

A Advent 3 12.11.22

Ruth 1:1-5, 8-11, 14-18, 22; 2:2-3, 17, 19-20, 23; 3:1-11; 4:13-15, 17; Matthew 11:2-11
Focus Statement: Ruth taught Jesus love and loyalty

The story of Ruth and Naomi is one of my favorites. Ruth chapter one verses fifteen to seventeen, the “where you go, I will go part,” was one of the readings for Travis and my wedding. And if you’ve been to a wedding I’ve officiated you may have heard it, because it’s a text I recommend to a lot of couples. I love how it’s a text not about romantic love but about devotion, about connection, about commitment, about the bringing together of two families. There is romance in Ruth, and even a little bit of scandal, but the story for the most part is about two women who found themselves, for reasons out of their control, in an untenable situation, and who made it through by staying committed to one another.

It was a long passage to try to follow on first listen, so let’s walk through it and break it down a little bit. The story begins by introducing us to the family of Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and his two sons. Note the pronouns there, his wife, his sons, because by verse three we see a shift. Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, has died, and she is left with her two sons. Right at the beginning of the story, Naomi became head of household, with all the responsibilities and obligations that included. Naomi’s two sons soon married, but then they also died, leaving Naomi again, still, as head of a household of women, herself and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. It should also be noted here that they are not in Israel when this all happens. Elimelech had moved the family to Moab, a place which doesn’t mean much to us, but Ruth’s original readers certainly knew what it meant. Moab was a place with, a reputation, shall we say, for not being the best people. To the point where the book of Deuteronomy even forbids Moabites from being admitted to the

assembly of the Lord, “even to the tenth generation.” Deuteronomy does not mess around with being not fans of the Moabites. But Moab is where Naomi found herself, without any male head of household, any means of support, and with two Moabite daughters-in-law to provide for.

This story has some similarities here to Tamar with two, three really, if we count Naomi, childless widows and the end of a family line. But Tamar still had Judah obligated to care for her even if he was not meeting that obligation, here there was no one. So, Naomi did the only thing she could think of to do. While Judah sent Tamar back to her father’s house, essentially placing her in a holding pattern where she was still connected to Judah’s family and unable to remarry, Naomi sent Orpah and Ruth back to their mothers’ houses. This meant the women were free of their commitment to the family of Elimelech and able to seek spouses, and security, elsewhere.

Orpah, recognizing the horrible bind her mother-in-law was in, wept at the parting and left, freeing Naomi of the obligation to care for her, at least. But Ruth, on the other hand, refused. Ruth stuck with Naomi, cast her lot alongside Naomi, left her own homeland to travel with Naomi to hers, and made sure Naomi had support and companionship along the way. A gesture of loyalty that actually, in one of the verses I left out due to time, we see Naomi didn’t really appreciate. Naomi felt, understandably, bitter and angry at the situation that had befallen her, and now she was bitter, angry, and still head of household for this Moabite woman, a constant reminder of the family and descendants she would not have.

The women reached Bethlehem and immediately Ruth's usefulness becomes apparent as the younger woman has the energy and stamina for gleaning. Gleaning was an ancient social safety net, a practice of providing for those who couldn't provide for themselves by leaving some of the crop behind after harvest time for them to gather. While gleaning, Ruth just happened to find herself—and the Hebrew here is interesting because it's a grammatical structure frequently used when God was the actor, so it hints at some hidden hand behind the coincidence—just happened to find herself in Boaz's field. Boaz, unbeknownst to both of them, was a close kinsman of Elimelech and someone who could step into the role of head of household for Naomi and Ruth. Though he didn't know the connection, Ruth caught Boaz's eye, and he made sure she stayed near his people. Ruth went home and told Naomi this news, and Naomi was like, oh, this could be the solution to our problems. Boaz already clearly liked Ruth, if I set them up, bam, we are no longer alone and abandoned. So, Naomi played a bit of matchmaker, the story gets a little less G-rated there for a minute, and Boaz and Ruth live happily ever after, having finally given Naomi the grandchild she so desired.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a story of, as Mary so succinctly put it in Bible chat this week, love and loyalty. Ruth loved Naomi, was loyal to Naomi, and that loyalty led her to Boaz, who loved her loyalty and in turn responded with his own loyalty to his kinsman Elimelech, to Elimelech's widow and children, and to Ruth the Moabite, who's selfless devotion to his relative's family brought about this redemption.

In reading this text, I've always seen Ruth as the character to emulate. To be loyal like Ruth, to love like Ruth, to show commitment like Ruth. And I think Ruth the character to emulate, but one of the commentaries I was reading pointed out that while we all want to be Ruth, we're probably more like Naomi, and that's where God comes in. For most of the story, Naomi is bitter. And, let's be clear, rightly so. Hard and bad things have happened to Naomi, things that were outside of her control, that left her with no one to turn to, no recourse for action, no avenue for support. Life happened to Naomi, in the way life can sometimes, where it just goes sideways for no reason and with no one at fault. And Naomi was stuck picking up the pieces of a broken life. She must have felt so alone, so abandoned, so stuck.

But with her, to her annoyance at first, then later to her redemption, was Ruth. The Moabite, the outsider no one wanted around, who would not let Naomi go. Who left behind everything, her life, her home, her family, to make her life with Naomi and make sure Naomi was cared for. On the surface there wasn't much a Moabite woman could do for Naomi, but she brought first strength in the ability to glean, then connection in a chance meeting of Boaz, and eventually a future through the birth of descendants. Naomi was the one redeemed in this story and Ruth was the redeemer, who's love, care, and commitment got Naomi through an impossible time and reconnected her, and through her us, to the journey of salvation that goes, as we've been talking about all of Advent, from God's promise to Abraham, through Tamar, than Rahab, now Ruth, onto King David and eventually to Jesus. In Ruth we see a picture of faithfulness, of God's faithfulness to God's

people as demonstrated in Ruth's devotion to Naomi, a faithfulness that restores and redeems.

And a faithfulness too, and I think this is also important, that has space for when we feel disconnected, that it's ok to be frustrated and tired and to say so. Ruth didn't quit on Naomi when Naomi went and told all her friends how bitter and lonely she was, even though Ruth had literally given up everything to be with her. Ruth stuck with her, recognizing that Naomi's anger was well-deserved, until Naomi could rejoice again.

We see similar characteristics in Jesus in today's Gospel reading. Last week we met John the Baptist, "the voice of the one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" This week we jump forward a few chapters, and find John, from prison, wondering if he got the wrong savior. He thought Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel, but it's been a minute, Rome was still in power, Herod was still Herod, and John was in prison and, honestly, just a few chapters away from being beheaded, so one can't fault John for wondering if he was following the right guy. So, John sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered him with proof of his power, but that wasn't where the conversation ended. After John's followers had left, Jesus turned to his own people to tell them about what a great guy John was. Jesus knew John's heart; he knew John's worth. John could doubt, question, wonder, get angry and call people vipers, and generally be a human going through human stuff, and Jesus was there for all of it.

Dear people of God, here's the takeaway for today. The news that is both hope and challenge. God is in this with you, no matter what. This doesn't mean hard and terrible things won't happen to you. It doesn't mean you won't feel afraid, alone, abandoned. What it does mean is that in all those feelings, in all those times, through whatever you face, there God is also. God through Jesus, whose ancestor is Ruth, is a God who sticks with us through everything. You are not alone. You never have been, you never will be. From his great-great-many times great grandmother, Jesus had an example of love and loyalty that transcends everything. God, dear people of God, is faithful. Amen.