DIALOG
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VIVA VOX

THE BARLEY HARVEST

/A *sermon preached to the congregation of the Church of the Covenant, Boston. Massachusetts, by H. Paul Santmire, at the ordination of* N'ancv *Elder*

The Text: Ruth 1:22.

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I

My text is from the first chapter ot Ruth, the last part of the twenty-second verse I do not know whether anyone else in the historx of the church has ever preached on this text, but I choose it today, Nancy, for you especially, but also for all the rest of us who are committed, along with you. to the universal ministry of the church And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest "

I also have a theme, which I would like to explain to you

As you know. I have lately left the ministry in higher education, where I served for fifteen years, in order to enter the parish ministry I his move has not been without some anxious moments for me because in many ways I'm entering an entirely new world So—I confess —the last week bet ore I assumed mv new post. I busied myself looking through a whole range ot how-to books about the parish.

One of them drew my particular attention, not so much due to its substance, but more due to its subject. It's called *Survival Tactics in the Parish.* Now I quickly concluded that something was very much awry with that way of putting the question.

As I paged through the book I had the feeling that looking at that volume at that moment In my life was rather like someone who was about to be married in a week paging through Masters and Johnson Too little, too late

Surviving is not the question, in any case Anyone who knows the Book of Acts ought to know that "And when they had prayed." we're told, "the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of Cod with boldness Sur viving is not the question The biblical question has to do with *thriving.*

So that's the question I want to take up thi> afternoon, with a view to our text from Ruth about the barlev harvest: *How do you thrive in the ministry?*

II

You and I, Nancy, and many others, have lately gained a new appreciation for the Book ot Ruth thanks to some new and imaginative literary exegesis But I don't recall whether any one has paid all that much heed to the barlev harvest

You probably have had the experience, as I have, of going back to see a film that you've seen before, maybe a number of times. When you do that, you do it not to be surprised by new twists in the story because you know them all You go back to see that film in order to relish and to savor those twists in the story in a new wav

So when we read the Book of Ruth we need to be mindful of both dimensions. Foi this, above all else, is a story that's meant to be told again and again Is you look for them, you'll find many clues, many signals, that are meant for the hearers ot the story. who come back to it again and again, indicators that are woven into the fabric ot the narrative itself

Now the first chapter of the story is ostensibly about the bitterness of Naomi. She had gone to sojourn in a strange land, with her husband and two sons, due to a famine There, in Moab, her husband dies, and, ten years later, her two married sons also

Naomi decides to return to her homeland Her surviving daughters-in-law want to return with her back to Judah But Naomi's voice is plaintive, even hopeless No ' she says to her daughters-in-law, it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me " And the daughters-in-law weep

So Naomi begins her sad pilgrimage back to Judah, scarcely noticing, it seems, that Ruth is with her Her arrival in the town of Bethlehem in Judah causes a stir throughout the town, and the women say, "Is this Naomi?'

She responds: "Do not call me Naomi [which means 'pleasant'], but call me Mara [which means bitter'], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full and the Lord brought me back empty "

Lhis, then, is how the first chapter ends Naomi lias returned, full of bitterness, with Ruth the Moabitess The storyteller then adds. "And they - a me to Bethlehem at the beginning ot the barley harvest "

This is something of an obscure comment, appar- • • n11 \ w ith no particular purpose —as tar as Naomi's >tate of mind is concerned. So it's time for the barley harvest! What difference does that make in a world where Naomi has lost the fullness of her lite and is wracked bv bitterness?!

But can't you imagine the feelings of the hearers ot the story? *They* know what Naomi doesn't know I hey know where it's all heading They know that the barley harvest will be the occasion for Ruth to do her gleaning in the fields of Boaz They know that Boaz will eventually befriend Ruth, gently, and then marry her They know that very soon Naomi's bitterness wil! be turned to jov, that the story will end with the poignant, powerful scene of Naomi reaching out to take the child of Ruth and Boaz as her own heir, laving the infant in her bosom, becoming the child's nurse

Can't you imagine the hearers of the story smiling, looking at each other with relish, as they sit In the hearth, hearing of Naomi s bitterness yet knowing where it's all going?

