

THE PASTOR'S SERMON

Please note that the following are the pastor's notes for his sermon and may therefore have some grammatical or spelling errors, etc.

“Decisions that Bring Wholeness”

Sunday, October 10

Ruth 1:1-18

Making decisions is part of our daily routine. We all make decisions on a daily basis. We decide every morning how we will dress or what we will have for breakfast. We then decide on many of the activities of the day in our work, our studies, or in our family life. Even on our way to shop in the supermarket, we decide what we will or will not buy. And although these decisions seem to be minimal, we make them almost automatically.

It is essential to know how to make decisions in our life. We constantly find ourselves with the dilemma of choosing between two or more alternatives.

Some decisions are easy to make because they have little impact on our future. However, there are other challenging and complex situations to decide. In the short or long term, decisions will affect our own personal fulfillment, such as academic or professional decisions, marital and family life, or life and survival decisions.

A few months ago, I read Malala Yousafzai's autobiographical book. The book is simply called "Malala." She is a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest Nobel Peace Prize in the history of these awards. After she lived a life of discrimination for wanting to study and educate herself, she decided to fight for education rights, not only for her but also for the women of her country and around the world. She writes, "I loved school. But everything changed when the Taliban took control of our town in Swat Valley. The extremists banned many things - like owning a television and playing music - and enforced harsh punishments for those who defied their orders. And they said girls could no longer go to school."

On the morning of October 9, 2012, 15-year-old Malala was shot by the Taliban. This changed her life, and after having suffered this terrorist attack, she had to make both small and big decisions in her life. She left her country as a way to protect her safety and that of her family. In one of those moments, she said: "It is very important to know who you are. To make decisions. To show who you are."

Regardless of the decisions that we have to make, many decisions take us to places we have not thought of before; sometimes unwanted or uncertain places.

Places where the unknown becomes known, and the unexpected finds us on the road to a new reality.

Think about the decisions you have had to make in your life. Where did these decisions take you? Were those decisions what you expected? Did everything turn out better or worse than what you had in mind?

Today's biblical story tells us about decisions. It begins within one of the most tumultuous seasons in Jewish history: the time of the judges. There was a great famine in the land. So Naomi, her husband, and her two sons moved to the pagan land of Moab to find food (Ruth 1: 1-2).

While in Moab, the two sons married two women from that land - Ruth and Orpah. After ten years in Moab, the situation deteriorated. The three husbands died, so Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah had a tough time of decisions.

These three women would suffer abandonment and destitution because they did not have husbands to supply their primary food, housing, and other necessities. Besides that, they also had no children of their own; no one to rely on or care for them as they grew older. This situation was equivalent to a death sentence for Naomi. According to the law, it was very likely that these three women would have to beg for

the rest of their lives. Their future looked really uncertain.

On the other hand, Ruth and Orpah were still in their youth, probably around 25 years old. When Naomi learned that the famine had ended (Ruth 1: 6), she was determined to return to Israel, her homeland. Naomi makes a decision and decides to free her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah from any commitment they had with her. After all, they were from Moab; why should they go back to a foreign land? Naomi talked to them and advised them to return to their families, remarry, and rebuild their lives. Orpah followed the advice of her mother-in-law and stayed in Moab to rebuild her life. But Ruth refused (Ruth 1: 8-18) to abandon her mother-in-law, accompanying her on her uncertain journey to Israel.

What did this decision bring to Ruth's life?

Ruth could easily have had a very comfortable life in Moab, being welcomed back to her parent's home and perhaps remarrying someone from her land. On the contrary, with her decision to remain by Naomi's side, she awaited a somewhat uncertain and challenging future in Israel for several reasons. First, she was a woman, and unfortunately, women were considered property in the patriarchal worldview. Second, she was a widow; she did not have a husband or a relative who

could support her; she had to beg by law. And third, Ruth was an immigrant in a strange land, so her rights were almost nil. In short, the possible scenario was not at all favorable.

However, Ruth takes a step of faith accompanying her mother-in-law, trusting that this new journey, the God she has accepted, will accompany them. It is there where we read and resound in our ears the beautiful words of Ruth saying to her mother-in-law Naomi:

"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

These were encouraging words for Naomi. But more importantly, these words of Ruth show great faith. She doesn't know what is to come; but even so, she trusts that God will guide them in her walk.

Isn't that the same journey of faith that you and I had to experience at the beginning of this time of pandemic? Looking to an uncertain future, an unknown future? Or did you know what would happen in this new era? I don't know about you, but I didn't know.

During this time, the church staff and leadership have been reading and reflecting on a book called "The Post Quarantine Church," written by Thom S. Rainer. In one of his chapters, he says: "The revival of neighborhood churches in particular and the renewed focus of congregations on their communities, in general, are exciting developments. God is truly using challenging and tragic time to bring things together for his glory "(p.52)

What does it mean to look at the future as a whole?
When we are in a challenging and tragic time?

Malala made a decision to help women develop through education, and this had consequences for her life. But that decision allowed many in this world to understand her reality and that of other women. And not only that, her movement was heard to the point of receiving the Nobel Prize.

Ruth made the decision to go with her mother-in-law at a time of uncertainty for their lives. Her husband dead, without a promising future. But this decision brought her the blessing of meeting her new husband - Boaz, of having a family, of recreating her existence in the eyes of God (Ruth 2.)

We know that God gave us free will to make decisions on our own. But what part of those decisions are shared with God? How many of these decisions are made with the assurance that God is leading us in them?

If you did not know, this pandemic has been a time of many decisions since day one. And we will continue to make decisions on a daily basis. But you know what the difference is? Decisions are made with the church in mind, with God's direction in front of us.

Ruth experienced changes. But she left these decisions in the hands of God so that God would renew her life and give her new wings to fly. Ruth left the safety of Moab. She left what assured her a promising future, according to human eyes, in order to follow the will of God.

Are you willing to share your decisions with God? Are you willing to let God guide the process? Can you feel the divine presence in your decisions?

In a time of decision, King David seeking divine guidance and protection, says in Psalm 25: 4, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. " May God guide our decisions, even when they seem complex and challenging. Amen.