

Manningham Uniting Church
Summer Series on the Book of Ruth
28th January 2024
Text: Ruth Chapter 4
Theme: Hope for an Uncertain Future

Introduction

Good morning. I hope you have enjoyed the Summer Series thus far. Enjoy is probably an inappropriate word. I hope you have found the series thus far to be engaging and challenging.

I have personally learned so much from my research and preparation of the reflections. I have read the book of Ruth from multiple perspectives.

This morning, we will focus on Ruth Chapter 4.

Do you know along with Esther, Ruth is the only other woman to have a book in the Bible named after her? It is interesting to note that Esther (a Hebrew exile) married a Gentile, and that Ruth (a Moabite exile) married a Hebrew.

In the final chapter of the Book of Ruth, Ruth and Naomi are offstage and Boaz seeks a legal hearing with the kinsman who, technically, has a greater 'claim' on Ruth. It appears there is a male cousin whose 'claim' is stronger because of being of nearer kin than Boaz. This closer cousin is, according to the Midrash, known by the unfortunate name of Peloni Almoni; that is, So-and-So. In the scheme of the drama he is caricatured as a foil, a fool perhaps, and his role is pivotal but unidimensional.

Clearly in the book of Ruth: a man whose name is 'So and So' – the narrator doesn't see him as important, but who represents a foil in the development of the plot.

Let us pray...

God our redeemer, in sustaining the lives of Naomi and Ruth, you gave new life to your people. We ask that from age to age, new generations may be born to restore life and nourish the weak, by returning to you those things that we once thought ours.

God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. And all God's people say, **AMEN.**

Now before we take a closer look at Ruth Chapter Four, we need to pause and see something disconcerting happening here, against the background of what has gone before. All initiative and power are stripped away from the proactive, strong, independent, and liberated Ruth and her resilient, tough and rather cunning mother-in-law at this point.

The story thus far has been mainly a story of women, and suddenly in Chapter Four, the men took over and Ruth and Naomi lose their voice.

I don't know how many of you have experienced others taking over and shutting you up and out of what is your life and your business. I can tell you it is irritating, disempowering and humiliating. There is no doubt that it happens more to women than to men. More to people who don't have the means or wealth to assert themselves. More to the vulnerable in society than the strong.

Boaz is shown in a particular light in this fourth chapter. Where he is initially depicted as open-hearted, devoted, and considerate towards Ruth, he is now depicted as shrewd, knowledgeable and perhaps even mildly manipulative in his dealings with So-and-So.

Boaz calls a gathering by going to the gate of the town. So-and-So passes by and Boaz invites him over with, 'Come over, friend; sit down here.' Then Boaz gathers ten other men as witnesses and proceeds to present his case – with his own particular spin.

First, he speaks of Naomi returning from Moab and her desire now to sell the parcel of land. (It is notable that Naomi would not have inherited this land because of the death of her own husband, but because of the deaths of her sons.)

Boaz presents the story simply, in such a way that So-and-So's desire to assert his first claim to the land would come easily. You have the first claim to it, and I have second, Boaz says. 'I will redeem it', So-and-So says.

So far so satisfactory, for So-and-So. And for Boaz, but So-and-So doesn't know that yet.

Now Boaz's scheming comes into play. He speaks of the requirement of the redeemer of this land of Naomi's to acquire the Moabite. Perhaps nowhere else in the book is 'Moabite' used more powerfully. Boaz seems to be playing on the prejudice of So-and-So. He doesn't only mention Ruth's nationality, he lays out the obligation of the law: *'The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance'* (4.5).

It seems unlikely that So-and-So is ignorant of the reasons for, or responsibilities of, Levirate law. Boaz seems to be making sure to push So-and-So – in public – to acknowledge what his obligations towards Ruth would be where he marries her.

He seems to guess – or perhaps know – the prejudices of So-and-So towards Moabites, and he creates a situation where exposure and expediency is part of the negotiation.

Boaz's speculation was correct. So-and-So does not wish to damage his 'inheritance'. So-and-So owns land already, so he is not waiting on an inheritance for himself. By damaging an inheritance, he seems to be talking about the future. The inheritance that he would pass on to his own sons would be spoiled by marrying a Moabite in the present.

Boaz is clearly in his element here. He is wheeler and dealer. He is the puppet master here, pulling the strings, as he was undoubtedly the powerful pillar of society. Now Boaz remains the good and faithfully righteous executor of the law who looks after Ruth and Naomi but at the same time, when we come to this part of the story, he seems to slip into his role as a wealthy power broker too easily.

We all crave certainty. We don't like things to change especially those close to us. I am sure I don't have to remind you that life is uncertain. The recent Pandemic is a good example.