You see. the barlev harvest, perhaps even more than the presence of Ruth at this point, is the literary signal —the glad news —that Naomi need not be called Mara, that one thing will lead to another in God's good time: and that God will bless her life tully, once again, notwithstanding the trials and tribulations of the present hour

So I come to my first piece of holy advice that I want to offer you, Nancy, this afternoon. How do vou thrive in the ministry? The first thing you need to do is to *reclaim the promise of Cod tor yourself.*

Read the story of your ministry with biblical eves, the eyes of the hearers, as well as the eves of someone who experiences the bitterness that life r an sometimes thrust upon us 1 here may be times when you will feel that your name should be Mara, not Naomi. There may be times when you will weep because you have experienced the loss of friends or programs you've worked diligently on or even of abilities which you once had taken for granted. There may be times, indeed, when, like Naomi, you experience yourself as abandoned by God, alone, full of bitterness, rather than brimming with life.

In such moments, and in all moments of your ministry, reclaim the promise of God for yourself Head for the promised land Reach out for that promise for yourself, draw it to your bosom, cradle it gently in your arms, become the nursemaid of that promise.

It's reported that a group of young Korean Christians, upon being arrested by the dictatorial authorities of the South Korean government, and thrown harshly into jail for no good reason, immediately began to sing "We Shall Overcome

Have you ever wondered, as I have, why the apostles in the Book of Acts so regularly start singing hymns when they're thrown into prison? An odd thing to do, on the face of it

But that's the first thing they do, characteristically: reclaim the promise of God for themselves. They look at their future with the eyes of biblical hope. They reach out and lay hold of the promise of God They bring it to their breasts. They become its nursemaid, no matter how bitter their experiences mav be.

III

This leads me to my second piece of holy advice that I want to offer you this afternoon, Nancy How-to thrive in the ministry? Yes, remember to reclaim the promise of God for yourself. When in doubt head toward the promised land and reach out for that promise for yourself.

But you can't do that alone. So, all the more so, I counsel vou not only to reclaim the promise of God for yourself, but to *acclaim the promise of Cod with the people.*

Naomi comes back, burdened and embittered with her experience in Moab I see the image of one whose head is low. who's trudging along the road, barely able to speak perhaps —a woman who is seriously depressed, if you want to speak it straight out in clinical terms

Now by some deep impulse, which the Book of Acts would surely call the Holy Spirit, she's doing the right thing. She's returning from her abandonment and isolation in Moab, to be with the people of promise. She's heading in the direction of reclaiming the promise of God for herself But it doesn't seem to work She arrives in the land of promise, and things almost seem worse for her than ever before

The women ask her ' Is this Naomi?" Are vou the one whom we know, the one who is full of the delights of life? She replies bluntly —I hear deep anger in her voice—No, I am not this woman of fullness. I am a woman of bitterness. Call me Mara, not Naomi.

Then what happens? Thanks to Phyllis Trible we now have a very good interpretive framework for answering that question.

At one point, Boaz is talking to Ruth as he is befriending her. He says: "The Lord recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given

to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." Under whose wings. . . .

Naomi, like Ruth, has taken refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. Operationally, that means that Naomi allows herself to be taken under the wings of the community of women who receive her back into their midst. They greet her as soon as she returns. And it is they, at the very end, who encircle her and celebrate with her the reclaiming of the promise in her life.

Naomi is embraced by the people of the promise, particularly the women, as Ruth is befriended by Boaz. And, in this way, Naomi allows herself to be lifted up by the community's acclamation of the promise.

