

***Ruth: Walking Alongside***©

Ruth 1:1-22

August 12, 2018

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This is the story of Ruth. It could easily be called the story of Naomi and in fact, that might be even better, because it really is about Naomi and what happens to her. I think most of us would probably relate to Naomi more than we would to Ruth.

I mean, we don't always relate very well to foreigners – to immigrants – to outsiders – as well as we do our own people. And Ruth was definitely an outsider.

So, who do we begin with? Naomi, the native of Bethlehem of Judea? From the clan of the Ephrathites. Or Ruth, the Moabite woman who returns with Naomi to live in a land where Moabites are despised.

Well, lets begin from the beginning. That's always a good place to start.

We actually first learn that there was a certain man whose name was Elimelech who lived in Bethlehem at the time when the judges ruled. If we look back at the previous chapter in Judges we read in the last verse that it says "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

Now most of us know that doing what is right in our own eyes can be disastrous. To do our own thing and pay little attention to God's law is cause for trouble. And Israel – God's people – were headed into big trouble. It was a time of decline and anarchy in Israel. Lawlessness and disorder, sin and evil, immorality, murder – Israel and its leaders were going down a very slippery slope.

So Elimelech was married to Naomi and they had two sons - Mahlon and Kilion. And it so happened that in the midst of all the political unrest, there was a famine in Bethlehem. Of course, many people in those times believed that famines were a direct judgement – a punishment from God. Whether it is was or not, we do not know. But it was real and it was severe.

The very meaning of the name Bethlehem is “House of Bread.” It was ironic that there was no bread in the “House of Bread.” It was dried up, burnt up and gone. People were hungry and afraid.

And so Elimelech took his wife, Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Kilion and they traveled to a foreign country so they could survive. They went to Moab, a country that, like Samaria, was despised. As far back as the Israelites’ escape from Egypt and their wilderness wanderings, there were hostile encounters with the Moabites.

And there were laws against Israelite men marrying Moabite women – or any foreign woman, for that matter. After the exile in Babylonia ended, there was a push to get the Israeli men to leave their foreign wives. That was what all the hatred was about with Samaria. It all came down to whether or not a Jew was full blood and pure, or half breed and impure. And likewise, that is the same thing that is going on in the hatred towards the Moabites.

So, this family migrates into a land that is foreign to them. Their sons marry Moabite women. One is named Orpah and the other is named Ruth. After they had been there a little while, Naomi’s husband died. And then, both of her sons died as well.

And here is Naomi, bereft, in a strange land with two young women to take care of and no way to support herself or them. She had been in Moab for about 10 years at the time and she had word that God had shown mercy on her country and there was food once again, to harvest and eat.

And so, Naomi, in deep grief and despair, decides to journey back home where she knows people and where she has hope of some kind of help for survival.

Here is where I think many of us can relate to Naomi. Most of us know what it is to be in grief. Sure, we have faith and we have believed that God is with us. But if the truth would be known, many of us, when we are in that lowest spot in our lives, forget the promises of God to be with us and to not forsake us. We often feel empty and alone and, try as we might, we have a hard time rising up out of that slippery, miry pit of anger and bitterness, of hopelessness.

We think God has forgotten us, or that we've done something to be punished somehow. We can't accept our new reality. We just want to go back; to get our life back; our health back; our loved ones back in our arms. How many of us have experienced this same kind of agony at one time or another in our lives? Or had a friend or relative that was going through all these feelings and no matter what you say, you cannot get through. You have no idea how to help this person who is so depleted of anything positive.

The name Naomi means "sweetness." And when Naomi sees her women friends they comment on how Naomi looks so different, so bereft. Naomi cries and tells them she is totally empty. She has nothing. God has taken everything from her. She changes her name.

"Do not call me Naomi anymore. My name is Mara – which means bitterness!" "She is a bitter woman."

Okay. So we can relate. Right? Many of us have been there. But wait just a minute.

Naomi – or Mara – seems to be totally disregarding someone who has committed to walk alongside her all the way. I mean, turn around, Naomi – Mara – and look at who is with you. Here is your daughter-in-law, Ruth. This is Ruth who is so loyal she has declared she will not leave you. She is so full of kindness and generosity and love and loyalty and faithfulness and yet you are ignoring – discounting – the one standing before you.

