

“A Son Has Been Born to Naomi”

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

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Ruth, the young childless widow. Ruth, the Moabite. Ruth, the foreigner. Ruth, the loyal daughter-in-law. Ruth, the religious convert. And ... Ruth, the ancestor of Jesus. This is her story.

Last week we heard the story of Elimelech and Naomi, an Israelite couple from the town of Bethlehem. Yes, *that* Bethlehem. They had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. There was a famine; this family of four emigrated to the nearby country of Moab in order to survive. The two young men married Moabite women, one named Orpah; the other, Ruth. Then all the men in the family died, leaving elderly Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Ten years have passed; the famine is over; Naomi decides to return home. She releases her daughters-in-law from any obligation to her and advises them to stay in Moab. Orpah does as Naomi bids. But Ruth clings to her mother-in-law, vowing steadfast love and fidelity to Naomi: “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 leaves behind her homeland, her friends, her family, even her god, and accompanies Naomi to Israel, adopting the religion of the people of Israel in the process. It is a remarkable display of devotion.

Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Their arrival creates quite a stir. Naomi is back; Elimelech is dead; their two sons are dead – but a young Moabite woman has come to Bethlehem with Naomi. There were not always good relations between Israel and Moab, and the book of Deuteronomy says that no Moabite “shall be permitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Ruth could adopt the religious beliefs of her mother-in-law, but she would never be allowed to worship with the Israelites – not her, nor any of her descendants. Ruth would always remain an outsider.

This creates a bit of a problem for Ruth. How will this land in which she now lives ever become a “home”? She comes up with an idea. “Let me go to the field,” she says to Naomi, “and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.” Ruth is hopeful to find *someone* who will look upon her kindly. *Anybody* would do. Naomi gives her blessing, and Ruth heads out to the field.

Good fortune was with Ruth – or, rather, the providence of God. For the field that Ruth went to belonged to a prominent and wealthy man named Boaz, who happened to be a relative of Naomi’s deceased husband. Many people are busily harvesting the barley in the field. Barley is a grain, similar to wheat; it could be used in bread, soups, and stews. Ruth asks the supervisor for permission to follow the other harvesters, picking up any sheaves that they might have missed. He says yes; she sets to work.

Later that day, Boaz himself arrives at the field to see how things are going. He greets the harvesters with a blessing: “The Lord be with you.” Then he notices a young woman at work whom he does not recognize. The supervisor explains that she is the foreigner who came back with Naomi from

Moab. He tells Boaz that “she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.” Boaz is intrigued. He is also worried for her safety. She is vulnerable; she has no one to protect her; there are all sorts of men who might try to take advantage of a young woman like her. Boaz gives the supervisor some instructions, then he says to Ruth, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.” These words astound Ruth; she can’t imagine why this man would care that much about a foreigner. She bows down at his feet, and asks directly: “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” Boaz replies: “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” *True loyalty can lead to genuine rewards.* Boaz knows that this young woman has shown tremendous love and care for his relative Naomi; he wants to express his appreciation, by providing for her welfare. Ruth thanks him: “May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.” Ruth resumes her work. When the harvesters stop to eat, Boaz looks out for her again, inviting Ruth to join them for the meal. She is given plenty to eat, and has food left over. When the work resumes, Boaz tells his workers to let Ruth harvest right in their midst, not just picking up sheaves that have been left behind. In the evening, Ruth returns to Naomi with a large amount of grain. Naomi is stunned, and asks Ruth where she had gleaned. “The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.” Naomi’s heart overflows with joy – joy like she has not had in a very long time: “Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi then explains to Ruth who Boaz is – that he is, in fact, one of their closest living relatives. And so Ruth continued gleaning barley in Boaz’s field through the remainder of the harvest.

Boaz, by the way, was not a full Israelite. He was a direct descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob on his father’s side. But his mother was a Canaanite woman named Rahab. She gave shelter to two Israelite spies and thus assisted the Israelites in their capture of the city of Jericho. She was a prostitute, perhaps out of economic necessity; but after the Israelites liberated her, she left that way of life and married an Israelite. They became the parents of Boaz, who is half-Israelite and half-Canaanite.

