

Ruth 1:1-22 – Common English Bible

1 During the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. A man with his wife and two sons went from Bethlehem of Judah to dwell in the territory of Moab. **2** The name of that man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and settled there.

3 But Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. Then only she was left, along with her two sons. **4** They took wives for themselves, Moabite women; the name of the first was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth. And they lived there for about ten years.

5 But both of the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, also died. Only the woman was left, without her two children and without her husband.

6 Then she arose along with her daughters-in-law to return from the field of Moab, because while in the territory of Moab she had heard that the Lord had paid attention to his people by providing food for them. **7** She left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law went with her. They went along the road to return to the land of Judah.

8 Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, "Go, turn back, each of you to the household of your mother. May the Lord deal faithfully with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me. **9** May the Lord provide for you so that you may find security, each woman in the household of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

10 But they replied to her, "No, instead we will return with you, to your people."

11 Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters. Why would you go with me? Will there again be sons in my womb, that they would be husbands for you? **12** Turn back, my daughters. Go. I am too old for a husband. If I were to say that I have hope, even if I had a husband tonight, and even more, if I were to bear sons— **13** would you wait until they grew up? Would you refrain from having a husband? No, my daughters. This is more bitter for me than for you since the Lord's will has come out against me."

14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth stayed with her. **15** Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law."

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you." ¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

¹⁹ So both of them went along until they arrived at Bethlehem. When they arrived at Bethlehem, the whole town was excited on account of them, and the women of the town asked, "Can this be Naomi?"

²⁰ She replied to them, "Don't call me Naomi,^[a] but call me Mara,^[b] for the Almighty^[c] has made me very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the Lord has returned me empty. Why would you call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has deemed me guilty?"

²² Thus Naomi returned. And Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, returned with her from the territory of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

In June, John and I will take a road trip to Bozeman, Montana for a wedding. We love to be on the road. We retired in early 2021 while COVID was still raging, sold our home in Marin County, CA, and traveled the U.S. for eight months. It's how we responded to the world's madness and the change in U.S. leadership. Life was an open field. It was just the two of us, and we had each other's backs. It was a lark because we had resources, and family and friends who received and loved us along our journey.

Our exodus was quite a contrast to that of Naomi, a Jew, and her Moabite daughters-in-law, all destitute widows fleeing a famine after the deaths of their husbands.

This tale is often seen as culminating in a sweet love story, but it starts out bitterly. Let's be clear: the women's circumstances were dire. They lived in a culture where they were protected by their husbands and also considered their property. As a widow without male relatives, Naomi was a stranger in the land without protection. All three women are widows in danger.

With the famine in Moab, Naomi sees no option but to return to her homeland in Bethlehem, (Bethlehem literally means "bread.") Moab is located on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, on a high plateau. Bethlehem is in northern Judah, west of the Dead Sea. It would be a demanding 70-mile trek from Moab in desert heat, over mountain passes, and through precarious political environments.

Naomi suggests the young widows turn back to their mother's homes, where they will have some safety and may even remarry. Naomi knows that her own inability to bear children makes her of no use to anyone.

So, Naomi struggles out loud with her suffering. She's angry. She's had it!

In her Jewish tradition, Naomi was taught she can count on God. But where is God?

We have all been brought low in our lives. And we may feel this now. We have memories of better times. But things happen. Lost jobs, dire illness, and hurt. The woes of aging. Our kids may move away.

We might perceive this era as the worst of times. It's certainly a life-threatening time for those who are vulnerable in class or origin. We may not feel like we belong in or recognize this country that is about to celebrate 250 years.

Because we know bad things can and do happen, we may dread what might come next. Recently, I was talking to a good friend about how happy I am that my daughter, Annie, has found a good man – hopefully, her life partner. But I crossed my fingers and said a bit woefully, "I sure hope this works out." And my friend asked, "You sound like you have doubts. Why?" And I realized that I do feel some dread, as if I'm projecting our family's difficult last year into the future. But we really can't predict the future from the past, can we?

And for our church, here we go again, another change in pastors for many of you, echoes of the unknown in previous times. Are you experiencing a wee bit of dread about changes here?

Ruth and Orpah, Naomi's daughters-in-law, are reluctant to turn back. But Orpah doesn't want to be a burden to Naomi, and she realizes that she has a better chance of finding a new husband by staying with her own mother, as Naomi suggests.

But Ruth says to Naomi, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God!" This reminds me of the passage in Jeremiah where God promises to be faithful in covenant forever: "You will be my people, and I will be your God."

