

Manningham Uniting Church

Summer Series on the Book of Ruth

07th January 2024

Text: Ruth Chapter 1

Theme: Hope in Difficult Times

Introduction

This morning we begin the Summer series on the Book of Ruth. I would recommend that you take the time this week to read through this book a couple of times. It is only four chapters, and you can probably read the whole book in less than half an hour.

While the book of Ruth is only four chapters long — approximately 80 verses depending on the translation — the book is packed with important avenues to explore, from sociocultural and justice-oriented issues like women's rights and rights and treatment of foreigners to theological considerations, such as how God is perceived and how divine providence might be operative in this text.

Ruth is also one of the few places in the male-dominated world of Scripture where women play the major roles and are the central characters. They must make their way, of course, amidst the men and the male-dominated world of ancient Israel, but the emphasis is squarely and resolutely on the women.

Ruth is a story of biblical proportions including everything from famine, widows, gleaning in the fields, levirate marriage, and justice at the gate to the birth of children of destiny.

According to Joan Chittister "In the Book of Ruth, the Word of God takes a position on women that defies the social tradition, in this day as well as in that one. In the Book of Ruth, God calls us beyond the stereotypes and the social barriers to the fullness of life and wholeness of being. It is a spiritual journey meant clearly for us all."

Let us pray... *God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. Amen.*

The story of Ruth begins with hunger. There was famine in Israel. And Naomi and her family flee Israel and settle in the land of Moab. They integrate themselves into the community, taking wives from the Moabites for their sons.

And as so often happens for those who are barely clinging to life, one disaster begets another. The Bible is blunt about the tragedy. First Naomi's husband dies. Then her two sons. It is one thing to grieve, but it is another to have death disintegrate your life. And this is what happens to Naomi.

She is a foreigner, an old woman in a society where her life is dependent upon men. And she is poor. She has no relatives, no wealth, no property, no skills, and no recourse. There is nothing left.

What do we do when our world falls apart? When we are swarmed with difficulties in our lives? Often, the question arises, where is God in the midst of difficult and dark days?

This family from Bethlehem is part of a long line of biblical, historical, and contemporary households facing food insecurity. The text does not indicate how long there had been a famine, or how many other Ephrathites left their homes. The text focuses our attention on one particular household and their decision to seek refuge in the country of Moab. The decision to flee famine is completely understandable. The decision to seek refuge in Moab is—in the biblical context—totally shocking.

The dominant biblical tradition regarding the Moabites depicts them as shameful, inhospitable, and dangerous. The Book of Deuteronomy instructs: *“No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none*

of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam ... to curse you ... You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live” (Deut. 23:3-4, 6).

The biblical tradition regarding the Moabites prepares us as readers to question Elimelech and Naomi’s choice of refuge, and to anticipate that they will encounter hostility from the Moabites.

The focus of the text, however, is on this family’s survival. Why should we, as readers, care about this particular family? There is nothing to distinguish this household in terms of lineage, prominence, righteousness, or promise. Nevertheless, it is their life as famine refugees that the text sets before us.

Sadly, the situation of Naomi is not unique among ancient or contemporary refugee women in having their lives turned upside down by emotional, social, and economic loss, and having to figure out how to continue to live.

It is not unsurprising that Naomi, having heard that the famine was over in her homeland, would decide to return to Bethlehem. What is startling is that *“she started to return with her daughters-in-law”* (verse 6). The text repeats this notice: *“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”* (verse 7). Nothing in the previous verses in the Book of Ruth and nothing in the biblical accounts of the Moabites prepares us for the decision of these women to travel together into an unknown future. Nor is there any prior indication of the devotion and concern these women have for one another.

The text does not indicate how far the three women travelled together toward the land of Judah before Naomi directs her daughters-in-law to *“Go back ... to your mother’s house.”*

Naomi indicates her concern is for their “security” which rests *“in the house of your husband”* (verse 9), and which Naomi, who has no living sons, cannot provide. What Naomi cannot provide is contrasted to what her “daughters” (verse 11) have provided.

Naomi prays that these two Moabite women will be treated by the LORD (YHWH) with the same loyalty and devotion that they have extended to “the dead” and to her (verse 8). Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth “wept aloud” when Naomi instructs them to “Go back” (verse 8), and after she acknowledges the bitterness of her own life (verse 13).

Orpah is dutiful to Naomi’s command (verses 14-15). Ruth is resistant to Naomi’s command (verses 16-17). Both daughters-in-law face uncertain futures. Both are presented as acting out of devotion to Naomi.

In the text, Ruth makes a stunning pledge to link her life to Naomi, to Naomi’s homeland, her people, and her God. *“Ruth said, Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”* (Ruth 1:16,17)

These words probably sound familiar because they are often uttered at weddings.

Let’s be clear there was nothing comfortable, romantic or idyllic about Ruth’s situation. The question is as a foreigner (a Moabite!) and as a widow without property, will she find welcome support for this commitment? Will there be ways in the economic and social structure of her new homeland for her to find security for Naomi and her future well-being? The future is not certain for a ‘foreigner’, and more so when she is a Moabite woman. But in her grief and loss, Ruth is willing to take a step of faith and leave Moab for the unknown.