The crux of the problem is we demand certainty in a world that is always tentative and uncertain. Truth is, it's precisely this unrealistic demand that creates anxiety. Life is both pain and pleasure, both opportunity and challenge, both birth and death. Both Ruth and Naomi knew that intimately.

Naomi and her husband, Elimelek and two sons, Mahlon and Kilion left Bethlehem, Judah because of famine. They were uncertain about their future in Bethlehem and decided to leave for Moab.

Did Naomi know that she was going to lose her husband and two sons? As the author of Ecclesiastes says, there is a season and a time for everything. And it's not for us to decide what the right season is, or which season we should be in. It's our job to embrace the season that's been given to us.

According to Elliot D. Cohen Ph.D. author of at least 27 books, *“It is this contradiction between the demand for certainty and the reality of uncertainty that will continuously play out again and again without resolution — unless you give up the demand for certainty. It is you who must concede; reality won't ever give up its uncertainty for you.”*

Ultimately our need for certainty is about the fear of losing control. We can have the best plans, but the future is full of uncertainties.

James reminds us, *“You do not even know what will happen tomorrow! What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”* (James 4:14)

In life, certainty is never guaranteed. In the Book Ruth, the uncertainties of life are on full display. Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. Her future is full of uncertainties. Will she be welcomed back? Who is going to provide for her in her twilight years?

Ruth made a commitment to Naomi. *“Do not press me to leave you, 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. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”* (Ruth 1:16,17)

For Ruth, her future is even more uncertain. She is a woman, an outsider, a Moabite, despised by the Jews. Will she be welcomed by the Jews? How will she provide for her aging mother-in-law?

In Ruth's story, we recognise the story of many women who have, over the ages, used their ingenuity and creativity to cope with life and fight for their future.

I think of refugees, migrant workers, new immigrants, women and children in war zones and those who struggle for survival every day, are at the mercy of those who make the decisions at the gate of the city about their futures.

They are often forced to wait and watch. They all face uncertain futures. Rights given and taken away without notice or explanation.

After immersing ourselves in the book of Ruth for a couple of weeks, under an overall theme of HOPE – **Hope in Hard Times, Hope for the Marginalised, Hope for the Stereotyped**, and today, the last Sunday for the Summer series, **Hope for an Uncertain Future** – we come to the end of our journey with the Book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth is subversive, in what was, and often still is, a very patriarchal world.

And yet Ruth flourished because of *hesed*. The Book of Ruth puts God's *hesed* on display.

The word *hesed* could be translated as: 'lovingkindness' (ASV), 'Steadfast love' (ESV), 'mercy' (KJV), 'faithfulness' (NASB), or simply 'love' (NIV)? Most commentators agree that none of these translations express the meaning of the word fully, but touch on components of it.

Again, in the Old Testament.... [*Hesed*] is the way God intended for human beings to live together from the beginning — the 'love-your-neighbour-as-yourself' way of living, an active, selfless, sacrificial caring for one another that goes against the grain of our fallen natures.

Hesed is a costly brand of love that involves going above and beyond what anyone has a right to ask or expect. It is the brand of love at work in the actions of Ruth, Boaz, and ultimately of Naomi too.

The Book of Ruth puts God's *hesed* on full display.

If there is one Old Testament concept I would encourage you to latch onto it is reality of God's *hesed* toward God's people – *Hesed* is a word that brings together ideas of loyalty, faithfulness, duty, mercy, goodness, and love.

And when it is used to describe God's action toward humans, it takes as its foundation *a covenant promise*.

God's *hesed* is the vital ingredient for living in an uncertain future. God's *hesed* is the key to hope in an uncertain future.

The fairy tales that we listened to as children, many times ended by saying "and they lived happily ever after." It is simply a hyperbole that emphasizes the happy ending of the story.

The Book of Ruth did not end with "And they lived happily ever after."

How did the Book of Ruth end? This story ends with Boaz taking Ruth as his wife. These last verses do not give us many details. A son is born to Naomi from Ruth and Boaz in Bethlehem and Naomi is restored to life and fullness. It ends with the genealogy of David. (Ruth 4:17 – 21)

*The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, “**A son has been born to Naomi.**” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

The genealogy at the end of the book claims Ruth the Moabite is the great-grandmother of David, God’s chosen and favoured king of Israel!

Further, in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, Ruth — along with two other Canaanite women, Tamar and Rahab — is explicitly named as an ancestor of David and, thus, of Jesus.

The Book of Ruth insists that we can find hope in difficult times. Famines, deaths, tragedies, and suffering doesn’t have the last words.

The Book of Ruth affirms that the marginalised, the powerless, the oppressed can find hope in God’s *hesed*. The Book of Ruth asserts that we can be free from patriarchy, and the limitations of stereotyping and single-story.

Hope in an uncertain future.

Let us put our hope in God who offers us *Hesed*, steadfast love in an uncertain future.