

Bethany Theological Seminary Commencement
May 8, 2021
Speaker: Rev. Dr. Amy S. Gall Ritchie,

I am so happy to be here with you all today, a seminary dreamed into being by visionaries, where visionaries still dream.

I honor the graduates, my colleagues now. You graduates who are joining online in your own spaces, and you who are present in Nicarry Chapel. So much love and joy to you.

I Honor family and friends who have gathered to celebrate. For we know, we know, no seminarian can do this complex, life changing, soul impacting, vocabulary enhancing thing without you.

I thank the staff and administrative faculty of Bethany Seminary, you are the body that breathes the work of this institution.

I honor the teaching faculty, whose words and ways keep a balance of tradition, scholarship, imagination with forecasting the coming and breakthrough understandings that are just hinted at.

I thank board member David McFadden here on behalf of Board Chair Eric Bishop, and Academic Dean, Steve Schweitzer, and President Jeff Carter for this return home. It is a deep delight, even as we all carry the visual and visceral reality of the pandemic's impact on what should have been the fullness of tradition.

Will you pray with me?

O Ever Forwarding God

We see these graduates, their sacrifices, their becoming, and we celebrate their leaving and launching. Be in the words spoken now, and in the imaginations that catch them. Amen.

Ruth 1:6-22

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope

for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said,

*“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”*

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them,

*“Call me no longer Naomi,
call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full,
but the LORD has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the LORD has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty^[e] has brought calamity upon me?”*

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Naomi stands in the barren, mountainous, nomadland.

She was taken along with her children, by Elimalech her husband, to a new land, with hopes of food and life. She left her kin, her routines, what she knew so that her family line would survive.

Naomi stands in the barren, dry, nomadland.

Her husband, dead.

Her two sons, dead.

Her two daughters-in-law from other peoples, other gods, well they have provided no heirs. The line is dead.

So, Naomi is going home. This is not what she signed up for. It was not what she imagined. It was not anything that she wanted.

Naomi was empty, when she had thought she'd be full. Naomi was barren, and barren again and barren again. No sons, no heirs, too old to provide new husbands for Ruth and Orpah.

The story of Ruth cannot be told without Naomi.

Naomi, is a name that means delight, pleasantness. Biblical wisdom scholar Andre LaCocque picks at an ancient thread that *Naomi* may have been an old theophoric name, meaning *God is my delight*, like an interweaving of the Divine presence into a human vessel. Other scholars may not agree. LaCocque has an agenda, and that is in the meaning of the names. The character names alone, tell the framework of the story. Meanings like...

God is King

Sickness

destruction

Seed of the Father

delight

Neck

friend

house of bread

strength

servant of God

And the naming of God as YHWH and Shaddai.

Can you hear the story taking shape? The story you know as the story of Ruth?

The story of Naomi is carefully crafted, it is a hearty exegetical wonder, it is a revealing of redemption.

To highlight the importance of the meaning of the names here, we must also speak of the renaming that Naomi does for herself.

After her moment of sending her daughters-in-law away, after Ruth persistently tags along, after Naomi stops speaking to her altogether on that long road ahead, they journey back to Bethlehem. House of Bread. Ironic. Naomi had left the family home in Bethlehem because there was no food. Her family went into a dry, stony, mountainous land that was not their own. Lived among people who were so not their people, ...those untouchable Moabite enemies, and now only the two women return years later to the plenty of the Bethlehem harvest.

Naomi and Ruth walk back into town empty as can be, after chasing fullness. Mara is Naomi's name now. Bitter. In her bitterness, she gives them all *what for* about God. Biblical translator and Bethany graduate Kristy Shellenberger has influenced my understanding of this point in the storyline.

The town is stirred up. Naomi/Mara is stirred up. It is a stirring, like a growing murmur, a disquietude, like a ringing in the ear that won't quit. Not like gossip by idle folk at the well in the town square when someone returns home. It is a rising rousing of noise

- like the moment the arc of the covenant is returned,
- like the disruption at the hand of God's destruction,
- like the celebration when Solomon is made King,
- like the bitter mourning noise of grief we make when God is not to be found.

It is a stirring that is found in our Hebrew bible at the most profound moments of human existence; when God is and when God is not.

Naomi, now Mara, names God to the people....Shaddai, Almighty, said in my ear with a sarcastic snarl. Shaddai, the one who was to fill her with children and life instead has emptied her like a worn out grain sack.

She names YHWH, the restorer...who left her to fend for herself.

She returns to the name SHADDAI a second time, her maternal grief so deep. She is having none of it. This is the critical apex in Naomi's story. When she is no longer who she once knew herself to be. When God is no longer who she knew God to be.

After this, we veer off into Ruth's story of grain, winnowing and plotting, It is Ruth's story, but it cannot be told without Naomi.

Today, graduates, is not the apex of your seminary story: your certificate, your MDiv, your MA. It is a result of the stirring, the murmurings that you opened yourself to when you applied to this seminary, and were accepted.

Today is a result of the stirring that you opened yourself to when you sacrificed what you knew and entered a new community that would shape, challenge, allow for your becoming through some sharp accountability and hard-won knowledge.

