

Denise Carrell
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These Threads of Grief

Ruth 1:1-17; Revelation 21:1-4

In the land of Judah, there had been a great famine, one that had lasted for years. With it, famine brings crushing hunger, mass starvation, widespread disease, and death. And as result, the people were in the midst of communal loss and collective trauma. This is where our story begins: in a land that had suffered so much, in the reverberations of a shared grief.

As part of a community of care in the midst of this sorrow, Naomi and Emilech would have attended many funerals. And in the Jewish tradition, their people wouldn't be left to mourn alone. The custom of Shiva is an ancient practice of communal grieving. Immediately after a burial, the family gathers in the home of the deceased to observe a week of uninterrupted mourning. As the observance begins, a family member will light the shiva candle which burns for seven days. This candle serves as a mark of respect for the deceased, the flame a symbol of their soul. Mourners will usually wear a torn black ribbon on their clothing, or even tear the clothing over their heart. This practice a symbol of the heartbreak of loss. Then the community gathers, sitting on low stools or benches around the mourners, providing the gift of presence. Three times a day, they say the Kaddish: a prayer that praises God in their grief, expressing hope that the messianic kingdom will come soon and bring peace to the world.

I imagine the sound of the Kaddish reverberating through the land as the people went from house to house, holding one another in loving support.

Eventually, Naomi and Elimelech leave their famine-wrought land and move to Moab, a country with a wrought connection to Israel. Suffice it to say, this was probably not an easy decision. A clue as to why they may have left can be found in the meanings of their son's names: both Mahlon and Chilion mean sickness — perhaps a result of a childhood spent in a land wrought with famine. So, this family who had experienced traumatic communal loss now lost that very community along with their homeland.

And then, suddenly Elimelech died, leaving Ruth and her boys in a new foreign land.

What could she have been thinking?

Later, Naomi's sons marry Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth. But tragedy abounded: and after ten years of childless marriages, both sons died as well.

There is layer upon layer of loss in the first chapter of this story.

Losses with which we can identify. Losses we have experienced. Losses we may still be carrying deep in the heaviness of our hearts.

But there's something beautiful that happens in this part of the story. After all this pain, Naomi is done with this land that had taken so much and sets out to return home to her people, to Judah. But these Moabite women go with her. They didn't have to — in fact, Naomi tries to send them back to their families, insisting she has nothing more to offer them. But they are not

following her out of need. The bond between the women is deep, an unanticipated loyalty found on the road, a precious love shared by this tiny community.

And as they weep together on the road, clinging to one another in love, I am reminded of the Shiva observance: of a community committed to hold one another — of the commitment to never let anyone mourn alone.

These three women. These three women who had lived in the depth of sadness, of trauma. These three women are woven together by the threads of their shared grief. And in this communal moment on the road, it is their love that makes it holy.

So often when I have heard this story, I have heard it as one of Orpah's failure: even her name indicates judgment: it means "back of the neck" — solidifying that she will always be remembered as the one who left.

But as I read this story, I read connection. I read love. I read a story of women supporting one another, understanding one another's story in a way that is only possible in community. And when Orpah goes home, she goes home to her mother. She goes home to a community. None of these women are abandoned, left to carry the weight of their loss alone.

And *that's* the story for us today. As we come together on this All Saints Sunday, as we remember those we have lost to death, as we acknowledge the collective trauma we have experienced in the last few years, as we feel the weight in our chests of a grief we cannot name, we do it here. We bear all of this in community. We are not going through any of our losses alone.

So today, we light candles for those we have lost. We light candles for those who we will never know because their lives were ended by tragedy, by sickness, by war. We light candles for those whose lives have been stolen by hatred, by bigotry, by racist violence. Those lost to mental and physical illness, to addiction, to victimization.

We light candles because no one should mourn alone. We light candles because God is the light in the darkness that darkness cannot overcome, and sometimes we need a symbol to remember that. We light candles because we hold to the promise that death does not have the final word. That our God came and lived among us, died, and rose again, and because of this God, we can hold onto the promise that resurrection is part of our story.

We light candles to remember that life is beautiful, and that community is holy and that we are not alone. Amen.