

Scripture Readings for Sunday May 9th 2021

Ruth 1:6-21 (NIV)

⁶When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, prepared to return home from there. ⁷With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. ⁸Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

¹¹But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹²Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— ¹³would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”

¹⁴At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.” ¹⁶But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” ¹⁸When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. ¹⁹So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?” ²⁰“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

Ruth 4:13-17 (NIV)

¹³So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. ¹⁴The women said to Naomi: “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! ¹⁵He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”

¹⁶Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. ¹⁷The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Sermon: “Life’s Unfair – and it’s All God’s Fault!”

“Life’s unfair – and it’s all God’s fault!” Have you heard your *mother* say that?¹ And let’s face it, mom’s (and wives) do have a *lot* to put up with. For example, whoever tidies the home - and its *still* usually moms even today – will find its all messy again within 24 hours, and that’s rightly frustrating. Often children won’t listen, husbands don’t listen, and life can sometimes seem so *unjust*. “I don’t deserve this,” says a mom, “This isn’t what I expected; parenting is so hard, juggling a home and a career is so difficult, I give, give, give – life’s just cruel.” And if you’re a single mom, it’s understandably even worse. Nevertheless, you don’t have to be a woman to say “life’s unfair – and it’s all God’s fault,” men say it too. Now, sometimes we say that and *mean* it! We have to blame *someone*, and who better than *God*?

Well, you might be surprised to know that this angry phrase is in the Bible, and comes from the lips of Naomi - as we heard in our reading from Ruth.² And, let’s face it, she seems to have had a point. Naomi had married Elimelech, whose name means “My God is King,” and – from a traditional Jewish perspective - God had blessed them with two *sons*.³ We are also told that the family were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, and this introduces some bitter irony to the story. “Bethlehem means “House of Bread,”⁴ yet the story begins with a *famine*.⁵ But there is worse news: the family had moved to Moab for a time and, while there, Naomi’s husband had died. Now, her two sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, and they lived in Moab for a decade when, we’re told, the two sons *also* died. No wonder Naomi was drowning in her sorrows; we can truly empathize with her. In those patriarchal times, that meant Naomi had zero security and was effectively homeless. There were apparently no children, no young heirs with any rights, so the label “Ephrathite”⁶ meaning “fertile” or “fruitful” was also just a cruel joke! “Life’s unfair – and it’s all God’s fault,” says Naomi, and we can perhaps begin to appreciate why she feels abandoned by God. But there’s more. Naomi’s two daughters-in-law were Moabites, and this clan were widely viewed by Jews with deep disgust⁷ because they were descendants of Lot through his eldest daughter!⁸ We have to therefore see the racial element here - just as the Samaritans were despised by Jews in Jesus’ day. Consequently, as that contrast adds power to the parable of the good Samaritan,⁹ so Ruth and Orpah being Moabites is also relevant in this story.

¹ Husband’s may have heard their wives say that – or a variant that blames *them*!

² See Ruth 1:20-21.

³ Naomi’s sons were called Mahlon and Chilion, meaning “sickness” and “perish/spent,” respectively, and the husbands of Ruth and Orpah (also respectively, see Ruth 4:10). Elimelech’s “My God is King” meaning seems powerless and ineffective!

⁴ And harvesting wheat and barley (Ruth 2:23) features in the story, and so is celebrated annually by Jews at the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost).

⁵ Ruth 1:1. This is one of many aspects of good storytelling techniques to be recognized and appreciated in Ruth.

⁶ “Ephrath” is sometimes a substitute for Bethlehem (Ruth 4:11; Gen. 35:19; 48:7; 1 Sam 17:12)

⁷ The (unsure) dating of the book of Ruth is a factor here too. For simplicity I will assume a *late* (early post-exilic) date, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when there a bias *against* foreigners (and inter-marriage), Ezra 9; Neh 13:23-27; Deut 23:3. It is thought by some that this book, like Jonah, was written to address that negative bias. Note that the Hebrew scriptures places Ruth in the “Writings” (along with the Psalms), *not* the (minor) prophets as in the Christian Bible (which is derived from the Greek LXX).

⁸ See Gen 19:30-38. (More could be said concerning this bizarre and terrible episode!)

⁹ See Luke 10:25-37.

So that's the background to the book of Ruth, which - despite its obvious initial tragedy - is a beautiful, uplifting, pastoral story with multiple themes in the context of *relationships*. It's a parable concerning a woman whose life has fallen apart, a woman who eventually finds a new family, and a man who finds a wife. It's also a story about love, loyalty, and kindness far beyond any cultural expectations and beyond anything that the recipient expects or deserves to receive. Ruth is also a story concerning racism, prejudice, and being the outsider, and about how to survive as a woman in a man's world.¹⁰ It's *not* the Jewish equivalent of a cheap romance story!¹¹ It's all about God's involvement in the lives of *ordinary* people. The story portrays God's provision behind-the-scenes through human action, as well as through chance.¹² And, above, it illustrates what it means for God to be a *redeemer* and a *restorer*. Let's explore it, briefly.

