

St Mary's Anglican Church – Regina

Faith Quest: RUTH

Background Notes

The book of Ruth begins with a series of tragedies. Naomi and her husband Elimelech live in Bethlehem in the region of Judah. First we hear that a famine strikes the land. This is especially noteworthy, because Bethlehem means “House of Bread” and was known for its great provision. For a famine to strike Bethlehem is significant. Naomi and Elimelech travel to the region of Moab, on the southeastern side of the Dead Sea, seeking food. Moab was a pagan land, and much hated by Israel. In fact the Israelites had strict laws restricting intermarriage with foreigners and forbidding foreigners from participating fully in the Israelite community. Many Israelites believed God to be the God of Israel alone, and so foreigners were felt to be inferior and were rejected. But desperate for food, Naomi and Elimelech move to Moab. There Elimelech dies leaving Naomi with her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. The sons marry Moabite women and live in Moab for ten years, but then they too die leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah as widows.

Widows in these times were left with no means of support and were dependent upon their families to provide for them. Naomi decides she must return to Bethlehem in hopes that her family will help her. She is feeling totally lost and bereft. The name Naomi means “pleasant” or “agreeable,” but she now tells people to call her Mara which means “bitter.” She urges Ruth and Orpah to return to their families. Reluctantly, Orpah agrees, but Ruth insists that she will not leave Naomi. “Where you go I will go, where you stay, I will stay, your people will be my people, your God my God,” asserts Ruth. Ruth is willing to give up her family, her home, her faith to follow Naomi and to adopt her faith.

So Ruth and Naomi journey back to Bethlehem. Upon arriving, they create quite a stir. Naomi's family is impressed with Ruth's loyalty, and happy to see Naomi, but no one offers to take them in. Ruth is forced to go into the fields to glean for food. Fortunately, they have arrived at the time of the barley harvest (usually in late April). Ruth goes out to the field of Boaz and asks permission to glean. The concept of gleaning means to pick up any of the crops that were dropped during the harvest. Israelite law required all farmers to leave some grain in the fields for the poor. (see Deuteronomy 24:19-21) They were not permitted to do a second run at harvesting. Gleaning was a right for poor Israelites, but it did not extend to foreigners. Boaz demonstrates his kindness by allowing Ruth to glean in his fields. Boaz also shows extra kindness to Ruth, allowing her to eat and drink with his workers and making sure that she is safe while working. He gives Ruth extra grain to take home to Naomi.

The story seems to indicate that Boaz is attracted to Ruth from the beginning. Certainly he is exceedingly kind to her, despite the fact that she is a foreigner. Then the plot thickens as it turns out Boaz is a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's late husband. Naomi decides to take action. She sets about a bit of match-making. Ruth must fix herself up and go to Boaz at night and ask for his protection as her kinsman redeemer. Kinsman redeemers were common practices of the ancient Near East. Israelite law required that a widow without a son be cared for by the brother of her husband. He was required to marry her and provide her a son who would be credited to the line of the dead brother and receive his inheritance. This would continue the line of the dead brother and provide care for the widow. In Naomi's case, the situation is

stretched to include a relative (not a brother) of her husband. And Ruth is the one offered, rather than Naomi. Boaz was a close relative. He could be asked to be the kinsman redeemer for Ruth and Naomi.

So Ruth embarks on her dangerous, night-time journey. What was she thinking and feeling as she approached the field? The end of the harvest was associated with fertility rites and celebration drinking in the pagan cultures and some of these activities seeped into Israelite culture. Certainly the threshing floor could be a wild and crazy place for a young, beautiful, single woman. Ruth waits until Boaz is asleep and then lies down at his feet, uncovering them. Boaz awoke to find Ruth at his feet. She asked that he “spread his skirt” over her, which was a request for Boaz to be her protector in marriage. “Spread your skirt” is translated as God’s wings, the place where one finds shelter. Boaz accepted this offer but noted that there was one kinsman who was a nearer relative than he. Boaz kept her in safety that night and sent her on her way with some extra grain as a sign of his promise early in the morning. Then Boaz made good on his word, approaching the other kinsman who declined the opportunity (glad that Boaz was willing) and so Boaz clinched the deal by removing his sandal. This custom was the traditional way business deals were sealed, just as today we sign a contract.