When Naomi was leaving Moab, she ordered her two daughters-in-law to turn back and go home to their mothers, to find new husbands because the law that would have them marry the brother of their deceased husbands – well, that could not apply to them. She was past any stage of marrying and giving birth again. And besides, they could not wait that long, for sons to grow up.

Orpah did as she was told, although she did it in tears and with true emotion and love for Naomi, her mother-in-law. She tried to resist at first but Naomi had insisted, and she obeyed.

But not this one. Not Ruth. Ruth was vehement about her decision. This famous verse sounds so sweet and loving but the truth is it is full of feeling,

full of passion and perhaps even a slight amount of anger, according to Hebrew commentaries.

Ruth has made a commitment in her marriage. She committed to her husband and to her husband's family, and people, and God. And she is not going to allow even her mother-in-law to cause her to back down on that commitment.

And besides, she has loved Naomi for a long time now. She is going with her no matter what. She surely knows she might not be accepted in a new country – a country where here people are hated just for being who they are. Or, who they aren't. They aren't Israelites. She doesn't know what will be her future. But she is full of *hesed* – loving kindness and faithfulness and she will not turn back.

She says those famous words that so many of us love:

“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.

<sup>17</sup> 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!”

And so, Naomi did not try any further to talk Ruth into going back. They went on and entered the land that was Naomi's home – Bethlehem, the House of Bread. And Ruth was beside her even though Naomi seemed at first to not notice. She was so far in the pit of grief and sorrow.

Have you been in that place yourself? Have you felt so empty that you thought there was no life, no hope left? Perhaps it was an illness that struck you, or a death that was too painful to accept.

Has there been anyone who was there? Just there, even if you barely noticed them? Someone who refused to leave your side, even if you wished they would.

Maybe you relate better to Ruth. Maybe you are the kind, faithful one who has been beside another throughout their desperate plight. If you are that person, then that's good. But if you are Naomi, that's good too.

Because we are probably more like Naomi than we are Ruth. Ruth is so much like God, isn't she? She showed grace and mercy and love when she didn't really have too. She walked alongside quietly, faithfully, just being there. She loved and she cared and she would not leave not matter what people thought of her.

This is a story of emptiness verses fullness; of bitterness verses sweetness; of hopelessness verses hope for a long and productive future. It is a story of redemption; a bridge from the sinful past to a future full of grace and strength. A journey from darkness to light.

But guess what? This is the first of four sermons on Ruth. You have to come back for the rest of the story. There is much to learn about Ruth and about redemption and faithfulness and promise.

I want end this first chapter with a story. I knew a woman who was born in 1926. Her parents were married – but not to each other. She was not conceived without love and passion and kindness. There is a story behind that story of deep emotion and yet, of course, unfaithfulness, regret and sin.

One morning early, the man came home from delivering papers and found the baby – dark hair and eyes – wrapped up in a warm blanket in a basket on his porch. Inside the basket with the baby girl was a note that quoted Ruth – “Wither thou goest, I will go; wither thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people; thy God shall be my God ...”

The man – her real father, and his wife, adopted that baby and named her Barbara Ruth. And though she was not the daughter of the wife, she was loved and shown kindness and was adored by her father. She was adopted by him and his wife and was given the family name. She was raised in a Christian home and while she was the only child, she got married and raised six children in the faith – one who became a Presbyterian Minister. The one standing before you today.

It was a family secret – the proverbial skeleton in the closet. The one my granddad told my mother when he and my grandmother – whose name was Grace, by the way – were moving to a skilled nursing facility. My mother was so careful to keep that secret so no one would think bad of the father whom she had loved all her life. And he had spent the rest of his life loving and caring for his wife and daughter – and grandchildren. He was a man of deep faith and love for God.

God acts in amazing ways – ways we cannot see. What starts out as a thing of shame or embarrassment or fear, God can take and make into a lifelong blessing.

We will see as we continue this series on Ruth just how amazing God's action in all this was and how long reaching God's blessings were because a young woman named Ruth, who was a foreigner, an immigrant, walked alongside a woman who was lost and hurting; a woman Ruth showed loving kindness and faithfulness to.

We will see God's redemptive act in this amazing story. Stay tuned for the rest of the story!

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