Somehow against all odds, Naomi and Ruth reach Bethlehem, and Naomi is warmly welcomed home by people who remember her. Yet Naomi complains. Listen to how she speaks about God: "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but Yahweh has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when Yahweh has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" Naomi's laments have been compared to those of Job and Jeremiah, who laid their afflictions at God's feet.

Walter Brueggemann, a sage theologian who wrote volumes on the Hebrew Bible, said that throughout the Old Testament, there are human arguments both for and against God. This is how we learn about God's character. As we know, there are many stories of God's People feeling forsaken. They carp at great length! Remember the folks in Exodus, Job, the Prophets, the Psalms? They imagine God to be withholding, abandoning, and punishing when they are in fear or suffering.

But, Bruggeman says, then comes the counterargument! That God is here for you more than you see or can imagine.

Ruth personifies the counterarguments to Naomi's complaints against God. Ruth is faithful, steadfast, self-giving and loving. Just like God. Ruth IS the face of God in these verses, although God doesn't appear as a character. I wish I could say to Naomi: When you feel abandoned by God, look at Ruth right by your side! Know that she represents God, who is present with you always.

Throughout the Old Testament, God demonstrates hesed, which means Loving Kindness in Hebrew. *Hesed* is the bottom-line value of the Jewish people. The Hebrew word *hesed* means "compassion," "loyalty," and "steadfast love." Walter Brueggemann nuances the word further: He says, *hesed* "is related to tenacious fidelity in a relationship, the readiness and resolve to continue to be loyal to those to whom one is bound."

Tenacious loyalty. This first chapter of this beloved story demonstrate what *hesed* looks like. Ruth shows patience, forbearance, and care for Naomi. She hangs in there, despite Naomi's incessant complaining, fear and anger.

Even as Naomi protests her bitterness and lack of hope, Ruth demonstrates Naomi's value as a human being. She paces with Naomi; she is RIGHT THERE with her. She's not going anywhere, no matter how much Naomi protests. Ruth underscores Naomi's worth with each step she takes by her side.

In this time and place, our society often has an individualistic orientation rather than collective purpose. What would it be like to collectively accompany people who feel abandoned in this time?

I think of my friends Sue and Karen in Minneapolis, who banded together with churches and community organizations. They created food banks in apartment building lobbies when residents were too afraid to go outside for fear of ICE.

I think of Cathy, the young woman who we will witness getting married in Bozeman. At the first bombings in Ukraine, she flew to the border in Poland join others to help displaced people as an EMT. She is marrying a Ukrainian.

I think of all of you who come together with others to provide provisions for women and children seeking shelter from domestic violence. I think of how you care for people without homes day after day.

These are all examples of *hesed*, sharing God's faithfulness through faithful loving acts. We, like Ruth, can be the counterargument that God's loving kindness is with us, come what may!

Enacting God's faithfulness doesn't have to be heroic or dramatic. It can be quiet and constant, like Ruth.

How has God provided for you through other caring people?

Right now, I'm thinking of Pastor Amy. She's been God's presence for us. Saying yes to the invitation to meet the urgent need as our bridge pastor. She calmly guides us, providing sustenance through worship. She helps Session plan next steps, drawing on her leadership expertise with a peaceful, kind demeanor. Right there with us.

Are there any podcasters, writers, or poets who lift you up and carry you through another day? For millions, it was Stephen Colbert until he left The Late Show. He is a man of faith who described his show as a “joy machine,” where he says, “he felt his way through with his audience” in a “reciprocal emotional relationship.”

And who are you accompanying who needs your *hesed* - your faithful loving kindness? Never underestimate the importance of faithfulness and kindness.

We are a small church in another transition. It may seem like the writing is on the wall for us. But really, we don't know that do we? We don't know what God has yet in store for us.

And while our future is uncertain, how we walk together on this journey is important. As we walk into the future together this summer, let's be the Face of God for one another. Patient, hopeful, steadfast, faithful and loyal. Let's huddle in, expectantly.

There is much more to the story of Naomi and Ruth. Stay tuned over the next three weeks as we learn what becomes of the two of them in Bethlehem. God's providence awaits.

In the meantime, we are struck by how God has provided Naomi with Ruth. Naomi, after all, has safely arrived in Bethlehem. And we have seen that God's presence and loving kindness is with her all along the way.

Sermon Resources:

A Theology of Ruth: The Dialectic of Countertestimony and Core Testimony by Nathan Tiessen.

Commentary on Ruth 1:1-18 by Alphonetta Wines.

Study Guide for Sermon on the Mount by Chuck Smith