



Ruth & Naomi by He Qi, heqiart.com

Ruth 1:1- 1:22

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

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 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.

THIS WEEK, WE BEGIN A FOUR-WEEK SERIES ON THE BOOK OF RUTH—one week for each chapter. Ruth is one of two books in the Bible named after a woman, the other being Esther. And the story of Ruth is a story of personal loss and loyalty, a story of migration and movement that shows us how to welcome the stranger and care for those on the margins. Ruth was a Moabite, who moves to Israel. So it seems fitting to hear now the poem by Emma Lazarus that sits at the base of the Statue of Liberty.

**"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"**

"The New Colossus" (1883) by Emma Lazarus

Friends, in that spirit of welcome and hospitality, let us worship God.

We begin a four-week series on the book of Ruth. In this first chapter we hear about how famine causes Naomi and her family to migrate to the land of Moab. There, they meet Ruth, who will forever change their lives as well as the very lineage of Christ. This story of personal loss and loyalty shows us how to welcome the

stranger and care for the marginalized. Ruth is one of two books in the Bible named after a woman, and as the quote goes: well-behaved women seldom make history!

WHEN WE READ THE BIBLE, we find that same-gender relationships have some of the purest, most heartfelt declarations of love found in scripture.

No joke.

When you think of a love that transcends borders, crosses boundaries, and promises to: "go where you go, lodge where you lodge, and die where you die," do you think of two women on the precipice of a week-long journey, one leaving home and the other returning home?

Ruth and Naomi shared that kind of love.

And these pronouncements of loyalty and love are not usually found between husband and wife in the Bible, but between those like Ruth and Naomi, and David and Jonathan.

I can't speak to whether these were romantic relationships in any way, because we just don't know. But the love found between these same-gendered people, is deep and abiding and true. Perhaps in a society like ancient Israel's where women and children were thought of more as property than people, and marriage more about economics than love, true affections were more likely to be found between those of the same gender.

Power and politics didn't complicate that devotion. Of course, societal norms and taboos certainly did, but I'm grateful for the ways our scriptures lift up these relationships and challenge us to wonder and ask questions.

So the story of Ruth is just four chapters. And it is a beautifully woven narrative with reversals and word play and plot dynamics that just come together for amazing storytelling. I recommend it to your reading this week if you can. And *this* morning, we are looking at just the first chapter which is already rich with meaning and intent.

So first, we learn that there is a famine in Bethlehem. This is the same Bethlehem where Jesus will be born, about a thousand years later. And what's ironic is that the word "Bethlehem," *Bet - lehem*, literally means house of bread. So the house of bread has run out of bread.

So what do Naomi, her husband, and her sons do? They immigrate to Moab where the famine has not hit. And it seems that in ancient Israel and its surrounding countries, they abided by one of the basic tenets found in the much more modern Universal Declaration of Human Rights created by the UN. Article 13 protects our right to freedom of movement and residence. It guarantees the right to travel freely within your own country, live wherever you choose, and leave or return to your home country at any time.

I think we should note that we don't hear about Naomi and her family applying for visas, or paying a coyote, or having to scale a wall separating Moab from Israel.

This is a time of open borders and free human movement, allowing for people who are hungry to go where there is food. The United Nations sees this human movement as a basic human right, and our scriptures seem to understand that as well. As we consider how the book of Ruth applies to *our* lives today, perhaps we, too, might recognize and advocate for the rights of people to have the freedom of movement, like Naomi's family did at the start of this chapter, and like Naomi and Ruth did at the end of this chapter. People should be able to go where they can be fed, where they can make a home, and where they can build and rebuild their lives. As the church who declares that *these* scriptures are the holy word of God, we cannot deny that human movement, immigration, and welcoming refugees is a part of God's work in the world.

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This first chapter of Ruth also reveals to us that humans were made to be in relationship. That's the way God designed us. We are made for community; to share our lives with others. Some scholars who've studied the nature of God and this idea of the Trinity (that's God in three persons: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, or God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit), they'll say, that the Trinity shows us that God has always existed in community. And so human beings, who are created in the image of God are also created for that kind of community.