Can't you see her coming back to life? Can't you see her crying her bitterness out, surrounded by her friends? Can't you see her giving voice to her anger at her abandonment in Moab? Can't you hear her friends saying to her, as she begins to smile through the tears: "But you have us, Naomi; you have the faithful Ruth and the gentle Boaz Look around you Look through your tears at your friends who will not forsake you. who stand ready always to comfort you."

There is a game, Nancy, which I know you know, current in some circles of the Human Potential Movement. Now I have some critical things to say about this movement overall, but for now I want to remind you of this exercise, because perhaps there, as elsewhere, the people of the promise can learn something from those Moabites in the Human Potential Movement '

It's called a trust circle, as you know. One form of it is for a group of people to kneel down next to one of the members who's lying on her or his back on the floor, relaxed as much as possible, eyes closed. They put their hands together all around the one who's lying there, and lift her or him into the air. often without any sense of effort whatsoever

If you are that person, you can feel yourself light and lifted up, psychologically as well as physically. And when they gently rest you on the floor again, your initial anxiety may well be gone. Even on the floor you may continue to feel yourself light and lifted up. as the people kneel around you, waiting for you to open your eyes.

Now I don't know whether most practitioners in the Human Potential Movement reallv know what that experience is all about Some of them do, I'm sure But. in any case, that was the kind of experience Naomi had when she headed home to the land of promise. She was made light and uplifted by the friendship of the people of promise. As she returned to their midst, she was surrounded by their acclaim for the promise of God, and so she was able to reclaim that promise for herself.

I want to share with you, in this regard, what may well be a liturgical idiosyncracy or a denominational peculiarity, but I don't think so. I have always felt much better about myself leading worship, preaching, and administering the sacraments as a called and ordained minister, when I've been able to get myself dressed up as fully as possible in clerical vestments. For a while, 1 used to wonder whether I had something to hide. But then I decided that that was missing the point.

Particularly the stole you wear around your neck Its historical origins are obscure. Its historical meaning in early centuries is also obscure. All we know for sure is that it has come to be worn by the ordained, deacons and priests, as a sign of their office. Whether for some reason of historical knowledge that escapes me now, or because that's what my mother told me when I was ordained, I have always identified the stole with the yoke of Christ

"Take my yoke upon you." says Jesus, "and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light " (Matthew 12:29f.)

So I believe, privately, that the people of the promise wrap me in these vestments, kneeling down beside me in friendship, and lift me to the work of my calling. So I believe, privately, that the yoke which they place around my neck as they lift me is indeed the yoke of Christ, and that his yoke is easy and his burden light

But however you may feel about your vestments, Nancy, I counsel you this afternoon — yes, surely reclaim the promise of God for yourself; but to do so, enter first into the midst of the people of promise. Hear them acclaim the promise of God for you, all around you. Feel light and lifted up as they lay their hands upon you, as they yoke you with Christ, to be his minister

That's how Naomi felt, I believe, in her time of bitterness, as she was uplifted by the people of promise. That's how you can feel, too, during the dark and lonely days of your ministry, as well as during the times of exuberance and confidence.

This is the promise of the barley harvest, now made real for Naomi as the women gather around her and praise God: "Blessed be the Lord. . ," they say. " [God] shall be a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age

IV

How do you thrive in the ministry? You claim the promise of God for yourself. To do that, you acclaim the promise of God with the people. Then I have one last piece of holy advice for you, Nancy,

this day of your ordination: to thrive in the ministry you will also want to *proclaim the promise of Cod to the whole world.* You will naturally want to share what you have been given, yet in this very specific way.

Some ten years ago. Cod blessed me richly one Easter Day. Not only because it was Easter, but because there was a baptism that morning. And not only because there was a baptism, but also because the infant I was baptizing was my son.

