and turning it playfully. The turtle naturally pulled in its head and legs, which sent the boy crying to his mother. "Mommy, Mommy," he cried, "it's broken, it's broken, and I've lost all the parts. I don't know what to do." Smiling, mommy took the little turtle and placed it on the ground. Gradually the head and legs once again appeared, as the little boy smiled in amazement.

This morning perhaps you're like that little boy. Everything looks like it's fallen apart, with no way to come back together again. God understands! And just like that mother, He's right by your side ready and willing to help you see that there is hope. You can trust that He's still in control, and that He is willing to hear your cry of pain and sadness, and that His providence is already working to bring things back together again.

Have you allowed Him to share in your pain today? It's not too late for even now He is standing with His arms open, ready to help you. I'd like to invite anyone this morning who is dealing with a situation of pain or loss or sorrow to come forward at this time so that we might pray together and be comforted in the assurance of God's assistance in our time of need.

Biographical Information on Sermon Writer:

Pastor Barbara McCoy has worked in Oregon, Missouri, and Florida and has special interest in pastoral care and Bible work. This sermon was part of her research for a class in Old Testament Theology for her master's degree at Andrews University.