

Their Story, Our Story: Ruth

Deuteronomy 24-17-22

Ruth 1:1-22 & 4:13-17

This is a delightful short story nestled in between the book of Judges and 1Samuel in the Old Testament. It's a bit of a challenge to cover the entire story in one sermon, so I'm going to take one particular angle on it and I invite you to read the entire story some time this week. It's only 4 chapters long and will take about 20 minutes to read, at a leisurely pace. See what God brings to your attention as you read it.

The setting: the time of the judges (about 1500BC). This was a turbulent and somewhat lawless time in the history of Israel with some really bad characters in leadership—there were a few good ones, but mostly the book of Judges shows us several good examples of bad examples of leadership, yet how God worked everything out anyway—and it was a chaotic era which is described in the very last verse of the book of Judges (21:25) this way—here is how the book of Judges ends: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Sounds like a great time, eh?

Given that context, the story of Ruth provides a quiet, out of the way contrast to the chaos of those decades. It's a story of faithfulness (God's faithfulness, and human faithfulness), a story of deep loyalty on the part of Ruth,

and a story of Providence—of God working all things together for good, amidst the pains and changes of life. And we'll see that it has a surprise ending, which highlights the providential nature of the story in an amazing way.

I'll be reading chapter 1, and then will fill in the rest as we go.

Ruth 1:1-22

¹In 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 (they became refugees, because of the famine). ²The 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. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These 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, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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. ⁸But 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. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹But 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? ¹²Turn 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, ¹³would 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.” ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵So Naomi said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷Where 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!” ¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

¹⁹So 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?” ²⁰She said to them, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me (The word mara in Hebrew means “bitter”). ²¹I 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?” ²²So 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 is the word of the Lord.

With this as our introduction to Ruth, I’d like to look at the story of Ruth from this perspective: the life of faith is not a straight line from point a to point b, like Interstate 90 through Eastern Washington to South Dakota, where you just

zip straight through it from destination to destination without a hitch. It's more like the drive along the Al-Can highway (Alaska/Canada) from, say, Vancouver, Canada, to Fairbanks, Alaska. There are twists and turns, elevation gains and drops, rough roads with frost heaves and potholes, other places where the road is torn up and under construction and so there are detours through God knows where, with wild animals crossing the road that you look at and say "I've never seen one of those before!" and, of course, spectacular scenery along the way. It's worth the drive, even if you do break an axle along the way. It happens.

The story of Ruth is a good example of that. It isn't a straight-line story, but contains a series of setbacks, or losses. Let's look at it, first, from that perspective.

Before we do that... think of your life right now, where you are today, and how you got here. Was it a straight line, where you went effortlessly from one rousing success to another—on cruise control? Or were there events, early on or later on in life, or both, that sent you or nudged you in an unexpected direction, or caused some change, that put you in a new place, or into unfamiliar territory? Think about that as we go along... so we can find ourselves in the story; and... find God in our story.

In one sense, the story of Ruth is a story of a series of setbacks. In chapter 1, as we heard, Naomi and her husband and their two sons were forced to leave their homeland in Judah on account of a bad famine, and they head to Moab, which was unknown country. Then Naomi's husband dies. Her sons marry Moabite women (foreign women) and for ten years the women and their husbands are childless for whatever reason. And then Naomi's sons die leaving three widows in the house. Even though Ruth clings to Naomi, which is her first act of deep loyalty, chapter 1 ends with Naomi's bitter complaint: "I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty . . . The Lord has dealt harshly with me." And she gives herself a bad nickname (never a good idea).

In chapter 2 Naomi is filled with new hope because this man named Boaz appears on the scene as a possible husband for Ruth. Ruth decides to go gleaning in the fields during harvest time, and she 'accidentally' meets Boaz. Now, they didn't know it at first, but Boaz turns out to be a next of kin, or near relative to Naomi's deceased husband, and therefore Boaz has the right, and even the responsibility of redemption, where Boaz could not only marry Ruth and hopefully provide children with her, but also reclaim, for her, the land and possessions of Naomi's husband, because there were no heirs, or children to will them to after he died. This right of redemption was built into the law of the Old Testament so

that widows would be protected and provided for and not be left destitute. It was a humane part of the law.