Kathleen Norris, a wonderful author and theologian writes, "For Christians, the Trinity is the primary symbol of a community that holds together by containing diversity within itself." It is God's nature to be in community, and it is in our nature to be in community, even for introverted people like me who really like being by myself. And even for broken people like Naomi, who renamed herself Marah, because she felt so bitter and wanted to be left alone, never imagining that Ruth would stay by her side. We are made to be in relationship - not to go it alone, and here, today's story, Ruth journeys with Naomi to a foreign land, offering accompaniment and love, every step of the way.

But it's also important to not vilify Orpah, who chose to leave. There is nothing in scripture that says she made the wrong decision. In fact, Orpah probably found community back with her family, with the Moabites, with those who had always been her people.

What community looks like, and how we form it isn't prescribed to just one way. Your community can be your blood relatives and kin, *or* it can also be your *chosen* family. For whatever reason, Ruth chose Naomi over the family and friends she had in Moab. And chosen family *is* family. What's important is the act of being in community with others, whomever they may be.

And by being in that community, belonging to something larger than ourselves that inspires us to do something *with* that community that makes belonging matter. Last weekend, eighty of us went on the church retreat. And we had 10-week-old babies and 80-year-old adults there. We played together, and prayed together, and we left refreshed and full. But what happens up in the mountains of Lake Tahoe, can't just stay at Zephyr Point. We come to join our greater community, those here at Calvary who couldn't make it, and those living and striving to survive here in San Francisco.

Community equips us to love *all* God's people better. So thank *you* for showing up on this Sunday morning, not only to worship God, but to build community with those sitting in your pews. And I know, that every Sunday, we have people joining us online from all over this country.

So thank *you* for being part of our extended community. And may the time we share together online inspire you to build community in the places where you inhabit. Ruth offered that community and companionship to Naomi at the worst and loneliest time of her life. So let's continue to show up for one another.

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And finally, this first chapter of Ruth holds fast to the promise that the worst thing is never the last thing because resurrection and new life are always possible. Naomi left Israel, her home, because there was a famine. And in this new land of Moab, her husband died. Then her sons died, and she was left bereft. She says herself that she is now bitter, Marah now, and in her grief and sadness, we are all given permission to feel angry and bitter, too, sometimes.

Whatever causes you to say, I am now Marah, know that our ancestors in faith have felt the same way. And we can sit with that for a while. We don't have to move immediately to hope and new life. But as a follower of Jesus, I do believe (Lord, help my unbelief) that nothing is beyond redemption, not because God makes these tragedies happen, but because God never leaves us or forsakes us even when they do. Process theology holds that rather than controlling the world, God works by continuously offering love to us, and beckoning us towards creative and peace-filled possibilities that we can choose in every moment. Free will is offered us, and God invites us to co-create.

In process theology, God is deeply relational, constantly evolving with the universe, and intimately involved in it, but not as the cause of every action; rather as our companion *through* every action.

Friends, it is nearly impossible to not be affected by the chaos and injustice of what is happening in our country today. Reading or hearing the news is like asking, "what fresh horrors await us today?"

I can't tell you how or what the redemption of these times looks like. But I have to hold onto the belief that *this*, which sometimes very much feels like the worst thing, is not and will not be the last thing. That even *this* upside reality is not beyond God's redemption. After all, Naomi could not imagine how her life could get better. She sends Ruth and Orpah away because what more is there? But, spoiler alert, so much more awaits her.

So if you cannot possibly imagine how any of *this* could get better, you are in good company. *And* the promise of God still remains. The story of God's redemption is not done yet. And each of us has a role to play in it.

So take heart and be of good courage. It's time for us to be Ruth to Naomi, to be bread in a time of famine, and home and chosen family in a time of isolation and fear. Amen? Amen.