

*Grace and peace to you in God who is our Father and our Mother,  
and in our savior Jesus Christ.*



In the days when the judges ruled –  
when the people of Israel lived in covenant with God,  
but before they were a kingdom with a king –  
there was a famine in the land.

Elimelech took his family – his wife, Naomi, and his sons, Mahlon and Chilion –  
to live in Moab, so that they would have food to eat.

The sons married Moabite women.

Then Elimelech and his two sons died, leaving the three women alone.

This story starts out a bit like a fable –  
perhaps like a story passed down over generations,  
that takes on some embellishment and changes through the years.

The irony that begins the whole story is that Bethlehem –  
which means the “house of bread” – is experiencing famine.

Elimelech’s sons are called Mahlon, which means sickly,  
and Chilion, which means frail,  
so it is no surprise when they die early in the story.

The opening verses set up a story in which three widows –  
three women without husbands or sons to care for them –  
are left in a vulnerable situation, grieving and alone.



Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to go back to their fathers’ houses,  
to take new husbands who will provide security for them,  
but Ruth is determined to stay with her mother-in-law.

So the two of them travel back to Bethlehem.

What a risky journey that must have been for them, women traveling alone.  
(see on map, travel around Dead Sea to make the journey)

They come back to Bethlehem, to Naomi’s community and home,  
and they are desolate with loss and anxiety.

Naomi says, do not call me Naomi – which means pleasant –  
but from now on call me Mara, which means bitter.

Naomi sees God’s hand in the tragedies that have befallen her.

I went away full, she says, but the Lord has brought me back empty.  
The Almighty has brought calamity upon me.



Naomi has returned to her homeland, her extended family and community –  
but Ruth is a foreigner, a stranger in a strange land.

Yet she knows about the ways of the people with whom she has come to live.  
She knows the expectation –

written into the law, the covenant the Israelites have with God –  
that landowners will leave a portion of the grain they harvest in their fields  
so that the poor and vulnerable can gather them and have enough to eat.

Leviticus 23:22 instructs,

*When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the  
edge of your field; and don't gather every remaining bit of your harvest. Leave  
these items for the poor and the immigrant.*

It is the Torah's version of a social safety net.

And, by chance or providence, Ruth and Naomi have arrived in Bethlehem –  
the house of bread – just at the beginning of the harvest.

So Ruth goes to find a field in which to gather grain.

She works all day, and Boaz, the owner of the field, notices her –  
a newcomer, a stranger in town – and asks about her.

The manager in the fields tells Boaz that she is the daughter-in-law who  
came from Moab with Naomi.

Now, it just so happens – a coincidence? – that the field Ruth worked in  
belongs to a relative of Elimelech.

He is touched by her care for Naomi, impressed by her hard work,  
and he makes an offer to her to return each day to his field,  
where he will offer her protection and care.



When Ruth returns home with all the grain she has gathered – 30 pounds! –  
and tells Naomi about her day, Naomi feels a glimmer of hope returning.

She sees in the events of the day the hand of God at work,  
and she is quick to name God as the source of blessing.

The widow who has seen more than her share of sorrow is also the one who recognizes  
the hand of God in their improving circumstances.

She names for Ruth, a newcomer to her religion, the ways she sees God  
acting in their lives for their well-being.

One of the interesting things in the book of Ruth is how God acts –  
quietly, behind the scenes,  
through the faithful and compassionate action of God’s people.

The book of Ruth follows the book of Judges,

in which God repeatedly rescues God’s people by raising up charismatic leaders,  
who are filled with God’s spirit and act with God’s power to achieve military victory

Professor Kathryn Shifferdecker writes in her commentary on Ruth,

*God does not speak from burning bushes in this book; nor does God divide the sea. Instead, God acts through circumstance, and through the faithfulness of ordinary human beings. God’s hesed, God’s covenant love, is embodied in human action. Boaz praises Ruth for her loyalty to her mother-in-law and then enacts through his generosity the blessings of God that he calls down upon her: “May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge”*

It reminds me of a prayer I learned a long time ago –

God, give us the will to do that for which we pray.

Ruth’s prayer and well wishes for Naomi doesn’t stop with words –

she commits herself to make her home with her mother-in-law.

Boaz’s prayer and blessing for Ruth and Naomi doesn’t stop with words –

he acts within his capacity as landowner to provide for them.

We will see next week how Boaz will go a lot farther in his care

for these vulnerable widows who are his kin.



Professor Robert Williamson writes in detail about the book of Ruth in his book, *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*,

and my words today rely heavily on his excellent commentary.

He writes about how the book of Ruth speaks to us today in the midst of rising anti-immigrant sentiment and Christian nationalism.

Although it is set centuries earlier,

the story of Ruth and Naomi was written down during the period

when the people of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon, in 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE

The Israelites were rebuilding the temple and reestablishing life

in the region of Judah, as told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah,

and the period was characterized by strong anti-immigrant sentiment, particularly against Moabites.

Williamson writes, “The book of Ezra closes with all the foreign wives and their children being deported back to their homelands, leaving the land of Judah ethnically purified.”

Ruth, of course, is just such a woman who would have been targeted for deportation. The story of Ruth, told at such a moment,

calls into question the harsh treatment of immigrants.

Remember, the Torah says again and again – you also were slaves in Egypt, and that is why you should welcome immigrants and care for them as members of the community.

The story of Ruth begins with a refugee crisis.

It is a story of loss and risky decisions, of hope for a better future.

As the story unfolds, it describes God’s care for those on the margins – the immigrants and widows, whose lives are precarious.

And it shows the faithful people of God following the way that God has prescribed, the way of care for community, welcoming the stranger, sharing resources so all may be fed.



In his conclusion, Williamson writes,

*Mostly, perhaps, the book of Ruth invites us to make the kinds of commitments that Ruth and Naomi and Boaz made to one another.*

*Commitments that cross ethnic and religious bounds. Commitments in which each person seeks the prosperity of the other rather than focusing solely on themselves. The book of Ruth calls us to stop being afraid of one another. To break down barriers rather than building up walls of protection.*

May we learn from Ruth to live out such commitments of care for the people in our lives and community.

May we have the courage to cross boundaries which would divide us from people we perceive as different than ourselves.

And may we have the courage and the will to *do* that for which we pray, as we seek to share the love of God in the world. Amen.