

October 31, 2021 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Spirit of God, we ask that you open our eyes and our ears so that we might see and hear a word from you. Transform us and reform us by your Living and Holy Word, we pray. Amen.

Our scripture for today comes from the book of Ruth, chapter 1, verses 1 through 18. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. **2** The name of the man was Elimelech (uh lim i lech) and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon (Mall on) and Chilion (Killion); they were Ephrathites (ef ra thtites) from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. **3** But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. **4** These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, **5** both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. **6** Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. **7** So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. **8** But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. **9** The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. **10** They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” **11** But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? **12** Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, **13** would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” **14** Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. **15** So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” **16** But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. **17** Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” **18** When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Though she be but little, she is fierce.” This famous quote - though written by Shakespeare in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is an apt description for the book of Ruth.

It is a little book - just 4 chapters - but fierce in its message.

Yes, the book of Ruth, quite plainly, is one of the most beautifully written books in the whole bible.

It's remarkable story driven by the love and loyalty between two women - both widows, both at some point in the story an immigrant - and though it tells the story of just a single family - it's universality and breadth speaks to the complexities of life universal to each of us.

And it's a book we desperately need today. Our scripture for today opens the book of Ruth, and it opens in hardship and suffering: there is a famine in the land and thus this family, Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons are forced to leave Judah, their home, and migrate to Moab - a bitter enemy of Judah. Even more grief and hardship follows when Elimelech dies and Naomi is left a widow with two sons in a foreign land.

She is vulnerable, an immigrant, and likely scared. 10 years pass and these sons eventually both take moabite wives - Ruth and Orpah, and death follows again.

The two sons die and now Naomi and Ruth and Orpah are all widows, left alone, powerless, and vulnerable.

Naomi is still an immigrant in a foreign land. An enemy land.

So Naomi hears the famine is over and decides to go back to Judah. She tells her daughter in laws to go home, back to their own mothers and re-marry. Orpah reluctantly agrees, but Ruth refuses and clings to Naomi.

Ruth the moabite vows to always stay with Naomi.

Now Ruth will be the immigrant widow in a foreign land. An enemy land.

In the remaining chapters of the book, Ruth and Naomi go back to Judah, and Ruth eventually marries a relative of Naomi's, Boaz, and Boaz protects Ruth and Naomi, and Ruth and Boaz have a son and thus their family line is no longer in danger.

All while Ruth keeps her remarkable, steadfast promise of love and loyalty to Naomi.

Scholars suggest that the book of Ruth was written and canonized - so put into the Hebrew bible - in critique of the post exilic period in Israel's history.

It was a time when the people of Israel returned from being exiled from their home and undergone immense suffering and grief and death and their very identity as Israel nearly died.

Thus, there was strong fear of foreigners and a need to cling to just their own. In this time, Prophets Ezra and Nehemiah even called for Israelite men to cast out their wives and children from the land if their wives were foreigners - plainly implying that their society was being polluted by these foreign immigrant women.... and yet here comes Ruth.

An immigrant woman. Not only a foreign woman - a moabite woman.

And it's this moabite woman's steadfast loyalty and love to her mother in law and courage to go to immigrate to Judah that saves this Israelite family. And this is an important family in Israel's history.

For Ruth and Boaz's great grandson is King David. Their glorious king, a descendant of a Moabite woman. In this way, this moabite woman saves not only her family, but the very

kingdom of Israel. This woman that prophets would have expelled from their land is actually their savior.

It's a scandalous story that fiercely advocates God's radical inclusivity. and it's told through something as unlikely as the steadfast loyalty and love between two women, two widows.

Have you ever heard of the Bechdel test? It's a simple test designed to measure the representation of women in fiction. And here's how simple it is - a work passes the test if it has at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. And sometimes a rule is added that the women have to have names.

At first you might think yeah, all movies surely have this - just two women who talk about something other than a man.

But in reality, only about half of films pass the bechdel test.

So in 2021, in only about half the movies you watch do you see women have identity and character independent of a man or men.

If you apply the bechdel test to the bible, well -the results are far worse. The book of Ruth is one of the few and far between places where it does pass.

But what's even more striking - the dialogue between Ruth and Naomi in this chapter which culminates with Ruth's beautiful promise: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

This is the only conversation in scripture between two women that concerns not a man, but simply about each other's welfare.

Now, the bechdel test is not the most accurate way to measure the importance of women in scripture and the influence they have, it doesn't tell the whole story - but it is a striking reality: that this conversation is the only dialogue between two women who are just caring for each other.

But if we are only able to get one conversation like this, my goodness! This conversation is a force to be reckoned with.

For it's this conversation between Naomi and Ruth where Ruth pledges to always follow Naomi - the only conversation where two women simply care for each other, this is the conversation that saves the lineage of King David, and thus the lineage of Jesus Christ.

For if Ruth had not cared so much for Naomi and immigrated to Judah - she never would have married Boaz, thus Naomi's family line would have died.

We need the book of Ruth. especially today, this moment in history.

We need the reminder that when we set up walls to save ourselves, our community, our nation - God breaks them down to save us.

It is a timely and important message that the foreigners, the immigrants we want to exile from our land in fear for our own survival - they could be the very people we need for survival.

That they are the agents of God's hope and possibility and life renewed. We have a lot to learn from Ruth - in every way Ruth is not what we would expect.

We would not expect a widow to give up safety and security to go to a foreign land to follow her widowed mother in law instead of going home to find another husband.

We would not expect a woman to make such a steadfast, lifelong commitment to her foreign mother in law.

We would not expect this immigrant, this outsider, to show us the power of steadfast faith sustained over a lifetime.

Ruth is the most unexpected, unlikely agent of God's salvific work.

Yet, can we not say the same of Christ? Who would expect the carpenter son who associates himself with the poor, the widow, the outcast, who rides in on a donkey instead of a noble steed - who dies - who would expect him to be the Messiah to save us all?

We need Ruth's story now more than ever, because Christ is always Ruth - the unexpected, the immigrant, the foreigner we wish to exile.

And we are always Naomi - through the hardships life brings, Christ shows steadfast loyalty and love to us.

Goes where we goes, lodges where we lodges, makes our people his people. And our God his God.

In Ruth, God is hardly mentioned. God is a background character - or not really a character at all - just referenced in prayer or lament.

God doesn't speak or interact - God plays no active roll.

The book is about humans, the real sufferings and joys of everyday life, and the remarkable love and steadfast loyalty between humans. But despite that, no because of that - the character of God is revealed in all its reversals.

The story reverses from despair and death to fertility and hope. What starts in death of a family ends in the birth of a baby, a baby of just one family and the people of Israel.

And Ruth is steadfast, strong, bold, and loyal through it all. This immigrant woman is the agent of God's reversal - God's radical possibilities.

The book of Ruth is little and fierce and that's what makes it so beautiful. That we only need a little story, about one family, centered around the love and loyalty of women who care for each other - to see God's radical possibility made manifest in our own lives.

Not in big miraculous ways, but in details, in the background - yet always shaping our story with hope and renewal in reversal.

And for that - Thanks be to God. Amen