

Ruth 1

Some of us have never heard this story, for others it is a favourite. Maybe we think of it as a 'nice' story.

Ruth is a story for women. It is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman. 33 out of 55 verses of dialogue in the story belong to women.

But more than women, this is a story for anyone who appreciates the value of friendship and faith. And who can appreciate how wonderful it is for mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to really love each other.

I think, and we will see this morning, that it is a story for anyone living in a life where things have not gone as you had hoped, where there has been a lot of disappointment and more dreams that have been broken than have come true. This is a story for anyone who has ever felt that instead of God's hand protecting, or comforting or holding or guiding you, God's hand is against you.

This is a story for those who know the emptiness of grief. It is a story for widows who know the pain of the half-empty bed. Many of you women know that emptiness. Most of you who are married women will one day be widows. That is just one of the statistical realities of life.

And it is a story for those who have lost children to death. Those who know the sorrow that should not be. Children should not die before their parents. That is wrong. But it does happen, and it happens in this story.

It is a story for those who have become cynical about life. Those who were told, or who decided that they just had to “suck it up and get over it and move on” from tragedy but they never really did. It is for those who get impatient with those who cannot get over it. It’s for those who do not believe that God would or could bring happy endings to our stories in this life.

Finally, this is a story for anyone trying to follow Jesus in a place where everyone does whatever they feel like, no one cares about right or wrong or keeping commitments and it is hard to believe that your own obedience can make any difference in the world.

So maybe in one of these ways it is a story for you and me today.

The author of the story was Hebrew and so used Hebrew techniques. We’ve talked about those before. As we listen we really need to pay attention to repetition. As we listen we really need to pay attention to repetition. As we listen we really need to pay attention to repetition. That’s the really important stuff.

One other technique that is important to know about that authors really love is the use of names that say something important about the character. Or, that give us clues about the story. In our translations those are lost. I will read the first part so we can hear those names the way the people would have heard them back in the day.

¹ In the dangerous days when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, ^[a] there was a famine in the promised land, and a man from ‘the house of bread in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of ‘from my father’ ² The man's name was ‘my God is King’, his wife's name ‘Pleasant’, and the names of his two sons were Sickly and Failing. They were Ephrathites from ‘the house of Bread, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³ Now 'my God is King', husband of 'Pleasant', died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named 'she turns back' and the other 'Friendship'. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Sickly and Failing also died, and Pleasant was left without her two sons and her husband.

...continue to the end of chapter 1...

Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepare to return home from Moab. They set out on the road. Going home. God has been kind to his people and there is bread again in the 'house of bread'.

They close up house together, pack up together and start walking together. But somewhere on that road, Naomi thinks ahead to seeing her family again, and the women of Bethlehem and she realizes that Orpah and Ruth don't really fit the picture. They are from the nation that came from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter as the Bible tells the story. "From my father" is what Lot's daughter says. (*Genesis 19:30-37*) Back in Moab those girls were like Naomi's daughters, but in Bethlehem, they will look different and sound different.

Three widows without children, all needing support, Naomi can see that it would be best for everyone if they faced reality right there on the road.

She tells them, 'go back to your Moms, go with the Lord's blessing, may the Lord bless you with rest in the home of a new husband. You are young, there is a better future for you if you go back'.

There.

But the girls weep and say, 'we are coming with you!'

Naomi puts her foot down. 'I have nothing for you. My arms are empty, my womb is empty. There is no future here. I am going back to live out the rest of my empty days.'

They had not had this conversation yet. The painful and obvious things are said out loud. It hurts, but it is in the open.

They weep again and Orpah goes back as she is urged to do.

Ruth is stubborn. And Ruth gives the most beautiful, powerful and complete statements of commitment, friendship, love and faith you will ever hear.

'Don't make me leave you..... where you go I will go, your people will be my people, your God my God....'

Ruth commits herself to Naomi and to Naomi's people and to Naomi's God even though there is no evidence that Naomi is a success story, though Moab and Israel have never been friends and the God of Israel cannot seem to deliver much.

This is why we love Ruth, this is why generations of the people of God have respected her. Ruth's words have been recited, used at weddings, spoken by brides to husbands, because even when these words are used out of context, they are beautiful words of friendship and faith.

And they are lost on Naomi.

Naomi is so wrapped up in her grief and bitterness that she cannot hear Ruth.

She shrugs her shoulders and starts walking back to Bethlehem.

Everyone notices Naomi, or is it really Naomi?

Her laugh lines are gone. Her plump cheeks are sunken, her confidence is deflated and the sparkle in her eye is dead.

She refuses to answer to 'Naomi'. 'Call me bitter, the Lord has brought misfortune on me'.

Did you notice that she does not introduce Ruth? The **narrator** tells us that Naomi, who left during the famine ten years ago with her husband and two sons, returns with Ruth the Moabitess, just as the barley harvest is beginning.

So, what does this story do in you? What does it say? We know the story does not end here, but Naomi doesn't know that, let's not get ahead of her. I'd be glad to hear what this story is doing in you. Let me offer three reflections:

1. There is a dark and painful side to faith in the living God, that we rarely talk about, but that Naomi knows.

Remember repetition? Listen, 'the Lord's hand has gone out against me'. 'The Lord has brought me back empty.' 'The Lord has afflicted me, the Almighty has brought misfortunes upon me.'

We know how to say, 'the Lord has blessed me, the Lord has been good to us as a congregation, the Lord has blessed our family.'

But the moment trouble comes, we look for other causes. We are too scientific to live with the God of the Bible who may lead us into times of struggle and trouble. We only know the God who blesses. If we feel or experience that the Lord has not blessed us, we have no words for that. Some of us, as we listen to Naomi are thinking, 'she should know better than to hold God responsible.'

But real faith does have a dark and painful side and Naomi knows it all too well. The psalmists are not afraid to say, "Lord, your hand is against me." We have the assurances of the New Testament, 'nothing can separate us from the love of Christ', but to go to them too quickly can be to deny part of our experience of living with God.

2. Sometimes when we are living with chronic personal pain or loss or grief in our families, we cannot hear or see those whom God is sending to help us. Did you notice that Naomi cannot even hear Ruth's words of faith, she cannot see that with this strong, faithful, loving daughter beside her and with hope in the Lord who is blessing her people with food there might be a future after all?

Sometimes, when we want to help those in pain or grief, they may not be able to hear us. Ed Friedman says in 'A Failure of Nerve' that people can only hear us if they are moving toward us. If we are pursuing them or trying to help or save or rescue, they cannot hear us. I think he's right. The hopeful good news is that the **Holy Spirit** is able to help us hear what we cannot, and see what we cannot, so that we can turn and be saved.

3. This is a hard place in this story. It is hard to see Naomi so destitute, so broken-hearted, so empty. It is hard to see others destitute, broken-hearted and empty.

Refugees, Aboriginal Canadians...

And it is hard to look at or accept the brokenness and emptiness in ourselves.

And so, we are tempted to rush on to chapter 2 in this story. Or we say things to those who are grieving or empty that are more about making ourselves feel better than anything else, because it is so hard to simply be with or witness someone else's grief. Or we get a prescription for our own pain, or we find our way into obsessive or repetitive behaviours that relieve us somewhat, but never really do. Or as a church we only sing songs of praise. Or we just shut down, or give up, or go angry or cynical.

This story is for all of us who follow the man of sorrows, the one who is familiar with grief and knows sorrow well. Could it be that he calls us to go back, toward our pain and trust that he is with us even there?

The Lord be gracious to you.

The Lord be gracious to me.

And all God's people said, Amen.