

The Book of Ruth Rev. Dr. Kim Engelmann West Valley Presbyterian Church

Well two Fridays ago I was in a hopeless situation.

My daughter Julie had called me and told me she was in SF with her classmates. She wanted to come home for awhile and see us, so I went up to the city to get her.

Now mind you, I wasn't thinking about what day it was.

I had my mind on other things, and when I got to the city I realized to my dismay that the GIANTS parade had just finished, and on top of that it was Halloween! People were dancing around in all kinds of strange attire, and every time SIRI told me to go right...the street was blocked off. There was no way I could get to the hotel where Julie was staying. Scads of people everywhere... It was a literal madhouse.

Then out of nowhere I pull up behind a white van with letters on it AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY – Julies school. Could it be? Mind you, the school had brought 5 vans to the city – I didn't know that then – but in a kind of desperate attempt I beeped my horn. The windows in the back of the van were dark, so I couldn't see in, but suddenly a female manicured hand stuck out the back van window which only opened partially and waved.

The van then roared up a hill and I almost lost it, but in desperate pursuit at the next light I pulled up next to it. I beeped again and the driver rolled down the window. "YES?" she asked. "Hi I said...I am Julie Engelmanns mother. Is Julie in there by any chance?" The girl nodded yes! As a matter of fact she is...The next minute Julie is bounding out of the van, in the middle of a traffic jam, jumps into my Prius and embraces. "Mommy!"

What would have been the chance in that mess, with 5 possible vans, that Julie and I would have found each other. Hopeless, right? Not so...it turned out better than I could have imagined...

That's the mood of the beginning of the book of Ruth.

It's a hopeless situation...

And its not just hopelessness in terms of inconvenience...its hopelessness in terms of Ruth begins with devastation, ruin, loss, weakness.

Take a look.

In the first chapter we have three widows in mourning, plodding sadly toward Bethlehem (meaning house of bread) to find food in an area ravished by famine. One widow is Naomi, a Jew.

The situation is dire.

Naomi has not only lost her husband, Elimelech, but also her two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. The other two widows were her sons' wives, her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Ruth and Orpah were Moabites.

Now the name Naomi means "pleasant one," but in the first chapter Naomi says, "I'm so devastated, by all this loss, I'm changing my name to Mara." (Ruth 1:20).

Mara means "bitter."

God's done it to me,

Naomi declares.

God's afflicted me. I have nothing left.

She might as well have said,
God can't stand me. God hates me.

"Go back to Moab!"

She tells her daughters-in-law.

Don't hang with me. I have nothing to offer. I am old. Go back to your own people and get yourselves married again. Go back to your own gods. Maybe they'll treat you better than my God has treated me.

Back in that culture, if you didn't have a male heir or spouse you had no rights, no inheritance, no chance of success. You were truly destitute.

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That's the start of the book of Ruth: bitterness, loss, famine, and disillusionment with God.

One thing to recognize about this book is that nothing we might consider out of the ordinary occurs to fix this sad opening.

No one comes back from the dead in the book of Ruth.

There are no burning bushes, or angelic appearances, or ecstatic visions or dreams.

Rather, in Ruth we see how God works in the midst of very ordinary events, to bring about His extraordinary purpose.

It is a story that reminds us that in the ordinariness of our everyday and also in the midst of loss and heartache, we have a God who is at work for us, fulfilling His plan for us even when nothing spectacular may seem to be happening in our lives.

God is still there and God is still at work.

Now Ruth was such an important story that the Jews read every year during Passover.

For the Jewish community it was, like Dr. Seuss's classic story, Green Eggs and Ham that we may have read or are reading to our kids (I read this story to my kids; they knew what was coming next and would recite the whole story);

It was a story that everyone knew.

The amazing thing about this book is that it is not about a Jewish man; it's not even about a Jewish woman.

It is about a Moabitess—a woman from a people who were considered enemies of God. Jews were not supposed to have any dealings with Moabites:

"No Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, even down to the tenth generation." (Deuteronomy 23:3)

Seven times in this short book of four chapters the author identifies Ruth as a Moabitess, making sure you do not miss her alien descent.

It's like the author is pounding us over the head with it. What's the point we are supposed to be getting here as the author mentions over and over that Ruth is from this enemy people?