Let’s pause for a moment.

It's that line – *"your gods will be my gods"* that sticks out to me as I read this story. We don't usually articulate faith in this way. It sounds a bit like picking out a type of detergent at Woolworth or AGL store, or deciding which fitness class you're planning to take at the YMCA. Instead, Ruth chooses a person, and in choosing that person she chooses a life among a people. She chooses a friend and in that friend she understands that God is something like that, something vulnerable, a god unlike the gods of Moab, a god for those who have nothing. Ruth chooses Naomi.

"You," the verses repeat over and over. *"Do not ask me to leave you, or to return from following after you, for where you go, I will go, where you stay I will stay, the people of you will be the people of me, the gods of you will be the gods of me."*

You. You. You. I am choosing you.

God has never spoken directly to me. I don't think of myself as a particularly religious person. I don't put a lot of stock in coming up with rational answers that are going to talk someone into believing in God.

But I do have friends. And thank God for friends. This is the frame of HOPE. That's what this little book is all about. No matter how out of control your life might be right now, we must remember that there is always HOPE. And HOPE can come from anywhere.

Believe it or not, it is when I look at my friends that I can see the fragile HOPE of God in a body. I witness the space God has made for their grief. When I am down and out, I look towards them, the extravagant, ceaseless, and unmerited care they offer me, and this is how I know what God is like. And that makes me want to be a better friend, to let my life say *"I'm here in this with you, and I'm not going anywhere."* It makes me want to stop pretending everything is fine, to let my life say that I'm not sure things will get better, but I'll be there with you, no matter what.

Recently because of some difficult stuff that I was going through, I decided to attempt to pen 52 things I am thankful for in 2023. Another way I tried to make sense of the curveball that was thrown at me. No, I wasn't trying to minimise my pain. I was trying to remind myself despite what was happening, there were things that truly I could be thankful for. That I could be grateful for.

Do you know what my top five are?

1. Friends.
2. The privilege of serving God and God's people.
3. My imperfections.
4. Not afraid of my feelings.
5. Learning to let go.

In 2024 I want this to be a daily practice. I start my day with "thank you" and end my day with "thank you". It's about gratitude. I see it as a deep spiritual practice. I am not trying to pretend that life is 'hunky-dory'. It's not. That every day is going to be a fantastic day. It will not be.

Many of us here have faced difficult times in life. There are many here right now that may be facing difficult times. And the question, 'Where did I go wrong?' is often followed by 'Why did God let this happen to me?' Most of us can identify with that.

Now let's look at Ruth 1:20,21... So, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem, the house of bread. Naomi in these verses is finally coming home. She is older, sadder but perhaps wiser. The whole town was stirred up about their arrival. So, they begin to ask, "Is this Naomi?" But she immediately tells them not to call her Naomi but Mara. The name Naomi means pleasant or sweet and the name Mara means bitter. So do not call me pleasant but call me bitter because "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."

Again, I want us to hear the pain in her words about what has happened to her. *“The Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.”*

But whether her assessment of God is correct or not, this is exactly how we feel! This is our perspective too.

Listen to verse 21. *“I went away full, and the Lord brought me back empty.”*

Now that’s not quite true. I have always thought these words were rather insensitive with Ruth standing right next to her.

The final verse shows a glim of silver lining in the clouds. That it is always darkest just before dawn: they arrived *‘in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning’* (22).

Our story today starts with a famine but ends with a harvest.

Recently through my reading, I came across an idea – BORROWING HOPE. In the middle of real life, real struggles, real loss, real crises of faith, and real humanity, it’s easy to become weary, exhausted, and feel hopeless. Sometimes one of the only things that can sustain us comes from other people or God or an inspiration that helps us take the next breath or the next step, or make it through the next day.

Naomi needed hope. Ruth also needed hope. They needed each other. We all need hope in difficult times. Recognize that HOPE in circumstances is not reliable. We often rest our HOPE in outcomes, tangibles, ideals of how we think they should turn out.

May I suggest to you that sometimes we get so blinded by our pain, fear, busyness, and self-preservation that it becomes difficult to experience God’s spirit moving, revealing, challenging, strengthening, encouraging, and healing.

Maybe HOPE is in the eyes of a friend, a word of encouragement, a song, a view of the mountains, a crisis, Scripture, a poem, or absolutely anything that stirs our hearts toward love, hope, and joy.

But what I believe in every part of my soul — from my own current experience and walking with so many others through pain, suffering, wrestling, doubt, confusion, and healing — is that sometimes I need to borrow some HOPE to make it through the day.

And whether you are aware of it or not I have borrowed HOPE from some of you. I guess that some of you do that, too. Who or what are you borrowing HOPE from right now?

The story of Ruth is a story of the pain and tragedy of life, the story of just how difficult life can get. But it's also a story of how we can have HOPE in difficulties. It's a story of how pain and grief can be transformed into joy and peace. And how we must be willing at times to borrow HOPE from others.