

*Grace and peace to you in God who is our father and our mother,
and in our Savior Jesus Christ*



There are only two books in the bible that are named for women –
Ruth, and Esther.

This month we are reading and learning from these two books,
both stories of God working behind the scenes,
within human acts of love and loyalty, to bring hope and redemption.

Last week we read about the Moabite widow Ruth,
who comes with her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi
to live in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem.

Ruth begins to gather grain left in the fields of Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's husband,
and he offers her the protection of his household.

In today's reading, Naomi and Ruth take things into their own hands
to ensure greater security for their future.

In the deeply patriarchal society of ancient Israel, male heirs meant everything.
Professor Robert Williamson writes of Naomi's loss of her husband and sons:

*For all the uncertainty about survival, Naomi's greatest tragedy may be the
extinction of Elimelech's family line. In a culture that didn't believe in a literal
afterlife, leaving children to carry on the family name was essential to
surviving death. A person could, in a sense, live on in their children and their
continued connection to the community of Israel.*



In order to prevent such a loss of a family line,
there was a practice called Levirate marriage.

If a man died childless, his brother would marry his widow to produce a son

“so that his brother's legacy will not be forgotten in Israel.” Leviticus says

The Levirate marriage was part of the broader tradition of the *Go'el* –

which translates to "kinsman-redeemer", in today's reading, next-of-kin.

In ancient Israelite law and culture, it referred to a living blood relative

who was charged with the responsibility to rescue, defend,

and restore a family member who had fallen on hard times.

In the story of Ruth and Naomi, Boaz acts as their go'el,
the male relative who redeems them from their poverty –
both by reclaiming the land Elimelech had left to emigrate to Moab,
and by marrying Ruth to produce an heir for Elimelech's bloodline.

There is something deeply troubling to our contemporary mindset
about such a patriarchal system –
in which the value of women seems to be only their ability to produce children,
and women need a man – a father, husband, or son – to live securely.

When contemporary Christians want to lift up “Biblical family values” for us to follow
today – traditional wives and male heads of household and all that –
it's important to remember that biblical families included practices
we find abhorrent today, such as levirate marriage, polygamy, and slavery.



Yet if we read the story of Ruth within it's own context,
we find a story of a strong, courageous woman,
faithful in her commitment of care to Naomi
unwilling to simply wait to see if someone will act on their behalf.

Instead, Ruth – at Naomi's urging – approaches Boaz at night,
offering herself to him in a deeply provocative scene.

Naomi told Ruth that Boaz would “tell her what to do,”
but Ruth has her own agency and purpose.

She essentially proposes to Boaz, since her request for him to
“spread his robe over her” is an image of marriage,
and she reminds him that he is a go'el – a kinsman redeemer – for her.

Boaz agrees, not reluctantly, but with gratitude for Ruth:

“May you be blessed by the Lord,” he says; “this instance of your loyalty is better
than the first; you have not gone after young men.”

In the Working Preacher podcast, professor Kathryn Shifferdecker suggests that
perhaps Boaz, apparently an older man, has been lonely,
and that in this scene, Ruth and Boaz save each other.

Certainly the scene seems to hold a sense of intimacy and mutual care and affection.



Ruth gives birth to a son named Obed,
and Naomi becomes his nurse, or guardian.

The townspeople declare, “A son has been born to Naomi;”
in this way, Elimelech's family line is secured.

What's more, they name Ruth as the source of Naomi's blessing,
“worth more than seven sons.”

The book of Ruth ends with a genealogy which names Obed
as the grandfather of David.

When Ruth is saving the family line of Elimelech, she is, in fact,
saving the family line of David, the beloved Israelite king.
And because Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David,
she is also an ancestor of Jesus, the one who came into the world
to show us how to live as God's people.

Ruth comes just before the books of Samuel and Kings –
the history books telling of the kingdom of Israel and its great kings.
As the narrative of scripture prepares to turn to the lives and acts of powerful people,
Ruth reminds us of God's action in ordinary lives of ordinary people, like us.
The story of Ruth is not filled with great acts of God,
but rather it is imbued with God's implicit presence –
the glue holding everything together is faith and community in God.
God works through the faithful actions of individuals,
and through the cultural structures of care among God's people.

For us, this can be a reminder that God is also at work in our lives,
even when we feel insignificant, anxious, or alone.
The stories of the wealthy and powerful fill our news and our screens
with tales of greed and corruption –
the rich getting obscenely richer, and the poor and middle classes struggling.
People with power engage in war for petty reasons of greed and ego,
while right-wing nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment rises,
not just in the U.S., but in many parts of the world.
It is hard to see how God is at work on the world stage.

Ruth's story reminds us to look for God in the everyday –
in the way we care for one another, in the structures that protect the vulnerable
and work for the common good.
At the same time, Ruth encourages us to stand up for ourselves and for one another,
to not accept being kept in second place or vulnerable positions.
Ruth reminds us of the responsibility we have to one another
as the people of God and followers of Jesus.



Today we will celebrate the baptism of Eleanor Harper Stanford.
We welcome her into the body of Christ, the great communion of saints,
around the world and stretching backward and forward in time,
who seek to live in love and faithfulness and care for one another.

As we pour the water on Eleanor and claim her as God's own child,
we have the opportunity to remember our own baptism.

We hear again the words of the baptismal promises,
which we renewed together on Pentecost:

to live among God's faithful people, learning to love and trust God;
to proclaim Christ through word and deed,
care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.

We are reminded that each of us is called to let the light of God's love
shine in our lives and in our world

Our reading in the book of Ruth reminds us what it looks like to live
faithfully in commitment and care with one another.

It reminds us that we have responsibility for one another, in the communion of faith
and in the wider community of people, all created by and beloved of God.

This is our call and our hope as the Body of Christ in the world.

Thanks be to God

Amen