It turns out that Boaz is a good man, and is kind to Ruth, and protective of her and allows her to glean from the fields more than her fair share of what was left for gleaning (this practice of gleaning was another wonderful provision in the law, which you heard read from Deuteronomy; God required his people to be generous to, and caring of, foreigners and widows; no one was to be left destitute). So, Boaz is a good man, however... he doesn't propose to Ruth. In fact, he doesn't make any moves toward her except in kindness toward her because he respects her. So the chapter closes brimming with hope, but also with great suspense and uncertainty about how all this might work out.

In chapter 3 Naomi encourages Ruth to make a risky move in the middle of the night. While the men are asleep on the threshing floor, which was a normal thing to do during harvest time (the workers camped out with the grain on the threshing floor, to protect it from animals and thieves; kind of like sleeping in the barn), Naomi tells Ruth to go, in the middle of the night, and lie down at Boaz's feet on the threshing floor. This is not an act of seduction, which is easy to assume; if it was an act of seduction, she would've laid down *next to him*, at his

side. Laying at someone's feet was an act of humility and taking the posture of a servant. So she goes and lays there, and although Naomi told her to wait until Boaz said something, Ruth takes the initiative and when Boaz awakens in the middle of the night, somewhat startled that there is this person laying at his feet, she says, "Spread your cloak over me," which is to say in effect, "I want you to spread your wing over me as my husband." Or, to put it bluntly, "I want you to ask me to marry you." A somewhat bold and risky move on Ruth's part!

But right when the tragedy of Ruth's widowhood seems to be resolved into a beautiful love story, a huge detour sign has appeared in the road of Ruth's life and it looks like she isn't going to get through or around it. Because, as it turns out, there is another man who according to Hebrew custom has prior claim to marry Ruth because he is a closer relative to Naomi's husband than Boaz. So the impeccably honest Boaz will not proceed without giving this man his lawful opportunity. And chapter 3 ends again in the suspense of another setback. Or so it seems.

After the midnight rendezvous in chapter 3, Boaz goes to the city gate where the official business was conducted. The nearer kinsman comes by, and Boaz lays the situation before him. Naomi is giving up what little property she has,

and the duty of the nearer kinsman is to buy it so that the inheritance stays in the family, and so that Ruth and Naomi are provided for.

To our dismay, the kinsman says, "I will redeem it." Oh no! We don't want *him* to redeem it. We want Boaz to do that. So again, there seems to be a setback. And the irony of this setback is that it is being caused by honesty and goodness. The fellow is only doing his duty. Actually, *everyone* in the story is acting honorably! Sometimes the Al-Can highway is clogged up, not with boulders or bears or landslides, but with good workers only doing their duty. Our frustrations are not always caused by tragedy or wrongdoing, but also by (apparently!) ill-timed goodness and honesty.

Just when we are about to say, "O no! Stop the story! Don't let this other fellow marry Ruth!" Boaz says to the nearer kinsman, "Oh by the way...(Columbo!) one more thing... you know, don't you, that Naomi has a daughter-in-law? So when you do the part of the kinsman redeemer and claim the family property, you must also take Naomi's daughter in law as your wife and raise up offspring in the name of her husband who has died. You knew that, right?" "Um, nope... didn't know that."

Then, to our great relief, the kinsman says he can't do it. He already has a family he is obligated to, and to marry Ruth would cause complications and distress in the family (even though taking a second wife was allowed in those days). So, he declines. Now, we are cheering in the background as Boaz gets through the bottleneck of road construction and high tails it to the wedding proposal for Ruth.

However, there is still a cloud overhead. Ruth is barren, to use the Biblical language. Or at least she seems to be. In chapter 1 we were told that she had been married ten years to Mahlon and there were no children. So even now the suspense is not over. Until we read chapter 4, where the story finally resolves in a wonderful way, and Ruth and Boaz become pregnant. I'll read a portion of that part of the story in a moment.

Again, one of the lessons of the book of Ruth is that the life of faith is not a straight line from point a to point b. Life is filled with twists and turns, setbacks, and advances, and we often don't know what's coming. But the point of the story is that God indeed works all things together for good. No matter where you are, or what is happening, even if it seems difficult in the present time, God is working his purposes out.