Naomi hears that Israel's God has provided food in for his people,¹³ so she decides it's time to leave Moab for Judah, and Ruth and Orpah come along as traveling companions. At some point along the way, perhaps nearing Bethlehem, Naomi says to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house."¹⁴ Naomi wants the best for Ruth and Orpah; she blesses them in the name of Israel's God for their kindness and loyalty, but time has come to recognize the legal bond they had together through marriage (rather than a blood tie) is long over. Ruth and Orpah are young enough to remarry Moabite men, and so Naomi urges them to consider their future as best being served back in Moab.¹⁵ And the response is tears and grief. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."¹⁶ Naomi then spells it out *again* in the context of the customs of the day,¹⁷ saying she has *no* men up her sleeve that she can magically conjure up as husbands for them! That realism is also mixed with grief and a sense of hopelessness, in that Naomi concludes, "No, my daughters, it has been *far more bitter for me than for you*, because the hand of the LORD has *turned against* me."¹⁸ Consequently, it doesn't make any *logical* sense that you align yourself with me, says Naomi. And the response is more tears and grief. We are told Orpah obeys her mother-in-law, kisses her and returns; she has done absolutely *nothing* wrong in that. Ruth, however, defies commonsense and "*clings* to Naomi."¹⁹

We then hear one of the most remarkable speeches on love, loyalty, and commitment in the whole of the Bible: Ruth tells Naomi, "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.

¹⁰ One facet of this aspect is the way that Ruth propositions Boaz, or proposes to Boaz – but it's a risky plan (devised by Naomi). Ruth is taking the initiative in the relationship in a way that contrasts with cultural norms!

¹¹ UK: Mills and Boon; North America: Harlequin (They are in fact the same company!)

¹² See Ruth 2:3 which says, "as it happened" (NRSV), and 4:1; Eccles 9:11. The story's narrator only mentions God's (YHWH's) *direct* in Ruth 1:6; 4:13; the rest is through the words and actions of others.

¹³ Ruth 1:6 – see [12].

¹⁴ Commentators note the unusual mention of "mother's" house (cf. Gen 38:11; Lev 22:13) with no clear explanation.

¹⁵ Ruth 1:8-9. "kindly" (*hesed*) is considered an essential part of the nature of God, "loving kindness" (cf. grace).

¹⁶ Ruth 1:10.

¹⁷ Levirate marriage, see Deut 25:5-10. While we find this abhorrent and abusive today, this practice was to provide protection for childless widows in a male-dominated world. See also the story of Tamar in Gen 38 (mentioned in Ruth 4:12.)

¹⁸ Ruth 1:13. The mention of "turn, return, go back," etc. is a thematic feature of the story too! (*Turn back* to God!)

¹⁹ Ruth 1:14b.

Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me!”²⁰ Ruth is *absolutely* determined to be with Naomi! The deaths they have both experienced has created a bond stronger than life. Regardless of what sorry future they could expect together, Ruth will *abide* with Naomi. Ruth recognizes that she may be rejected as an immigrant, or worse – a Moabite – even so, Naomi’s Jewish people will be her people, come what may. More than that, Ruth will align herself with Israel’s God. And she vows that she will eventually be buried alongside Naomi. Ruth is willing to die to her past so that she and Naomi may live anew. What a declaration!

If Ruth’s speech wasn’t dramatic enough, when they finally arrive at Bethlehem, the narrator then gives a further speech of Naomi’s. It’s been 10 harsh years and the women of the town barely recognize her! Naomi, whose name means “pleasant” or “sweet,” says, “Don’t call me “Naomi” any more, call me “Mara” – which means “*bitter*” - for God has dealt *bitterly* with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.”²¹ “Woe is me!” complains Naomi. Evidently, the loss of her husband and two sons was all *God’s* fault in Naomi’s mind.²²

When you hear this story, with whom do *you* most identify? Ruth or Naomi? Here’s another question, “Who does the *narrator* want you to align with?”²³ I encourage you to read again this short book this afternoon and decide for yourself. I suggest, however, that the original Jewish readership were faced with a dilemma. Ruth’s admirable loyalty and kindness might have encouraged them to think that they *ought* to behave like that. But could they get beyond the fact that she was a shunned *Moabite*? This is, in fact, a story of redemption and restoration.²⁴ But who needs redeeming here? Is it really Ruth? Perhaps Naomi is the character that most closely mirrors the attitudes and experiences of the people of God, including the church. As is already evident, it’s *Jewish* Naomi who really needs redemption in the story.²⁵ Faithful Ruth’s is, *unknowingly*, God’s surprising agent in accomplishing Naomi’s reversal from bitterness to joy. Yet *how* can that be? Ruth’s *not* Jewish! This story is, then, about *reform* as well as *redemption*. But for that message to be heard, the people of God in every generation must identify themselves with the one who needs to be redeemed, to have their lives turned around. This only works if *we* can be persuaded that the behind-the-scenes efforts made by an ever-faithful God on Naomi’s behalf will be made by God on *our* behalf as well – and, in this case, through an unexpected avenue: *Moabite Ruth*. Yes, *we ought* to be like Ruth, but do we recognize that we are, in fact, more like *Naomi*, with a sense of entitlement and blaming God when things don’t go as *we* expect? Who do we want to blame for our griefs and life’s hurts? For cancer and COVID? Are we with Naomi and blaming God?

