

“Call Me Mara”

The Season of Advent is a season of expectant hope. As the world around us places no restraints on Christmas – the Church quietly, and slowly makes its way to the celebration of the Incarnation of Our Lord. It’s a time of waiting – of hope.

We begin with a promise and move towards its fulfillment. As we move through the Book of Ruth in our midweek Advent Services – we begin in emptiness – and in faith, look for fulfillment.

Naomi said to the women of Bethlehem: “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Naomi is an example for us – written into the Scriptures so that we may learn to share her faith. And where does faith begin? In contrition – that is, in sorrow over the condition in which you find yourself.

Naomi was in a bad place. The Lord Almighty had dealt bitterly with His servant – so bitterly that she wished to change her name. “Call me Mara,” she said – Mara, which means “bitter.”

In the midst of this bitterness – what great faith! Naomi radically changes her own name – but she refuses to do violence to the name of the Lord her God. Naomi will NOT curse the name of the Lord – even though He could have allowed her a better, happier course in life. Naomi will NOT utter the Lord’s name in vain. Without accusation and indictment – Naomi only speaks what has happened. She judges NOT the reasons why.

“I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.” To this simple statement of the fact – Naomi does not add – “The Lord emptied me because He takes more than He gives.”

Naomi will only say – “The Lord has testified against me.” She will NOT say – “The Lord was wrong.”

There is deep sorrow in Naomi's words – "The Almighty has brought calamity upon me." Yet, for all the sorrow, there is NO wringing of Naomi's hands – NO obsessing over the question, "Why has God done this to me?" And NO nighttime wondering whether the Lord Almighty take pleasure in our pain.

Great benefit is attached to Naomi's self-restraint – benefit for you – benefit for me – benefit for all who would hold their tongues and refuse to blame the Lord Almighty for their bitterness in life. By speaking only what has happened – by refusing to know the reasons why – Naomi has ...

... chosen NOT to add more sin into an already miserable situation. And what about us? Don't we already have enough struggles, without adding the further guilt and burden of blaming God? May the Lord our God grant such faith to us – that in our lives we may be content to speak only what has happened, WITHOUT pretending to know the reasons why. "My thoughts are not your thoughts," says the Lord, "Neither are your ways my ways." (Isaiah 55:8).

Trusting this truth revealed by God in His Word – Naomi has left herself open to the possibility that the Lord her God might know what He is doing!

Despite everything that has happened – Naomi still leaves room for the grace and mercy of her God. By not cursing God – Naomi leaves herself room for expectation, for hope, for deliverance – ultimately, for faith in Christ the Coming One.

May the Lord our God grant such expectation – such certainly of hope – to us, as we labor through hard days and keep vigil through sleepless nights. May the Lord make us participants in Naomi's patient resignation – especially as we bury our dead and suffer strain in countless ways. May the Lord grant to us a share of Naomi's faith – that when He empties us – we look forward to Him filling us with something new.

As you heard her say to her daughters – there was no hope for them of a son from her own body. “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet 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. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown?”

Looking at her own body, Naomi had no reason to hope for a son. Nevertheless – the end of this blessed book will show that God mercifully saw fit to do precisely that! God blessed Naomi with a long-awaited son by using the body of another woman, her daughter Ruth. In that day, all the women of Bethlehem rejoiced to say – “A son has been born to Naomi” (Ruth 4:17).

With such faith, let us keep ourselves open to the possibilities of God filling our emptiness – trusting that His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways.

Indeed, God has also blessed us with a long-awaited Son. And we have this promise from God – in the Son born of Mary’s womb – that all bitterness shall one day become pleasant again – and all emptiness filled.

God grant us such faith, in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord. Amen.

The grace of our Lord + Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.