So Ruth and Boaz were married and soon had a son, Obed. This brought Naomi much joy and happiness in her old age. Obed became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, who was in Jesus’ family line. This lineage is included in the last verses of the book.

In this story, we see how God uses the humble and the weak to accomplish his plan. Ruth, the alien widow is lifted up as a loyal and true person who becomes the ancestress of the Messiah, the kinsman redeemer of the entire human race! Here in the Old Testament we see the promise that God’s plan is for all the people of the world, not just the people of Israel. All would share in the Covenant.

Definitions to know:

Gleaning – the practice of picking up leftover grain from a field after harvesting, Israelite law required this to care for the poor

Redeem – buy back, ransom, reclaim

Kinsman Redeemer – a practice whereby a near relative married a widow, provided a son for her to continue to line and inheritance of the dead husband (for 4-6 graders – younger children don’t need to know the actual words)

Additional Background

It’s interesting that most of us focus on Ruth and Naomi in the story and distill the book down to the subject of “friendship”. This is natural. It’s important to identify female heroes in the Bible. But the story of Ruth has much more than just “friendship” to teach.

I’ve often thought that Boaz gets overlooked. He had much more to lose than Ruth did by marrying an outsider. And he has to take care of his wife’s dead husband’s mother.

Our kids will be able to relate to how it feels not only to be an outsider, but how it feels to consider befriending somebody that others may ridicule you for. Many will also be able to relate to the concept of “extended family” and the obligations we have to those connected to us.

The other part of this story that often gets overlooked is the law of “gleaning”. This is a stewardship issue: leave something left over for those less fortunate. “Gluttony” is the theological corollary. Here, too, kids will be able to relate. All of them have at sometime been the last person in line at the cafeteria or received the leftovers at home.

Finally, there is the fact that Ruth doesn’t abandon her older mother-in-law and, equally important, neither does Boaz. The Bible makes the point over and over again that widows have a special place in Israelite society. The elderly were a treasure.

(Neil MacQueen, www.rotation.org)

Telling the Story of Ruth (Amy Crane, www.rotation.org)

Read the story in several translations of the Bible and Bible storybooks to see other ways to tell it.

This is a warm and gentle story about family loyalty and devotion and love. Tell it in the first person as Ruth and in a way that is intimate and friendly.

Decide why you think that Ruth decided to leave her people and her God to go with Naomi. The Bible does not indicate why she makes this decision; she was not required to go. Maybe Naomi has been a good, loving example of a follower of the one true God. Maybe Ruth knows who her parents will arrange for her to marry if she stays. Once you have decided how you want to interpret Ruth, let that color how you speak for her and Naomi. But remember, there are no right or wrong interpretations.

Bring the story to life with your movements and emotions as well as the words. Orpah and Ruth should cry. Naomi should be gentle but firm. Ruth probably spoke to Boaz with downcast eyes. Try to visualize the action, and then include small parts of it in your telling.

Read and reread it until you are very comfortable with it. Make eye contact and interact with your listeners, which will help bring the story to life for them. (Consider making your “cheat sheet” copy of the script into a scroll.

Ruth’s Story (adapted from Today’s English Version by Amy Crane, www.rotation.org)

Long, long ago, in Israel and Judah, there was a famine throughout the land. There was no food to eat. Elimelech, of the town of Bethlehem, heard that there was food in Moab. So Elimelech took his wife Naomi and his two young sons, Mahlon and Chilion to Moab. There they lived comfortable for a time. And then Elimelech died. Mahlon and Chilion married Moabite girls, Orpah and Ruth. After about ten years, Mahlon and Chilion died too. Neither had any children.