I recall that moment now, because I remember vividly the time after he had been immersed three times under the cold waters in that huge white crock jar that we used that day. I remember, at that moment, holding this lovely bumpy infant up in the air in his nakedness, so that all might see this new child of Cod and delight in the promise of Cod for the whole creation

It was naturally important to me that this child was my son But far beyond that, as I held him up for all to see, I was overcome by a power not of this world In so doing, I now believe, the Spirit of God was empowering me to proclaim the promise of God to the whole wo'ld.

I think I am right in supposing that a similar sense of holy empowerment must have been overwhelming Naomi, at the end of our story, as she took the Cod-given child of promise, laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. I think I am right in supposing that, in her own powerful way, with that child cradled in her arms, she was proclaiming the promise of God to the whole world

Here at the end it's important to step back once again from the flow of the narrative and to hear it as the hearers were intended to hear it. For this was no ordinary child, just as that barley harvest was no ordinary barley harvest. The undercurrents of the ending of the whole story are, indeed, positively Messianic.

So I want to show you now, in conclusion, how we can see the circle of hearers widening to include not only Israel in the fourth century, let us say, but also the first century church and even ourselves, this day.

Naomi takes the child to her bosom, demonstrably proclaiming him to be the one in whom her life is restored Then the women gather around her and give the child a name; and as they do they echo Naomi's visible proclamation in words that are reminiscent of an angel chorus in the same Bethlehem centuries later: “And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed," we're told. “He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."

And now you and I remember that right at the beginning of the story we were given another clue, another signal, that we may have missed All along, even in the times of her deepest despair on her pilgrimage, Naomi had resolved to go to Bethlehem, the city of David.

Is this not a wonderful clue, standing forth for us to hear, like a string quartet in the subway station? Right in our text we hear: "And they came to *Bethlehem* at the beginning of barley harvest."

So we, the hearers, sitting around this hearth here, as we hear mention of the name of David and the city of David, Bethlehem, will respond with relish, looking at each other knowingly, just like the first hearers did when they heard about the barley harvest.

For you and I know where this story's going. We know who the Son of David will be. We know the One who will, through his death and resurrection, fill up the whole promise of God, for the sake of the whole world, the One who is gentle and lowly in heart, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. We know this joyous outcome of the story in our hearts, and so we cannot help but tell the whole world. So we immediately lean forward, to tell the whole story, as we know it.

Nancy, you have had a lot of good training in pastoral counseling. You have gone through this training program and that training program So many that I can´t remember them all. Through all manner of difficult and happy experiences you have been trained to be a good listener. I hope you will never lose those listening skills, and the sensitive human heart you bring to the most trying of situations. All that is essential for your ministry.

But you are being ordained today into a vocation that calls for more than listening, in both word and deed. In the language of the Book of Acts, you are being set aside this day to proclaim the Word of God with boldness, come what may, to the whole world. You are being called to take the risk of lifting up the fragile child of promise for the whole world to see, to show forth this child of Obed, Jesus, to all nations — beginning at the center of the world, Plymouth

This calling may well cost you. If you live and speak the Word of God with boldness, you may shake up the brothers and sisters at Plymouth, when they may have been expecting you mainly to listen. If you live and speak the Word of God with boldness, indeed, you may shake up yourself, since to do that you have to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is no respecter of well-planned career goals. You might even find yourself in jail some day, like Peter and John, like those South Korean students.

V.

But this is how to thrive in the ministry, if I under-

stand the Word of God aright: you *reclaim* the promise of God for yourself; you *acclaim* the promise of God with the people; and you *proclaim* the promise of God to the whole world.

All these good biblical truths, I believe, are implicit in this one glorious text: “And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest."

And I who have been gleaning in this field for more than a day, offer them to you, Nancy, as the fruits of my own labors, my own struggles, my own joys, in the ordained ministry, as Ruth went to Naomi at the end of her first day's labor, with the fruits of her gleaning.

I offer them to you with the prayer that you indeed will do more than survive in the ministry, but that by the Spirit of God you will thrive, from this day forward.

"And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of Cod with boldness." So be it Amen