The **MOABITES WERE A PEOPLE WHO**

- A people who **were not kind to the Israelites.**
- A people who **did not let the Israelites cross over into their land.**
- A people who **worshipped Baal and other gods.**
- A people who **it actually says in Scripture cursed the Hebrews when they escaped from Egypt and refused to give them bread and water when they needed it for their journey.**

"Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live," says the Lord.

(Deuteronomy 23:6)

And yet, here in the Hebrew Scriptures, we have a book named after a woman, which is amazing

enough in itself in a patriarchal culture, but a woman who is from Moab!

Now it is clear that Naomi's sons married Moabite women, but to highlight that fact of inter-marriage, which was not okay either according to Jewish law, and then make a whole story out of it, and celebrate the event—quite remarkable!

Could it be that even in the Old Testament, God races to embrace the alien, the foreigner, the stranger who runs to Him for refuge?

Given her alien descent, it would have been so easy for Ruth in this situation of despair to turn back to the familiar.

She could have just said, "I want to go home," and she could have gone back to the land of Moab and started over with people who would accept her as one of them.

Orpah, her sister-in-law, with Naomi's persuasion, does finally go back. Interestingly the name Orpah means "back of the neck"; in other words Orpah turned the back of her neck to Naomi and left.

Ruth, however, with vehement super-glue tenacity, hangs onto Naomi and says some of the most beautiful words in Scripture:

"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 will be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

I am loyal to you Naomi. I am with you, even though you are bitter and angry at God and full of despair, I am not going to leave you. I am going to hang on and we're going to see this thing through together.

Sometimes these words are used in weddings. The irony is that this commitment is declared after Ruth's husband had died. She is saying this to her *mother-in-law*, of all people.

I don't think many of us would say to our mother-in-law,

Where you go, I will go—AND CERTAINLY NOT—where you lodge, I will lodge.

That is just asking a little too much for most of us. Relationships with mother-in-laws are not always the best.

PLUS...Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, is not on top of her game emotionally.

She is in the pits, and she is hardly being a good witness.

It's not like she's handing Ruth Hebrew tracts and telling her how great it is to be a Hebrew and worship Yahweh.

No way! Naomi, as we said before is saying,

Go back to your own gods; may they treat you better than Yahweh has treated me.

Not exactly language to get a conversion going.

Not exactly a way to win Ruth over to monotheism.

Had Ruth left her at this point Naomi probably would have curled up and died. She would have had no one and nothing to live for.

Later, Boaz tells Ruth:

May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (Ruth 2:12)

You see, I think that is exactly what Ruth did.

Ruth's exposure to the God of Israel through being married to an Israelite caused her to trust in God's goodness even in the face of Naomi's despair.

I think **Ruth—the pagan from Moab—had more faith in God at this moment than Naomi, the Israelite.**

There was something in Ruth that knew—despite her mother-in-law's despair, that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the Hebrews, was not a God who abandoned the needy and left them bitter and alone as Naomi claimed.

Rather, **Ruth trusted that this God was a God of mercy and compassion—who might even be able to love a widow from Moab—(and that would be Ruth herself) - an alien, a foreigner from a cursed people.**

She trusted that she, even she, could run to this God, Naomi's God that Ruth wanted as her God too.

Even though she was of foreign descent, this God would have mercy on her and she could find refuge under His wings.

She dared to believe that this God of the Hebrews wanted her.

Ruth's resolve to stick with Naomi wins out and both of them journey together and settle in Bethlehem—literally meaning “the house of bread”—the birth place of Jesus.

Now, how are they going to survive, these two destitute widows?
Well, Ruth knew God's welfare system.

It was written in Leviticus that those who were destitute were allowed to pick up the pieces of grain, the sheaves that those who were harvesting dropped behind them. God tells the people very clearly:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:9-10)

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 23:22)

So Ruth gleaned around the edges, and picked up what was dropped and provided food for Naomi and herself in this way.

The story unfolds as “coincidentally” she ends up in Boaz's field—a wealthy man of good repute who, unbeknown to Ruth at first, happens to be a kinsman or close relative of Naomi. He is a kind, generous man. Listen to Boaz's heart:

“Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pullout some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean and do not rebuke her.” (Ruth 2:15-16)

And Ruth says of Boaz:

“You have comforted me and spoken kindly...” (Ruth 2:13b)

Boaz tells Ruth:

“I have been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done...”
(Ruth 2:11-12a)

We aren't told how Boaz is related to Naomi. We are told, very clearly in Matthew's genealogy, who Boaz's mother happened to be. **Boaz's mother was Rahab – the harlot.**

Rahab had been a prostitute, a gentile, also not a part of the Hebrew people.

