

Women of the Bible: Ruth and Naomi

Deuteronomy 24:17-22

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

Our series this winter is on the women of the Bible. This morning: Ruth, *and Naomi*. Although the book of the Bible is titled Ruth, the more I have read it and the more I developed the theme for this morning, the more I realized that the story is really about both of them. 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 sometime this week. It's only 4 chapters long and takes 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—a long time ago!). 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 this way—here is how the book of Judges ends (21:25): “In those days there was no king in Israel; and all the

people did what was right in their own eyes.” Sounds like a great time, eh? So much for “And they lived happily ever after.”

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.

With that in mind, the second reading from Ruth chapter 4 will come at the end of the sermon! You heard chapter 1, and with that reading and the background and context in which the story takes place, I’d like to look at the story of Ruth from this perspective: the life of faith is not a straight line, simply, from point a to point b, like an interstate through Nebraska, where you just zip straight through it from destination to destination without a hitch. The life of faith is 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—of the setbacks.

Before we do that, let’s take a brief pause to reflect... 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 victory/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? Yet somehow you experienced God’s faithfulness, and you found yourself eventually in a place of blessing, in a mysteriously God-ordained way. 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 some reason; we aren't told. 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."

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—you'll have to read how that 'accidental' meeting takes place. 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, from Deut.24; 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 in the barn on the threshing floor, to protect it from animals and thieves), 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 as 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 awakes 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. 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 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 nearer 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 righteousness (to use a good Old Testament word). This 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 job.

Just when we are about to say, "O no! Stop the story! Don't let this other fellow follow through with this!" Boaz says to the nearer kinsman, "Oh by the way... 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 as your wife and raise up offspring in the name of her husband who has died. You knew that, right?" The guy says, "Um, nope... didn't know that."

Then, to our great relief, the kinsman says he can't do it. He already has a wife and 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 usually don't know what's coming—and perhaps we're not supposed to know what's coming, so we will trust God more. But the point of the story is that God eventually 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, over time.

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 providences who is working everything out for our good, and for the good of others.

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 the God's people endure, God is already at work, in kindness and with blessing.

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 Ruth and Boaz, that they may conceive. They do this, not 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. Think about that. I remember, when we lived in Alaska, and occasionally would come across native/indigenous folks who were experiencing infertility in their village. 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 and 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 (in the book of Genesis) whose womb the Lord had opened long before. And they pray that God will make Ruth like Rachel. And so 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 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. This is how the book of *Ruth* ends...

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 eventual 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. In those days, 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 of our lives may be. Often it's seen only in hindsight, and maybe even... after we're gone. This is why faithfulness today is so important, because God works with all of the parts of pieces of the story of our lives—the setbacks and the successes—to produce good for the future. God works with all of it.

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. That, in and of itself, is reason to press on, to keep trusting, and keep doing the good that God gives us to do.

If you will trust in God to guide you.