Some time passes; the harvest is over; what is Ruth going to do now? Naomi comes up with a plan. She advises Ruth to head to the threshing floor one night when Boaz is there winnowing out the barley, separating the grain from the chaff. Naomi gives Ruth some very specific instructions: “wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.” In other words, let Boaz get a little tipsy first. “When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” Now this business about “uncovering his feet” has raised a lot of eyebrows, for there are many who think that “feet” might be a euphemism for ... something else. But it needs to be noted that there were numerous other people sleeping at the threshing floor that night, and that none of the ancient Jewish commentaries on Ruth suggest that anything inappropriate happened that night. Ruth waits until Boaz has fallen asleep at the end of a heap of grain, then comes “stealthily,” uncovers his feet, and lies down. Certainly an unusual move on Ruth’s part – but she’s just following her mother-in-law’s instructions. In the middle of the night Boaz wakes up to discover his feet

uncovered, and a young woman lying there! It's dark; he can't see her face; he asks, "Who are you?" "I am Ruth, your servant," she answers; then she makes a request: "spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." It is then that Boaz has an epiphany. For there was a law in Israel – you can find it in Deuteronomy 25 – that if a man who is married dies before he has had a son, his widow should not marry someone else outside the family. The deceased man's *brother* should marry the widow, and the firstborn son from that union would count as a son of the deceased, so that the family name would continue. Ruth's dead husband had no brother, and Boaz is the closest male relative – at least, that's what Ruth and Naomi think. There, in the darkness, on the threshing floor, in the middle of the night, Boaz realizes that a man from Elimelech's family must marry Ruth, to fulfill the spirit of the law. Boaz praises Ruth for her loyalty to her family, for Ruth could have gone after some other young man, and ignored the responsibility she has to make sure the family name carries on. Boaz promises to help her – but he also informs her that there is a man in the family who is a closer relative than he himself is.

In the morning, Boaz approaches this other relative. This man is not willing to marry Ruth, for it would damage his own inheritance. He formally gives Boaz the right to marry Ruth, and to acquire all the property and land that had formerly belonged to Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion. Boaz accepts that right, and the responsibilities that go along with it. With the blessing and support of all the elders of Bethlehem, Boaz and Ruth get married. They have a son, whom they name Obed; and Naomi is blessed.

Obed is not just *any* son. Obed will become the father of Jesse, and Jesse will become the father of David, who will become the first great Israelite king. All the subsequent kings of Judah will come from the lineage of David. In time, that family line will continue down to a certain carpenter named Joseph, who was engaged to a young woman named Mary, who conceived a child through the Holy Spirit, and gave birth to him in Bethlehem – the very same Bethlehem where Ruth and Boaz had met and married.

So, in the end, Ruth is no longer a young childless widow. She is still a Moabite; she is still a foreigner; she is still a religious convert, unable to fully worship with the Israelite people. But she is also a loyal daughter-in-law who not only accompanies Naomi back to Bethlehem, but who also marries a man who will make it possible for her deceased husband's family line to continue, thus keeping the family property in the family. What makes it even better is that this man truly *appreciates* her, truly *cares* for her, truly *admires* her. It is the best of all possible worlds. And it keeps getting better, because *kings* will come from this union, a whole long line of them, including – especially! – *the* King, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the one whom we worship and serve today, some three thousand years later!

It's a remarkable story about a remarkable woman, a woman of sincere devotion, great love, and diligent faithfulness, who played a significant role in God's plan of salvation, and earned herself a mention in the New Testament. It didn't matter that she was a foreigner. Or maybe ... in reality ... *it did*.

One final thing. Through the centuries, many Christian interpreters have seen in Ruth metaphors of the Christian life. Ruth's decision to leave Moab and accompany Naomi – that's like us, when we turn from our former ways of life and decide to follow Christ. Ruth's decision not to go after other young men – that's like us, when we choose to be faithful to Christ rather than follow the lures of the world. And Ruth washing and anointing herself, putting on her best clothes and going down to the threshing floor – that's like us, when we are baptized: washed in the water of salvation, dying and rising with Christ, being clothed in the garment of salvation. Ruth's story is, metaphorically, *our* story.

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