²⁰ Ruth 1:16-17.

²¹ Ruth 1:20-21, she continues, “Why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt *harshly* with me, and the Almighty has brought *calamity* upon me?” (Note the contrast of full/empty and plenty/famine, fertile/childless, life/death.)

²² Like others who are caught up in the throes of their own grief, Naomi seems to lack of gratitude for the support that she has received from Ruth. (We don’t know if Naomi was still “grieving” or whether she was now an embittered woman.)

²³ This story is like Jonah, who can be seen as symbolizing Israel itself, a stubborn and self-isolating people always occupied with itself, evading the actual will of God and unaware that God loves other people as much as Israel itself!

²⁴ Redemption is a *key* theme in Ruth, it’s the word (along with its derivative) that is used 23 times!

²⁵ In the end, it’s Naomi whose life is *turned around* and whose feelings of bitterness, emptiness, and hopelessness is *reversed*.

The story of Ruth and Naomi moves on. There is an apparent “chance” encounter with a wealthy landowner called Boaz, who turns out to be a kind, Godly man and a distant relative of Naomi.²⁶ Boaz, knowing the story of Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi,²⁷ allows Ruth to glean grains of barley with his servants in his fields. On hearing this news, and as Naomi’s grief begins to heal, she invokes the LORD’s blessing on Boaz for his kindness and generosity.²⁸ It would appear as if Naomi is even beginning to think of God as a potential source of *blessing*! Well, one thing leads to another, both romantically and - in the end - legally, and Boaz marries Ruth, and they have a son.²⁹ The story starts in tragedy and bitterness, and ends in a grandson, an heir, and joy.³⁰ The women of Bethlehem proclaim to Naomi that, “The child will *restore* your life and be the source of security and nourishment in your old age.”³¹ They also attribute this blessing to God *and* to Ruth’s kindness, love, and loyalty that is worth more than *seven* sons!

There is a further crucial point: The child of this marriage of a Jew to a Moabite is the grandfather of King David. Ruth was therefore instrumental in *blessing* all Israel, and blessing the *whole* world because she is also mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus!³² One of the underlying questions is can a non-Israelite, even a despised Moabite, become part of God’s people. Clearly, the answer is “Yes”! God can – and does – achieve his redemptive purposes through all kinds of people, and in the least likely of ways. One of the messages of the book of Ruth is that God chooses to redeem those, such as Naomi, who seem to have done little to *deserve* redemption.³³ That is a feature of *grace*! And the whole story of Jesus is one of divine redemption and grace, a story that begins with Mary and Joseph partnering with God.

Let me conclude with a comment and a question. I, like you, have often heard the saying, “Everything happens for a reason.” On one level this seems fatalistic. Sometimes it is used to imply God *knows* the reason - though we cannot, but not to worry, “Everything will turn out alright in the end.” I believe such phrases, though well-meaning, offer little comfort. While Naomi may now have a grandson, she remains a widow. Clearly, redemption doesn’t *restore* everything. Nevertheless, I believe God is “life-maker,” *not* a “life-taker.” I also believe that, “Nothing is *wasted* in God’s economy.” Tragedy and loss, though *not from* God, can - with the God’s behind-the-scenes influence *and* with the loving kindness of others – result in something good and beautiful that benefits others in unforeseeable ways. My own life-story is a case in point. And as you look back on your life, my hope is that you also can recognize signs of God’s faithfulness as tragedy, disappointment, and even bitterness have been transformed into new opportunities and joy. If that is the case, give thanks to God and be a blessing to others. And my question is this: Who are the “Moabites” that we disdain today who might actually be a surprise blessing and a means of our own redemption? Amen.

²⁶ See Ruth 2:1,3,11-12, 19-20

²⁷ Ruth 2:11-12.

²⁸ Ruth 2:20.

²⁹ Ruth 4:13; Boaz and Ruth have sex, a human activity, but in the narrator’s eyes the child’s conception is an act of God.

³⁰ Ruth 4:14-17.

³¹ Ruth 4:15. The LORD is blessed too in 4:14; the women see the hand of God in this provision.

³² Matt 1:5-6. Moreover, Boaz’ descends comes from the sordid story of Tamar, wife of Judah (Gen 38) and her son, Perez, had a son, Salmon, who married Rahab from Joshua 2! And Jesus is also descended from David and Bathsheba!

³³ The story is primarily concerned with the faithfulness of God rather than the faithfulness of the people of God!