

## “Where You Go, I Will Go”

Ruth 1:1-18

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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Ruth. She is one of only five women who are named in the genealogy of Jesus – all of whom have special and unique stories. She is one of only two women who have books in the Bible named for them (that is, in Protestant Bibles – Catholic and Orthodox Bibles have three). A few sentences that come from Ruth’s mouth are often quoted at weddings. The book of Ruth is one of the “Five Scrolls” in Judaism, and is typically read every year at the Jewish festival of Shavuot, the “Feast of Weeks,” in late spring. Ruth is one of the most popular and well-known women in the Bible. This is her story.

It begins with a famine in the land of Israel. In the town of Bethlehem there was a husband and wife, named Elimelech and Naomi. They had two children, both boys, named Mahlon and Chilion. This family of four was running out of food. They leave Bethlehem, they leave their homeland, they leave the country of Israel; they migrate to the country of Moab. The Bible mentions that detail fairly quickly, almost in passing, but we need to pause and think. They moved *to another country*. That is how desperate Elimelech and Naomi were. They did not see any hope for a future in the country where they had been born and raised, when they had fallen in love and gotten married. There is no indication that they had any relatives in the country of Moab. They were going simply because they had heard there was *food* there, on the other side of the Dead Sea. Sometimes the living situations in one country become so bad, so utterly *hopeless*, that the people who live there feel that if they are to have any future – any future *at all* – they simply have to leave. They have to find someplace else to go where the living conditions are significantly better, where the prospects for their well-being would be dramatically improved. That is the decision Elimelech and Naomi made, for their own benefit, and that of their two boys. They left their homeland, the land of their ancestors. Most of them would never return.

To get to Moab, they had to travel down from the mountains around Bethlehem, descending nearly 4,000 feet to the wide plain that leads eastward to the river Jordan. They would cross the Jordan, continue across a plain on the far side belonging to other Israelite tribes, then turn south and cross a second river. Then they would ascend again, some 4,300 feet, up onto a large plateau, on which the country of Moab was situated. The border between Israel and Moab was probably nothing more than just the natural boundaries that the rivers provided; there would have been no iron fence, no cement wall, no customs or border patrol, no need to present any passports or other documentation. They could simply go at will – *if* they wanted to take the risk. Moab and Israel were not always on the best of terms, and at times there were bandits on the road. When they arrived in Moab, they would have had to find someplace to live, and some way to survive. In Israel, there were laws that protected foreigners, who were called “resident aliens” or “strangers” or “sojourners.” We don’t know if there were any such laws in Moab, although it’s likely that Elimelech and Naomi weren’t the *only* Israelites making this move.

Unfortunately, after settling in Moab, tragedy struck this family. Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. She was left to raise her sons alone in a foreign land. Those two young men both married Moabite women. That is significant; it indicates the degree to which these young men had made Moab their home. As for the young women they married, well, their parents must have accepted the young men and their foreign origins, or else they would never have allowed their daughters to marry them. There is absolutely no advantage that the young women or their parents would have gained from marrying young men from an immigrant family. These two young couples must have married for *love*.

But then tragedy strikes this beleaguered family once again. The two young men, Mahlon and Chilion, also die, before either one of them had fathered any children. So of the four Israelites who had migrated to Moab, only one still lives: Naomi, who has now lost everything she held dear: her homeland, her husband, and both of the children that she had born and raised. She is a foreigner, a widow, and a grieving mother, twice over. All that is left to her are her two Moabite daughters-in-law.

It has now been ten years since Naomi and her family had emigrated to Moab. Naomi probably assumed she was never going to return to her homeland. All these deaths change that. She receives word that the famine in the land of Israel is over; there is now, finally, grain and harvests once again. So, in the wake of her multiple tragedies, Naomi ponders once again the future of her life. Is she better off staying in Moab? Or would it be better to try to return home? The journey would be arduous, but she has done it before. Of course, when she did it the first time, she was ten years younger, and she had a husband and two boys to journey with. Now she has two Moabite daughters-in-law. According to traditional custom, those Moabite daughters-in-law were now part of *her* family; they had effectively left their families of origin when they had married Mahlon and Chilion. So they, too, are undoubtedly wondering what this journey would mean for them. Are *they* ready to become foreigners in a new land?

