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Ruth and the Kindness of the Lord

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Ruth 1:1-19a, Psalm 113, 2 Timothy 2:1–15, Luke 17:11–19

*O God, our refuge and strength, true source of all godliness: Graciously hear the devout prayers of your Church, and grant that those things which we ask faithfully, we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:20–21).

Naomi has come to the end of herself, of her dreams. She is a living image of the barren world around her. During the period of the judges, the tribes of Israel descend into moral and physical chaos. The book of Judges ends with the disturbing line, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 21:25)

Naomi and her husband had sought to leave the barren land behind when they left Bethlehem and entered Moab. The land was supposed to be thriving. As this new life was beginning, her two sons married, and the future was hopeful. Then the father died. Then the sons died. Naomi and her daughters-in-law were left widowed. To be a widow in a world run by men was to live in peril of starvation, rape, and destruction. Many women were forced into prostitution to simply survive. Many women died in ignominy. In recognition of this ever-present risk, the law provided explicit instructions about caring for widows.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moses commands:

<sup>19</sup> “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. (Deuteronomy 24:19).

Jeremiah proclaims:

<sup>3</sup> Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. (Jeremiah 22:2–3)

Malachi warns:

<sup>5</sup> “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:5)

James instructs:

<sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

Naomi is returning home. She has no wealth. She has no power. All she has is grief and loss. She is a broken woman. Our world is filled with Naomis, with broken and needy people. In fact, some of us in here have known firsthand the devastation of loss, disappointment, pain, failure.

Naomi is going home to die in the land of her ancestors. She tells her daughters-in-law to return to the place of their birth as well. She has nothing for them. She has no future promise, but if they go back home to their mothers maybe they will marry again, maybe they will have a future.

Naomi sends them away with a blessing. “May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” (Ruth 1:8–9). Though the hand of the Lord has turned against her, she blesses her daughters-in-law that they might know the lovingkindness of God. Though Naomi can no longer see a possibility of God’s lovingkindness to herself, she seeks it for her daughters-in-law.

She entreats them to return home even as they beg to return with her. After much weeping and anguish, Oprah finally relents. She kisses Naomi goodbye and returns home.

But Ruth takes hold of Naomi. Now pause for a moment and think about the oddity of this moment. Ruth is clinging to a woman with no hope for the future.

“A young woman has committed herself to the life of an old woman rather than search for a husband,” writes Phyllis Trible. She continues, “One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel. Naomi is silenced by it.”<sup>2</sup>

Ruth pledges her life to Naomi, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” (Ruth 1:16-17). This oath is so profound, such a complete pledge of one life to another, I have often used it when conducting weddings. It perfectly describes the two becoming one.

In this case, it is not a man and woman pledging their lives in marriage, but a young widow pledging her life to an old, broken and grieving widow. Ruth first pledges, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.” Naomi is leaving this land behind, and Ruth is leaving with her. Ruth will not look back or return from following Naomi.

Now for a brief historical note. Ruth is a Moabite woman. The Moabites are descendants of Lot. When the angels led Lot and his family from Sodom before the judgment, Lot’s wife looks back and is judged instantly. Ruth pledges not to look back and tells Naomi don’t urge me to leave or look back. Next, Lot and his daughters escape to the mountains, but the daughters are afraid they will be childless, so they get their father drunk and each bears a child from their father. Their descendants are the Ammonites and Moabites.

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<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Trible, “A Human Comedy,” in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 166–99, 173. (Referenced in Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, First edition, JPS Tanakh Commentary (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), 22.)

Ruth descends from a family that was living in the land of Sodom. A land of corruption on multiple levels. A land that showed no welcome to the sojourner but sought to take everything from them. She descends from a family that will do anything to preserve their future: even violate the laws of God and man.

Unlike Lot's wife, Ruth does not look back to Moab. Unlike Lot's daughters, Ruth lets go of the need to preserve the future and embraces Naomi instead. Rather, than seeking a husband and a child, she vows her life and death to a woman who has nothing to offer her. She risks everything to follow Naomi.

She exclaims, "For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge." Naomi has no offspring. She has no wealth but she has a loyal, faithful, and kind daughter. Ruth is manifesting the very lovingkindness of God to Naomi. She gives up her home in Moab and will return to Naomi's home.

Her vow continues. "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Ruth's future is with Naomi's people and Naomi's God. As we listen to Ruth's vow, we might actually think of Abraham. For her vow resonates with a similar pattern.

The Lord tells Abraham,

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1). Abraham must leave behind his land, his home, his people, and go to a land that God will show him. Ruth pledges to leave her land, her home and her people and go to a land the Naomi will show her.

Then the Lord tells Abraham,

"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:2-3). Abraham leaves trusting in the promise of God.

Ruth does not hear a promise from God. In fact, she follows Naomi into a potential disaster. As a Moabite, Ruth's people are an enemy of the Israelites. Ruth's ancestors sought to curse the children of Israel as they crossed the wilderness. When Balaam was unable to curse the children of Israel, the Moabite women seduced the men of Israel and led them away from the Lord. Therefore, Moses proclaimed, "No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever, <sup>4</sup> because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you." (Deuteronomy 23:3-4).

Ruth's position is at risk to the say the least. Her future in having children appears closed, and her hope for making this enemy people accept her as one of their own is in question. And yet, Ruth pledges her life to Naomi: no matter what happens.

Finally, Ruth pledged her death to Naomi. “Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” Naomi is older and will most likely die sooner than Ruth, but even as Naomi dies, Ruth will remain faithful to her. She will be buried alongside her. By choosing to be buried in Naomi’s homeland, Ruth is in one sense abandoning her past, her ancestors. She will not be buried among her people, among her ancestors, but she will take Naomi’s people and Naomi’s past, and Naomi’s hopeless future as her own.

She has literally pledged all to Naomi in an act of loyal love. Ruth returns with Naomi. And Naomi announces to her people that she is no longer Naomi, but Mara, meaning bitter. The once hopeful young woman is now dried up and has not life but bitter waters.

In the wilderness, the Lord turned bitter waters to sweet, so that his people could drink. And he will do the same for Naomi. He will use Ruth to open the future for Naomi as well as all of Israel. For Ruth will give birth to a son who will be the grandfather of the great king David. Ruth, the Moabite woman who abandoned all to follow Naomi will bless Naomi even as she enters in the story of King David and eventually the story of Jesus Christ.

While there are many rich themes in the story of Ruth, it is worth pausing over this theme of human friendship. In the story of Ruth, we see the mystery of God’s hesed, God’s mercy and lovingkindness are expressed in human relationship.

The glory of God does not always look like people flooding a church with tears and repentance. It does not usually take the shape of angels appearing in our midst. In fact, it is often hidden in the commonplace of friendship, faithfulness, loyalty, lovingkindness, and openness to risk our future in the hands of God.

Ruth serves to remind us of the gift of friendship. All through Scripture we see God at work in human friendships. We need friends and we are surrounded by people who need friends.

As we go out from this place, may we follow Jesus into the lives of people like Naomi: the needy, the broken-hearted, and even the bitter. Our encounter may not look quite so dramatic as Ruth’s pledge to abandon all to follow Naomi. It might simply be faithful, quiet, loyal love to those in need. Even as we trust Jesus to bring the winds of renewal and hope to those lost in pain.