If you remember, Rahab helped the Hebrew spies—and makes a statement of faith in their God even though she too is an alien and foreigner and sinner.

As a result, she and her family were saved when Joshua took Jericho and claimed it as the Promised land for the Hebrew people. Rahab became incorporated into the Israelite culture, being a gentile herself.

And Matthew, the most Jewish gospel of them all, the author who would be most unlikely to want to deviate from Jewish tradition, the one who would be most concerned about preserving the purity of the Jewish line, is the one who mentions two gentile women in the genealogy of Jesus; it is so unusual to mention women anyway, especially Gentile women.

Read it:

“Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. (Matthew 1:5-6)

So here is Boaz, the son of Rahab, the harlot, who perhaps because his own mother was also from a foreign culture and land, who had changed from pagan gods to the God of Israel, was able to show Ruth comfort, generosity, protection, and finally marriage, and restore the family line, and create an inheritance for a Moabite widow who was destitute.

Someone who did this for a family member was called a kinsman-redeemer.

This meant that if you were kin of a family member in need, as Naomi was, if you were willing, and had the means, you could buy back the family inheritance, and reclaim the family line that was lost, which is exactly what Boaz did.

Boaz and Ruth eventually do marry and have a son named Obed who Naomi cares for; Obed cheers Naomi up, as grandchildren often will do.

And Naomi, no longer Mara the bitter one, but rather Naomi (that name means “pleasant one”) takes the child, Obed, who later became the grandfather of King David, lays him in her lap and cares for him.”

Boaz never presumes that Ruth would wish to marry him. Although he is well established and generous, he is older. It does seem that Boaz loves Ruth. I think he is pleasantly surprised when she asks.

Yes, it is Ruth who proposes to Boaz—she asks him to be her kinsman-redeemer according to the custom of the time.

And Boaz's response is gracious and kind:

“The Lord bless you, my daughter”, he replies. ‘This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier (to Naomi); You have not run after the younger men whether rich or

poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I (more closely related to Naomi)... if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives, I will do it." (Ruth 3:10-13)

This other relative, more closely related to Naomi, gets first rights on being the kinsman-redeemer.

Notice, however, he is never mentioned by name in the Scripture.

It is clear from the way that the Book of Ruth is written that the author knew the name of the person, but never wishes to mention it as if implying that this other relative is not worth remembering.

So this closer relative stays anonymous in the story and in the Hebrew is referred to as "so and so."

You sort of hold your breath as Boaz negotiates with "so and so" because at first, so and so agrees to buy back the land that Naomi is selling that belonged to Elimelech, Naomi's husband; and you worry for a minute that "so and so," this nameless unknown person, will become the kinsman-redeemer because by now you've become kind of attached to Boaz.

When Boaz tells this relative, this so and so, that he will also inherit Ruth, a widow of Moab; this relative whose name is not worth mentioning, declines.

It would shame him to marry a Moabitess.

In addition, if Ruth were not in the picture, "so and so" would inherit the land for himself, which would be to his own benefit.

If Ruth became his wife, it is her son that would inherit the land, and carry on the name of her dead husband. That was the custom. Boaz is willing to accept such a loss. The other kinsman is not. "Buy it yourself!" he tells Boaz.

So Boaz declares:

"Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. You are my witnesses!" (Ruth 4: 9-10)

So Ruth goes from destitution to an inheritance; from having no family name, to being remembered down through the generations as King David's great grandmother and part of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

That's the story of Ruth.

From destitution to inheritance is our story, too. You and I, we have a kinsman redeemer who is not ashamed of us as the unnamed kinsman-redeemer was ashamed of Ruth, the Moabitess.

It says that Jesus "is not ashamed to call (us) his brothers and sisters....that both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family." (Hebrews 2:11)

"God sent his son to redeem those under the law that we might receive the full rights as his children....and since you are a child of God, you are also an heir." (Galatians 4:4-7)

Again scripture tells us:

"You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." (Ephesians 2:19)

There is a redeemer who came and gave up everything in love on a cross so that we could be reconciled to God—to buy us back so that we may receive the inheritance of abundant life, forgiveness, and the power of the Holy Spirit to restore us to a love relationship with our Creator.