Naomi decides to go. The three of them pack their bags, bringing with them whatever belongings they can carry, and start to head out. A long road lies ahead: down from the plateau, across two rivers and wide plains, then up into the mountains. But at some point Naomi stops. She realizes: she can't do this. She can't ask these young Moabite women to make this journey with her. She and her husband had *freely chosen* to become foreigners, migrants. She doesn't feel right *making* that choice for her daughters-in-law. So she says to them: "Go back each of you to your mother's house." She formally releases both of them from any familial obligation they might have. She blesses them and bids them farewell: "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." She kisses them, a final kiss of farewell. She is crying; they are crying; all of them realize that if she dismisses them, if they do turn and head back to their own country of Moab, they will surely never see each other again. It is a bitter parting, on top of the losses they have already suffered, but, in Naomi's mind, it is absolutely the *right* thing to do. She refuses to *make* them come with her. She wants to give them the freedom to choose their *own* destinies, to find their *own* happiness. Maybe, perhaps, to once again find *love*.

Both of the daughters-in-law aren't ready to accept this freedom. Both of them still feel a significant amount of loyalty to Naomi. "No," they tell her, "we will return with you to your people."

Naomi insists. "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?" She shares with them her concerns; she tells them her worries about *their* future. "Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?" she asks. "Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear

sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying?” These two Moabite women had been willing to marry young Israelite migrants – but, once they arrive in the land of Israel, would these foreign women find *any* Israelite men willing to marry them? There is no guarantee that they would *ever* get married or have children. When they are old, they might have *nobody* to care for them. “No, my daughters,” says Naomi; “it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” Naomi – like Job! – felt that God had betrayed her.

What Naomi doesn’t realize is the *incredible* plan that God has in mind. God is going to take this sad, tragic situation and make something truly *wonderful* come of out it. But that is all in the future.

One of the daughters-in-law – Orpah – is convinced by Naomi’s words. Naomi is right; there is more of a future for her in Moab than in Israel. More tears are shed ... and Orpah turns toward Moab.

But the other daughter-in-law – Ruth – is still clinging tightly to Naomi. Naomi tries to make her see reason. “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” The people of Moab worshiped a different god; we know – both from the Bible and from a monument that was discovered 150 years ago on the Moabite plateau – that the Moabite god’s name was Chemosh. The religious beliefs and practices of the Israelites and the Moabites were similar and yet different, although we do not know many details, as the Moabite religion died out, and not many records remain. Some evidence suggests that, at least at times, the Moabites practiced human sacrifice. Regardless, Naomi tells Ruth that she should return to her own people, and to her native religion.

Ruth, however, sees things differently. Ruth is utterly and completely *devoted* to her mother-in-law Naomi. She will not turn back; she will not return to her homeland; she is willing to leave behind all her family, all her friends, even the religion of her ancestors. These are the first words Ruth says in the book, and they are also her most famous: “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 shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die--there will I be buried.” Ruth even invokes the name of the *Israelite* God: “May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

This is a remarkable example of devotion and fidelity. These are words that you will hear, in part, at some weddings, for they speak of one person’s wholehearted commitment to another person. Ruth is not offering these vows because of any compulsion; she is not doing so out of any sense of duty, for Naomi has already *released* her from her duty. Ruth is freely, willingly, and *wholeheartedly*, of her own volition and will, *choosing* to bid farewell to her family of origin, her homeland, her religion, practically *everything she has known*, to accompany her beloved mother-in-law back to *her* home. She is choosing to make a new start for herself, in a new country, and even with a *new God*.

That kind of devotion is not something we see every day. We all can learn from Ruth’s devotion.

Naomi, seeing that Ruth is so deeply committed, can do nothing other but to welcome her into her life. “When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.”

And what happened next? What became of Ruth, Ruth the widow, Ruth the Moabite, Ruth the foreigner? What kind of future would await her in Israel? Would she be happy? Would she find *love*?

She’s in the genealogy of Jesus. She doesn’t have any children ... *yet*. God is up to *something*....

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