Like Naomi, you have complained bitterly. I bear in me, like the beat of my heart, those words, those emotions, those fears and indignations, as you complained honestly over cups of coffee at the local shop. You were Mara at times. You were desolate at times. There were times when returning home to what you knew before sounded like the right thing to do.

But,

there were also stirrings in the dark watches of the night, when you sat with the naked truth, the revealed presence, the awesome majesty of the Sacred before you, on your screen, found in the words you just typed that came flowing from your unleashed awakenings.

Those moments when you knew you could no longer return to who you once were, what you once knew, and to the God out there you believed you knew well enough.

That was your apex. That was the moment you became a seminarian. When it all fell to pieces, the many times it fell to pieces, and then when your faith, your path, your purpose were refashioned in a way you never expected.

You have named and renamed yourselves in every paper you turned in:

- With every exegesis you wrestled with.
- With every precise word chosen, like a found feather or tripped over stone
- With every verbal sparring with authors and professors.
- With each time you caught yourself disrespecting another person in the classroom, because of your own discomfort.
- With every fumble and holy save in your ministry formation placements.

And...

with every sacred moment when you opened yourself to listening well to someone with whom you strongly disagreed, with every sacred moment when you opened yourself to God/YHWH/SHADDAI striking you in the heart with explosions of understanding.

You have been queens and kings, servants and redeemers, you have been sick and destroyed, you have been delighted and bitter, you have been a clinging support of friendship. You have longed for what you once knew, and you have broken bread away from home. You have known the moments when God is and when God is not. Why would anyone come to seminary voluntarily?

But you did. You came for various reasons. Do you remember?

You stayed the course. I'm so proud of you. You listened to something deep within as you changed, as those reasons changed. That takes courage, because it is a public transformation. It wasn't easy and it took all you had to give. But you are not empty.

You committed yourselves to this world of heartsick woe, changing tides, and monumental joy to add your drop of change to the course of history. You are part of the oncoming, the vision, the chance taking, the risky innovation, the innocent shoulder shrug of the fools journey stepping into the unknown with your bundle of faith. How will you name God in your day? How do you name yourself today?

You all have shown your resilience. A resilience of going through and continuing on. The only way to become resilient is to hold tight to continuance. To be in the hard places until the hard places are no longer.

A graduate program is a hard place of seeing what you're made of.
A pandemic is a hard place of being what you're made of.

This pandemic during your seminary experience, well It's nothing personal, this disruption, these tender losses, the unfair imposition of what we didn't want and hadn't imagined. But it was all yours. Its all of ours. All of us. The whole world is in a nomadland of "*what just happened and what is going to happen?*"

How are you showing up in this global moment? Do you like what you discovered in yourself? How did you show up in your own personal and particular seminary moments? How did it feel when you took a hard look, a deep breath, and readied yourself for the justice, the compassion, the preaching, the poetics that have been calling you forward?

Naomi kept going forward. She didn't remain Mara, bitter. In the storyline, she returned to her truer name almost immediately after confessing her bitter disappointment. It was an act of survival to continue on. It also showed us who she was; a tough, feisty, adaptable woman who could return unprotected through borderlands, who could calculate opportunity, who knew the tradition to use it for a different future.

Will you, on this day of completion, walk forward with your feisty selves, your vision wide, your courage moving every muscle in your legs toward the unknown?

Oh, that you *would* calculate opportunities to set a new course.

Oh, that you *would* know your traditions so well that you turn them for a future that none of us yet see.

Oh, that you *would* hold tight to the human beings next to you, on zoom, across the ocean, enemies and friends, and see a new world coming.

Graduates, you will

- write that novel,
- be a peacemaker
- advance your culture
- get another degree
- nuance truth words that the tongue longs to taste
- unleash your mediation skills
- intersect gaming and faith
- grow as a pastor and vision lead your congregation
- bring a theopoetic to daily life and expressive performance which is life
- fearlessly co-create the integration of our siblings of every hue and identity expression
- partner with nature for the interweaving of the divine
- teach, preach, sing
- Become.
- Be.

You will.

You are full of the soul defining triumphs and disappointments of the human experience. You Are. And we see you. This full Bethany story, the whole world's story cannot be told without you.

At the end of the book of Ruth comes the genealogy that begins with an outsider that leads to a King and brings us to the incarnation.

But just before the genealogy, just before we have a raggedy site line to whats ahead ...Naomi is redeemed. She is made full. Though she could not bear more children to replace her two sons, though she could not produce new husbands to fulfill the marital expectations for Ruth and Orpah, though her full faith rested in the hands of Boaz, a redeeming kinsman, her redemption was finally realized through a Moabite woman, and the baby Obed.

With the whole community as witness, Naomi steps into her full place, her full story. She is met with a fullness of God, in the dust and disappointment that clung to her sandals, in the restoration that would create a royal line, an unexpected future, and at ultimately, in her very being.

For Naomi now becomes the embodiment of Shaddai, the interweaving of the divine presence in the human vessel holding continuance tightly to her redeemed and nourishing body.

You graduates,

With the whole community as witness, Step into your full place, your full story knowing that our God who guides us is within our bitter breath and newborn hope.

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