Ruth was written to help us trust God's grace even when the clouds are sometimes so thick that we can't see the road ahead, let alone the signs along the way that tell us, "Go this way; go that way." This is the other great lesson of Ruth: to show us that it was *God* who acted to turn each setback into a stepping stone to joy, and that it is *God* in all of *our* painful experiences who is working everything out for our good in the bigger picture of things.

When Naomi's whole life seemed to cave in while in Moab, it was God who gave Ruth to Naomi. We know this because at the core of Ruth's commitment to Naomi is Ruth's commitment to Naomi's God. She says "Your God shall be my God." God had won Ruth's allegiance in Moab and so it was to God that Naomi owed the amazing love and loyalty of her daughter-in-law. Also in chapter 2 it says that when Ruth came to Judah with Naomi, she was coming to take refuge under the wings of God. Therefore, it is owing to God that Ruth left her home and family to follow and serve Naomi. All along it was God turning Naomi's setback into joy—even when she was oblivious to this grace at the time.

And although Naomi gives the impression that there is no hope that Ruth could marry and raise up children to continue the family line, all the while God is preparing a good man, Boaz, to do just that. We know that this was God's doing

because Naomi herself admits it. She recognizes that behind the "accidental" meeting of Ruth and Boaz in the field was, as she puts it, the "kindness of God who has not forsaken the living or the dead." In every loss that God's people endure, God is already at work, for their gain.

And then, in the end, God gives Ruth a child. In chapter 4 we read that the townspeople pray for and pronounce a blessing over Boaz and Ruth, that they may conceive. Btw, this isn't because babies are so cute, like puppies, and they want Ruth and Boaz to experience the cuteness. It's because infertility meant the potential extinction of their culture. I remember, when we lived in Alaska, and occasionally would come across native folks who were experiencing infertility in their village/community. The elders grieved this because they knew it could mean the extinction of their culture. It was also important to have children in order to continue the family line/identity, and because farming families needed kids to work in the fields and around the house. Anyway, they know that Ruth was married for ten years without a child. So they remember Rachel whose womb the Lord had opened long before. And they pray that God will make Ruth like Rachel and Leah. And the author makes it clear that God is the one who caused a child to be conceived.

Again, the life of faith is not a straight line to glory; however, God sees to it that his people get there. And sometimes along the way there are surprises, and surprising outcomes. So, let me read the last 4 verses of the book of Ruth to hear the surprise ending.

Ruth 4:13-17

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.' The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of... David.

Wow. This story of famine, of untimely death, of suspense and setback, but also of loyalty and faithfulness, results in the birth of Israel's greatest king, David. Through whom would come...? As Isaiah foretold it: a shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse...

Although no one knew it at the time, and even for a little while afterward, God was working his purposes out in an extraordinary way. And in gospel-writer Matthew's genealogy of Jesus all of these people are named, including Ruth. Women were not typically mentioned in family genealogies, but in the genealogy

of Jesus it mentions two women; it says “Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab (that’s a whole ‘nother story!), and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.” And on to Jesus.

In the midst of the chaos and turbulence of the time, we have this simple and touching love story, out of the way, ordinary in many ways, but it’s an ordinary story that becomes extraordinary. However, that is only recognized later. Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, did not see the significance of their role in the moment, at the time. But they stayed faithful to their parts. And that is my final takeaway, and giveaway for you, from the story of Ruth:

Sometimes we don’t know what the end result or outcome of our lives may be. Often it’s seen only in hindsight. This is why faithfulness today is so important, because God uses all of the parts of pieces of the story of our lives to produce good for the future—including our faults and failures, as well as our strengths and our successes; God uses all of it to produce good for the future. Even if it’s a future we won’t see in our lifetime. Friends, no story is too small, no life is too insignificant. The little choices we make, the little faithfulnesses, the courage and honesty, can have large impact down the road.

Because of the Christmasy ending of this story, I wanted to sing an Advent carol. Here is a lively and hopeful song: Awake, awake, and greet the new morn.