

We Can't Go Alone

Second Sunday in Advent

Ruth 1:14-19, 22 Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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This year's Advent resource material from A Sanctified Art provides the following **overview** as a focal point for this season.

We invite you to enter this Advent season as if you are entering a sacred new chapter, holding fast to the reminders that will bolster you for the journey ahead. As you journey through this season, may you find words for belovedness and hope. May you find words for beginning again. For no matter what you are facing, no matter what this new day brings, love is your beginning.

Last Sunday, we entered into Advent with the words, "**You are a blessing**". Today, our focus is very poignant and timely, "**We can't go alone**". You could probably write your own personal sermon from this perspective. To help make the point that we can't go through life entirely alone, two Old Testament passages have been chosen. Interestingly, both of these texts are most often heard during wedding ceremonies. I've used references to the Book of Ruth before in comments about covenant relationships in marriage. Yet, as we will see, neither of these texts are inherently romantic or specific to romantic partnerships. Rather, they are about close personal relationships of any kind, the kind where we don't go it alone.

To connect these two scripture passages to this theme, the resource material states, "One of life's most essential lessons is that we are never meant to go alone. And yet, modern culture pushes us more and more into lonely silos. If Ruth had followed her culture's norms, she would have gone home to her family of origin [in Moab] after her husband died, but instead, she commits herself to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Together they form a new family and covenant. Ruth and Naomi travel together to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest, foreshadowing the journey Mary and Joseph will one day take to be counted in the census. Both Ruth and Naomi as well as Mary and Joseph are unconventional pairs, but **if God can bring unlikely people together, God can form us into a covenant community too.**"

That's where College Hill comes in. It is built into our congregation's Mission Statement that we strive to "build an inclusive community of faith" where everyone is welcome. That, in itself, is defined by **the covenant relationships we form with each other, relationships built on respect, integrity, trust, and compassion.**

Church, by its very nature, is a place where we can't go it alone. Saying that, there are many of us, whether single or not, who feel the pain of loneliness at times. And simply living alone doesn't necessarily mean being lonely. Yet, for many, **this time of year can be especially difficult. That serves as a call for us to reach out to those who are isolated or feel stuck in loneliness. This includes those who are grieving someone**

they have lost. Here at church, then, look around and reflect upon the ties that bind us to one another.

From the perspective of being lonely, when we are hurting, it can be tempting to turn away from love and connection. When this happens, it takes courage to reach out to another when feeling lonely. **What helps you when you are feeling lonely or isolated?**

Resource biblical commentator Kayla Craig offers the following reflection upon our theme that we can't go it alone. "As nights grow longer and the world seems to hush under the weight of winter, we often find ourselves cloistered and secluded as we wait for the world to thaw. But the season of Advent whispers an ancient truth: **We were never meant to journey these paths alone.** In a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps culture, choosing communal life is both radical—and deeply faithful. We see this in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth, a Moabite woman, could have returned to her birth family after her husband's death, following the expected path.

"Naomi, overcome with loss [of her husband and two sons] and steeped in grief, initially pushes Ruth away. Instead of leaving, Ruth chooses a radical commitment to her mother-in-law, saying, "Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go." Ruth's choice wasn't merely about devotion. It was the formation of a new family built not on blood but on kinship, on the daring belief that our lives are better intertwined. **Sorrow can make us shrink into ourselves, believing that solitude is safer than the vulnerability of connection.** When the weight of loneliness makes you feel forgotten and you wonder if your place in this world matters, it's easy to get sucked into a cascade of lies. You start thinking you're the only one carrying this weight of loneliness, the only one on the outside looking in. And it snowballs into other struggles like inadequacy, insecurity, and insignificance.

"Recent studies show that 1 in 2 Americans struggles with social disconnection. [Yes, that's 50%.] This leads Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, to call **loneliness an "epidemic."** Loneliness not only hurts us on an individual level, but negatively impacts society as a whole. Feelings of isolation hurt our mental and physical health. **Cultivating compassionate community is the antidote.** [Again, that's what we strive to accomplish here at College Hill.] Murthy says, "If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country.""

In our highly polarized and divided society, it's even more important that we don't go it alone. While we rightly talk a lot about being inclusive, **there are times, it must be admitted, that for our own well-being, especially our mental health, that we find connections with like-minded folks where we can lower our anxiety and stress.** We're better together. We are not created to do it alone. Even Jesus didn't go it alone!

As alluded to earlier, "the season of flickering candles and twinkling lights can have a shadow side filled with loneliness and grief. For many, it feels like anything but the happiest time of the year. And yet, **this season offers ample opportunity for kinship and connection**—to reach out to the grieving, to invite the lonely into our homes and hearts, and to show that in God's family, no one has to face their sorrows alone. **What would it look like to foster deep connections in this season**—not just gatherings marked by exchanging pleasantries but by sharing your messy, holy, complicated life?

"The wisdom of **Ecclesiastes** reminds us, "**Two are better than one . . . for if they fall, one will lift up the other.**" Though [also] often heard at weddings, this wisdom **speaks to**

the fundamental human need for connection, no matter the relationship or what season of life we're in."

Kayla Craig writes, "In each other's companionship, may we find the reflection of the One who, in becoming flesh, chose to be with us, to share in our humanity, and to show us that we need each other." May that be a guiding principle for us in all seasons of the year here at College Hill. **We need each other.** I'll close with a Blessing:

Beloved, you are not alone on this winding journey. May the companionship of fellow sojourners reflect the love of the One who—in becoming flesh—chose to journey alongside us. May the quilt of life warm you from the chill of isolation, and may the Spirit move you to compassion as you cultivate community, even in times of uncertainty.

Amen.

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