So the three widows, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, lived as best they could. One day Naomi received news from home. The famine in Israel was over! How she had missed her homeland. There was no reason for her to remain in Moab, so she packed her things and called Ruth and Orpah to here. “Dear girls, I am going home to Israel. There is no reason for you to come with me. Your husbands are dead, and I have no other sons for you to marry. Go home to your

mothers. And my the Lord be as good to you as you have been to me and my sons. May the Lord help you find new husbands.”

Orpah and Ruth began to cry. “No, dear Naomi. WE cannot leave you. We will go with you to your people.”

“No girls. It will not work. I have no sons and no family to care for you. You must stay here.”

Orpah cried, but kissed Naomi goodbye and returned to her family. But Ruth would not let go of Naomi. “Ruth, you see that Orpah has stayed wither people. You must do so also.”

“Dear Mother, don’t make me leave you. Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.”

So Ruth went to Bethlehem with Naomi. When they arrived, the barley harvest was just beginning.

“Let me go behind the reapers who are harvesting the grain and pick up whatever grain remains on the ground,” said Ruth. “I may not find much, but maybe they dropped enough for us to make bread to eat this week.”

So Ruth went out to the fields and picked up the grain dropped by the reapers. It so happened that the field she was working in belonged to Boaz, a distant cousin of Elimelech.

Boaz came that morning to see how his workers were doing. Boaz pointed to Ruth and asked the man in charge, “Who is that young woman?”

“She is Ruth, the foreign girl who came back from Moab with Naomi. She asked if she may glean the fields after the workers have picked the grain. She has been working hard all morning.”

Boaz went to speak to Ruth. “Let me give you some advice. Work in my field every day behind the women. I will see that no one bothers you. Drink from the water jars when you are thirsty.”

“Thank you. Why are you being so kind to me, a foreigner?”

“I have heard how you have cared for your mother-in-law Naomi. I know how you lift your own people. May the Lord God of Israel, to whom you have come for protection, reward you for what you have done.”

At lunchtime, Boaz invited Ruth to join him. He shared his bread with her, and she ate her fill and even had some left over.

Privately, Boaz ordered his workers to drop extra grain for Ruth to gather.

At the end of the day, Ruth discovered she had nearly twenty-five pounds of grain! She took it home to her mother-in-law, plus the leftover food from lunch.

“Where did you gather all this grain today? May God bless the man who took an interest in you!”

Ruth told Naomi about her day working in Boaz’s field. “May the Lord bless Boaz! The Lord always keeps His promises. Boaz is a distant relative of ours. Therefore, he is one of those who is to take care of us.”

So Ruth continued to glean grain from Boaz’s field for the remainder of the harvest season.

Some time later, Naomi said to Ruth, “Dear, you really must marry so that you will have a home and family of your own. Remember Boaz? Get cleaned up, put on your best clothes and go to where he is threshing. When he is done working and eating, go to him.”

So Ruth got cleaned up & dressed up and went to where Boaz was working. “Who are you?”

“It is Ruth, sir. Chilion’s widow, Elimelech’s daughter-in-law. You are a close relative and are responsible for taking care of me. Please marry me.”

“The Lord bless you. You are truly showing great family loyalty. Instead of looking for a young handsome husband, you have come to me. Don’t worry Ruth, I will do everything that you ask.”

So Boaz and Ruth were married. The men of Bethlehem said to Boaz, “May the Lord bless you and make Ruth like Rachel and Leah, who bore many children to Jacob. May you become rich and famous.”

The Lord did bless Ruth and Boaz. She had a baby boy. He was named Obed. The women of Bethlehem said to Naomi, “Praise the Lord! He has given you a grandson! Your daughter-in-law loves you and did more for you than seven sons!”

That is the end of Ruth and Boaz and Naomi’s story, but the beginning of many others. For Obed was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David – you know him: shepherd, songwriter, soldier, and king. And of course you remember that our of the house of Jesse was born a baby, Christ the Lord!