

When Naomi and her family moved from Israel to Moab, those two countries were at war. And because of that, it was risky for them to go into what was basically hostile territory, but they were in desperate need of relief from a famine. To reach Moab they would have journeyed through the Jericho pass, which took them across the Jordan River, and into the same wilderness from which God had delivered their ancestors. Symbolically they were traveling backwards; back to a land that had imposed imprisonment and sorrow, but they did what they must to protect their family.

They were in search of sustenance, security and safety, and for a while they found what they needed in Moab. The sons married local women, Naomi and her husband established a home, and they all presumably lived in peace for a time. With the deaths of Naomi's husband and her two sons, however, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, found themselves in dire straits once again. They faced enormous difficulties that shouldn't be overlooked.

The response of the two young widows, to the deaths of their husbands, are quite different. Orpah chooses to go back to her homeland and her people, but Ruth decides to leave her father and mother, and the land she knows best, to accompany Naomi as she returns to Bethlehem. Orpah heads in one direction and Ruth and Naomi in another. Each venturing out, once again, in search of sustenance, security, and safety.

A word of caution must be mentioned about this story. It is often cited as the premiere example of loyal commitment and loving relationships. I've often seen it suggested as

the perfect text for weddings. And there is loyalty here, and there is love, but not everything is as rosy as it might seem. Toward the end of the first chapter, which you'll have to look up, because we didn't read it this morning, Naomi gives voice to some pretty harsh feelings. Ruth has been arguing with her, demanding that she stop pushing her away; vowing to go wherever Naomi goes; to live wherever she lives. But Naomi fights Ruth the entire time, finally giving into the pressure of Ruth's insistence. Her response to this concession might surprise you. After agreeing to travel with Ruth, she says "I am filled with bitterness because of how the Highest One has treated me. I left with a husband and two sons and I now return with nothing." Ruth is returning with Naomi, but Naomi sees her as nothing. She's clearly not so happy about having Ruth along.

This story could be read in many different ways, but at its core it's really about people whose lives are in constant movement toward new beginnings. And as their stories demonstrate, not all new beginnings are welcomed. Not all new beginnings are joyful. Some cause bitterness and frustration, and even happy beginnings can come with challenges.

National Public Radio's Rhi-tu Chatter-jee recently interviewed a boy and his family who fled Afghanistan to settle here in Maine. She highlights that when people flee violence and persecution to come to a new country, the toll of what they've experienced can haunt them for a long time, even after they're physically safe.

12-year-old Mujib and his family moved into a small, sparsely furnished apartment in Lewiston in January. He had spent his younger years growing up in Afghanistan's third-largest city where they had a house with a big garden, and where Mujib remembers spending most of the summer doing the thing he loved most: flying kites on the roof of his house.

But life as Mujib knew it came to a halt in 2021 when the Taliban took control of the country. He describes it as being scary. "They did a lot of scary things right in front of people's eyes" he says... "I thought they would come to my home and arrest me and beat me too."

Mujib's mother, Khadija, worked as a nurse and women's rights advocate. Part of her job was to identify and advocate for girls and women who were forced into marriage or were victims of domestic violence. And that made her a target for the Taliban. So she, her husband and her two sons stayed in hiding at a relative's house. Finally, in 2023, they received permission to leave the country and arrived in Lewiston, Maine, a city now home to a few resettled communities, including Somali and Bhutanese.

Khadija says she's grateful to be in Maine. But the chronic stress of the past few years still haunts the family. And 12-year-old Mujib has struggled the most. His mother says he's easily triggered by sudden noises and school fills him with anxiety. All of which is to be expected when you've been through the sort of frightening, traumatic events that he's been through. New beginnings can be very hard.

The Advent connection between Ruth and Naomi, Mary, Joseph and Jesus as well as Mujib and his family is probably obvious. All of them were, at one point or another, immigrants in need of a community of care. All of them were in need of a place where peace prevails; a place where they could begin a new life without fear.

At Advent, we recognize that the peace we all long for is most fully embodied in the form of a tiny baby born in Bethlehem. A baby who, as it says in the Gospel of Luke, by the tender mercy of God, shines a light that breaks upon the world like the dawn of a new day, illuminating those who sit in lonely places, and those who face death on a daily basis, guiding them into a new way of being. This Jesus became our sustenance, our security, our safety showing us how to approach all our new experiences from a place of peace.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said that "It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it." The gift of the Christ child, especially in the face of difficult and frightening change, is a path of peace that one works at and nurtures in oneself and in others.

As Christians, we believe, as the Rev. Sarah Speed so eloquently describes it, in a God who walks with us in the valley, dances with us on the mountaintop, sings with us through the night and rejoices in the morning. We believe that this with-us God has wired us for relationship, having said from the very first that "Humans should not be

alone.” And so we work at making peace together. Even when we don’t want to, or when we are convinced, like Naomi, that we don’t need anyone to walk with us and help us. The spirit of Christ urges us, with great insistence, to travel with one another and face our new beginnings together.

In an effort to be who God calls us to be, to live like the Trinity - connected, united, and centered - Like Naomi needed Ruth, or Mary and baby Jesus needed Joseph, or Mujib and his family needed those who helped them escape. We too need each other. We need to link arms and walk into the unknown of whatever new thing awaits us, taking deep breaths, and helping one another carry our fears and frustrations.

Whether you are walking into hostile territory  
Or starting a new life in a strange and unfamiliar place;  
Whether you are beginning something new that you have chosen  
Or something that has been thrust upon you;  
You shouldn’t have to go through it alone.

The path is rarely simple or easy, and our search for peace and stability will continue until the end of time. Thanks be to God for all who walk alongside us, and for those

who not only talk about peace or simply believe in it, but do the work of bringing peace into every new moment. Amen.