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I've moved around a lot: from Goshen to Greencastle to Martinsville to Indianapolis. Then to Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and back home to Indiana. It's been an adventure along the way, filled with new experiences, growth, struggles, frustrations, joy, fear, disappointments, and fulfillment. Each place has been unique, but many places have also been very similar. I've made close friends and experienced the betrayal of those closest to me.

For many people these days, moving seems to be a common part of life, and I'm curious: How many of you have moved from one town to another?

Moving is filled with a sense of excitement about exploring a new place, but sometimes it's filled with the fear of change. Many times, we may wonder while moving, in the face of uncertainty: where am I going?

Those who have faced this experience of transition may quickly identify with Naomi in the Book of Ruth. The narrator begins the story by telling us it took place during the "days when the judges ruled." The preceding Book of Judges ends

with the statement: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Although that may sound like a positive thing, the book of Judges is filled with stories of people who had gone astray, who did what they thought was best to serve their own interests yet had negative consequences for others. It was a wild and chaotic time, filled with wars and abuse of power. Since no king yet existed, tribes were ruled by local leaders, some who led well, but many who were a disaster.

To complicate life even more, a famine occurred, and in order to survive, Naomi and her husband and two sons left Bethlehem and went to Moab, a rival nation often in conflict with Israel to the east of the Dead Sea. But the story gets even worse—Naomi's husband dies. Now she's a single woman living in a foreign land, but at least she has two sons, who both marry Moabite wives. Just as things begin to get stable once again, life took a painful turn, and both her sons died, leaving three women without husbands, which in those days meant life would be difficult.

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The plotline turns once again when Naomi heard that her people back home in Israel had a good harvest, so she packed up and prepared to go back home, suggesting that her daughters-in-law go back to their own families. They objected and suggested they go with her, but Naomi replied, “Where are you going? What can I offer you? Even if I get married again and have more sons, would you wait for them to get old enough to marry?”

To Naomi, it made no sense for these two daughters-in-law to travel back with her. She could barely provide for herself. How would she feed two more people? Besides, would they be accepted back in her hometown—these women from a foreign rival nation? Nothing had seemed to go right in Naomi’s life. Why add more risk to her life? At this point she may have wondered, “Where am I going in life?”

Have you ever wondered that? Wondered where you are going? Sometimes we may go through life and suddenly wonder where we are. We go through the motions of getting an education, going to work each day, raising children, saving money, but then a crisis hits. Illness. Financial loss. Death of a loved

one. What once made sense seems to turn upside-down, and we face the question, “Where am I going? What once made sense now seems out-of-date. The map I had set for my journey seems tattered and worn. Places I had hoped to go seem to have fallen off the map. Where am I going?”

It’s a bit like what happened to a group of mountain climbers.

After a half day of climbing a range of mountains, a party of climbers came to the realization that they were lost. They took turns studying the map, and each tried to figure out where they were. One of the climbers began to match up the surrounding landmarks with the ones shown on the map as he confirmed his findings with his compass. After careful charting, he announced to the others, “See that big mountain over there?”

“Yes,” answered his fellow climbers eagerly.

“According to the map, we’re standing on top of it.”¹

Sometimes we might think we’re going in the right direction. We follow the rules. We go the church. We think we have all the answers, but then chaos still enters our lives. We wonder what we did

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wrong, and once again we may ask, “Where am I going?” We may seek out friends for help in navigating our direction, as was the case when

two friends met at a coffee shop. One was a woman whose life was a mess and she needed guidance and counsel from her friend. Her marriage was on the rocks, she had had an emotional breakdown, her social life was in ruins and yet when she came to ask for help, she was wearing a sweatshirt which had the slogan on it, “Jesus is the answer.”

Her friend took one look at it and said to her, “I think you should scrap the idea that Jesus is the answer. Because he never said that. He said, ‘I am the way.’ I think that you need to walk with him to find the answer to your problem.”²

When chaos hits our lives, sometimes what we believe may not always match up with the way life seems to be going. We may carry around the illusion in our minds that if we believe in Jesus or follow certain rules or attend church that life will flow smoothly. But life doesn’t work that way—no one is exempt from facing struggles.

I’ve heard stories from many people through the years who have stopped attending church or believing in God because of a tragedy in their lives. “I no longer believe in God,” they often reply, “for why would God let this happen to me?”

They carry the mistaken belief that God prevents all suffering, that if one believes in God, life will be filled only with blessings. They may have the belief that if they pray for an end to the struggle, that God will magically make the pain or loss immediately go away, and when it doesn’t, they stop believing in God.

Naomi’s also struggled with why bad things happened in her life, but finally she seems to get a break. Even when she told her daughters-in-law to return home to their families, Ruth stayed with her. Ruth spoke words to Naomi that couples today often ask to be read at their weddings. Even though the context of the words had nothing to do with a wedding, the promise that Ruth made to Naomi offers a promise that couples may make to one another:

I will go where you go,

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I will live where you live;
your people will be my people,
your God will be my God.

When they finally arrived at Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, people came out to greet her, asking, "Aren't you Naomi, who used to live here among us?"

She replied with a pun, for her name Naomi meant "pleasant," but instead she requested, "Call me Mara," which in the Hebrew language meant "bitter," for she explained, "God has dealt bitterly with me."

Have you ever felt bitter in life, wondered if God was treating you bitterly? Wondered where you are going and if God was traveling with you?

At times I've heard people ask, "Why is God doing this to me? I've lived a good life, so why is God punishing me?" I explain that God doesn't cause suffering or send punishment; God is not doing something bad in their lives. I offer another

perspective instead: God remains with us in the brokenness of our lives; God offers new possibilities within the chaos, tries to help us find another way. That's something Naomi and Ruth discovered, for their lives had a surprising turn once again—something we will hear about over the next three weeks.

In following God's way, we may encounter challenging pathways. Some are difficult. We may encounter obstacles. We may experience failures. Some will be exciting adventures. Some may be filled with fear and uncertainty. But one thing is certain: we do not travel alone, for God always accompanies us on our journey, offering us new possibilities when we go astray, helping us up when we fall or showing us new directions when we encounter obstacles.

Where are you going? Wherever you go, God goes with you, offering new possibilities each step of the way.

¹ Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for*

Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers (Kindle Locations 2044-2048). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #227.

² HomileticsOnline.com, 11-5-06.