And out of this love from God, we learn to love people back with God's kind of tenacious sacrificial, unconditional love.

How many folks are just longing for someone to say Ruth's words to them:

Friend, I am going to stick with you. I am going to go where you go, and when you're down, and you feel God is against you when you experience loss or pain, I'll be there for you. I'm not going to give up on you, even when it means I have to sacrifice. I'm going to help you survive in this life because I trust in a God whose love and compassion is insurmountable. Because God has been a refuge for me in all my weakness and sin, I'm going to be a refuge for you.

It has been said by some commentators that Ruth represents the church which is sometimes referred to as the bride of Christ.

Boaz represents Christ.

If that's the case, then the truth is that Ruth's tenacious love and friendship is what the church is all about.

We ought to bear each others burdens, look out for each other, encourage each other, stand up for one another with that same super glue tenacity that Ruth had.

We got an emergency call recently that someone was about to take an overdose, a wonderful person who felt all alone.

This person needed a Ruth, to say,

I'm right here beside you. I'm going to be your friend and stick with you. Your life is important to me; there is a purpose to it all and I love you—no matter what—I'm not going to leave you.

Guess what! This person did get a "Ruth" who just happened to be at the right place at the right time, appeared on the scene, and did an amazing job.

You know, **one of those "unspectacular coincidences" through which God works; as unspectacular as the book of Ruth whose tenacious friendship for Naomi changed history.**

Now it may be that some of you struggle not so much with being alone, but you struggle feeling like an alien or stranger to darkness within.

Maybe you have an addiction—like alcoholism, pornography, or spending. You're aware of it, but you don't know what to do.

Or you're a workaholic and you can't bring yourself to admit it.

Or you've had an abortion and you wish you hadn't.

Or you have a problem with rage, or lust.

Or you struggle with ongoing depression and you can't clear your thoughts or concentrate long enough to make a decision or even pray.

Or your self-esteem is at a low ebb because you can't find a job or a relationship you are searching for.

Or you are trying to preserve a marriage that's crumbling but you are too afraid to look at it.

You see, **Ruth was so remarkable because even though she was cursed as a Moabite, an alien, she still believed that she was loved by God and that she could find refuge under God's wings and be restored, and embraced, and become a part of God's family.**

She hoped this with all her heart.

And she was not disappointed. She didn't let her alien status, the shame, the reproach she might have felt, keep her from running to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ for refuge.

It didn't keep her from reaching out to Boaz and asking, "Would you be my kinsman-redeemer? Would you restore for me all that I have lost?"

You won't be disappointed either, if you reach out to Jesus today and ask for help from God's people.

You can ask for prayer after the service.

You can ask for support from a deacon, an elder, \

. Ruth had to ask—so do we. Don't sell yourself short by not asking. I know sometimes it is hard to ask, but do it.

It's a sign of strength to ask for help—not weakness.

It's not realistic to think we can do it alone.

So often, God uses His people to express His love to you. And I know there are many here—who, once they know your need, with Ruth-like tenacity will walk alongside you and say to you,

You may be bitter, disillusioned and running on empty right now. But I'm here to be your friend, to commit to you to be FOR you, to pray for you, not to judge, because

We've all been redeemed;

We've all been bought with a price;

We've all fallen short;

We've all been destitute and then forgiven.

We've all had to ask for help and there is one Judge—and it isn't me and it isn't you. Thank God, it's God! You can stake your life on His mercy.

Tim and I celebrated our 33rd wedding anniversary this year. When everyone said 14 years ago, It's over, don't bother,

We had a friend—a tenacious friend—a loyal friend—a Ruth—and she was a pastor. She called me and said,

You know, there's still hope.

I'll be there for you.

She said.

I'll walk with you; you guys aren't alone.

I'm here to help; I love you both.

She never gave up on us. And because of her, I realized that God never gave up on us either but rather worked in the most ordinary way through the gift of friendship, and prayer, and counsel to buy back—to redeem—to restore—to heal all that was lost.

God will do it for you too.

Everyone's story is different, of course, but the truth is that no matter where you've been or what you've done or who you are, or how hopeless it looks, no matter how alien, or far removed from God you feel, you've got a kinsman redeemer in Jesus, who will never stop loving you and who, if you ask, will buy you back and restore you to your rightful inheritance as a forgiven, Spirit-led, hope-filled, beloved child of God.