

## SCRIPTURE'S GREATEST HITS

### *Family Matters*

Ruth 1:1-18

June 18, 2023

Some context may be helpful. The Book of Ruth is set during the time of the Judges when, we are told, "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." That is, there was little sense of shared responsibility or concern for the common good. It was a "get what you can, fend for yourself, tighten the circle, ignore the needs of others, especially outsiders," kind of time.

There is a famine in the land of Judah. Naomi and her husband Elimilech go in search of food to sustain their lives and the lives of their growing sons. They do, in other words, what many have done across the centuries. What many do in our own time. They flee a familiar land of scarcity in search of security, in search of a future. They cross the River Jordan and arrive in Moab as refugees. There they find sustenance, and their sons find wives from Moab—Ruth and Orpah. Still, life is not easy for outsiders. Elimilech and his sons die far from home.

Naomi is left. Naomi is the picture of vulnerability in the ancient world. A widow living in a foreign and often hostile land. No sons to take her in. No pathway to provision. No family in the land. She pursues the one plan that stands a chance. She will go home, back to Bethlehem. There she will pray that her extended family will welcome her. Before she goes, Naomi gathers and blesses her daughters-in-law, now widows themselves, and instructs them to return to their families, to return to their mothers. After all, they are young. They will have another chance at marriage and family. Hesitantly at first, Orpah does as told, returning to her family in Moab. We cannot blame her. It is prudent and judicious. Wise and careful. Forward thinking. No one could blame Orpah for her decision.

And then there is Ruth. We are not told what animates her defiant response, but I think we know. What we are told is this: Ruth simply will not leave Naomi to return to Judah alone. They are going together.

Their prospects are bleak. We are not told in this story, but Scripture is filled with directives about the kinds of boundaries that Ruth and Naomi have now crossed. Command after command not to marry foreigners. To keep separate. To maintain ritual purity. To remove yourselves from "them."

Well, in Judah, Ruth is "them." A poor, widowed, Moabite woman living in Bethlehem at the time of the Judges, when self-preservation was the law of the land, and caring for the stranger held no value at all.

And here is what should astound us about this moment: Ruth, fully aware of the risk, chooses to put herself in danger. She will travel with her mother-in-law to a foreign country. And there she will be the refugee. She will not speak the language. She will not know the culture or the religion. And, yes, she will hear the whispers. *Not from around here. Doesn't look like us. Moabite woman. Have you heard that accent? I think she's just here for a handout.* You see, Ruth's decision makes no logical sense. There is only this: Ruth loves Naomi. That love, forged in shared grief, is more than friendship. They are family now, and Ruth will not let Naomi journey alone. She makes a life-altering sacrifice.

*Where you go, I will go.* And then, the most audacious statement of all: *your people will be my people.* It is a pledge, a promise of fidelity, a radical commitment that redefines family. It's one of those beautiful moments that we love to lift up and remember in a

sentimental way. We add it to the list of scripture's greatest hits as a memorable passage of scripture. But be careful. Don't bypass the raw courage that Ruth's love requires. Yes, these two women may be united by an unbreakable bond, but they face impossible circumstances.

We're hearing this story in church on a Sunday morning, and so I must come clean and confess a curiosity about the Book of Ruth. The voice of God is not heard in this story. God never appears as a character in the narrative. Ruth and Naomi have fallen on unexpected hard times, but unlike Job's memorable conundrum, there is no indication that God played a role in their circumstance. Back in the Book of Genesis, Abraham and Sarah leave their land and move to a faraway place, but they go because God instructs them to go. Not so in the Book of Ruth. These women receive no clear divine instructions. No series of miracles and plagues. No sign in the clouds. No voice from a burning bush. No manna falling from the sky. No failsafe guarantee of divine presence with Ruth and Naomi. The leap they take comes without the promise of sacred safety net.

Which is precisely why this passage deserves a place on our greatest hits. The story of Ruth and Naomi looks like our stories. As much as we may love the Biblical narratives of unmistakable divine intervention, for most of us, those stories read more like legend than blueprint. We are far more familiar with the hidden God, the behind-the-scenes God, the quiet God whose gentle prodding may be confused with coincidence.

And so, this morning, if you want to know where God is in the story of Ruth and Naomi, you need to consider the words and actions of two strong women who simply do what must be done to care for the ones they love. These women—familiar with the persistent pain of grief and the bitter sting of exclusion—have the gift of courage. When the harshness of life is too much to bear, they find a strength that they cannot manufacture on their own—

only receive. And it is in that strength that we find God in this story.

I've been thinking about those moments when God chooses anonymity, those moments when God acts and speaks through the words and deeds of ordinary people with extraordinary courage. I've been thinking about those times when you and I are called to speak words of truth, even in shaking voice, and then discover that we are strong enough, we are brave enough, we are faithful enough to follow where those words lead us.

*Your people will be my people.* A pledge. A promise. A radical redefinition of family.

Speaking of family, and of the presence of God in this story, I do want to fast forward a bit. Spoiler alert. Despite all those clear commands in the Book of Deuteronomy against marrying a foreigner, Ruth the Moabite woman plays a leading role in the story of God's people. If you read ahead, you will find her name in the genealogy of Israel's greatest king. David was her great grandson. Ten generations later, in the Gospel of Matthew, we find Ruth's name again in a genealogy, this time in the trunk of the family tree of Jesus of Nazareth.

*Your people will be my people.*

You see, from beginning to end, this is the story of scripture. This God who keeps tearing down the dividing walls that we insist on building. This God who insists that we welcome the stranger, invite the outsider in, care for the neighbor whose life feels so distant from our own. This God who keeps putting us in direct contact with people who challenge our assumptions about who belongs and who does not. This God who even places them deep in our family tree, reminding us that the strangers we are prone to dismiss, ignore, or fear are our people.

*Your people will be my people.* If we believe those words, we begin to see the face of God in every human face.

In the face of every child whose life has been cut down by gun violence, and every parent whose weeping knows no end—*your people will be my people.*

In the face of every young person struggling for acceptance because of who they are or might become—*your people will be my people.*

In the face of every refugee longing for homes to which they cannot return, and all who face the utter cruelty of rejection—*your people will be my people.*

In the face of all who live in communities torn apart by crime and violence, and all those who seek to restore and maintain peace—*your people will be my people.*

In the face of leaders called to put power to proper use in ethical ways—*your people will be my people.*

In the face of those set adrift by jobs that have left town and a world that seems to be slipping away—*your people will be my people.*

In the face of friends who search in vain for meaning, and all who consider ending a life that seems to no longer hold purpose—*your people will be my people.*

In the face of every suffering child of God, no matter the cause of that suffering—*your people will be my people.*

It is a pledge and a promise—the kind of words we speak and then must live into. It is also a gospel truth: God has created us to be one human family. Oliver, Edmund, Lola. Your people are my people because we are all God's people. Friends, whenever we ignore this foundational truth, we capitulate to a self-righteous narrowmindedness that excludes the very ones God calls us to embrace. Listen to this: Anyone you are tempted to dismiss is the very one God invites you to welcome.

So let us be brave enough to turn to the neighbor we struggle to love, the stranger whose presence unsettles us, the person whose perspective we cannot understand, the friend from whom we've grown distant, the human being who, by providence

disguised as happenstance, is standing right in front of us, and to them speak this pledge, this promise, this truth.

I belong to you, and you belong to me. We all, all, all belong to God. Amen.