



## Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

### *When Loss Gives Way to Hope*

by Pastor John Strommen on Ruth 1:1-17

Sunday, October 13, 2019

So much of life is about loss. Over the last few years, I've watched as a friend of mine 12 years my junior has lost his father, both sisters, and his only brother as they all died at different times for different reasons. He and his mom are the only ones remaining in his family. On top of this, his wife left him. We'll call him Mark, not his real name.

Who will be there for Mark? Amidst all the loss, is there someone or something he can count on when it feels like everything is being taken away? We will come back to this question.

Our Old Testament lesson from the book of Ruth tells the story of someone who is dealing with profound loss as well. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, are faced with a severe famine. So severe, they must leave their home in order to survive. Their home is Bethlehem, and you may recall this town would have more significance a few centuries later. Bethlehem means "house of bread," and while normally a fertile land producing much grain, this was not the case as our story begins.

Ever gone from feeling like you had it made to sudden desperation? From house of bread to house of barren fields? It's a parallel discussion to what some women face in the Bible when their womb is barren, their prospects dim. The difference here is that the fields are not normally barren but now suddenly are. A reminder that placing trust in any one thing of this earth is a shaky proposition.

So, Naomi and her family flee Judah. Understandable. What is surprising is that they flee to Moab. Now, the Moabites and Israelites didn't get along, even worse than Minnesotans and Wisconsinites arguing over the Vikings and Packers. This was a little worse than a neighborly rivalry. The Israelites and Moabites had a long history of antagonism, treachery and warfare between them. In many ways, Naomi and

Elimelech leaving Israel to seek refuge in Moab was probably seen as an act of disloyalty, almost a betrayal, in the eyes of many Jews.

What happened next would seem to validate the idea that they were living under a curse for being unfaithful Jews. Naomi's husband, Elimelech, died. After that, her two sons died as well, but not before marrying two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah – not Oprah. She was a messianic (savior) figure who would come much later. Now those two daughters-in-law were all Naomi had. So, how do you call it? Has the land of Moab been a curse to Naomi, a graveyard for all the men in her family, or a blessing, giving her two daughters-in-law?

How about from Naomi's perspective? Was Naomi more a glass half-empty or glass half-full kind of person? The answer would be "half-empty," for she rightfully concluded that her situation was dire. In that world, having no man in your family was a big liability because in a patriarchal world like this, it was men who offered women security, income and the preservation of the family lineage. All of this was magnified living as a refugee in an unfriendly land. Well, Naomi's men were gone, she was too old to remarry, so she felt the only chance she had to survive would be to go back home to Bethlehem, even if many there considered her a traitor.

So, she began to journey back home with Ruth and Orpah. It was a minor miracle that they had chosen to go with her, since they had no obligation to accompany her. With their husbands dead, their connection was much stronger to their families of origin. Whether Naomi knew how blessed she was to have such loyal daughters-in-law or not is clear, but as they traveled, one thing became clear to Naomi: she felt cursed and did not want to bring Ruth and Orpah down with her. "The hand of the Lord has turned against me," she said. "You will find more security in the houses of your mothers, so turn around, go back," she said to Ruth and Orpah. And then she kissed them both to say goodbye. Now, for all of Naomi's pessimism, this was a selfless act on her part.

And what happened next? Ruth and Orpah, amidst their tears, declare to their mother-in-law that they will not return to their families, but will accompany her to Bethlehem.

Naomi basically says, are you nuts? As Naomi spelled out in blunt detail to them, she was unable to either attract a man or produce a male to help out the situation. "So, go back to the houses of your Moabite families!" And this time, Orpah

was persuaded. She kissed Naomi and left. But Ruth, that was another thing. She clung to Naomi, as our text says. Naomi persisted: "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

It was then that Ruth said these memorable words: "*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. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!*"

And Ruth was good to her word. She risked everything going to Bethlehem with Naomi. A Moabite woman in Judah? Under the wing of someone who could promise to provide nothing? And yet she was bound to her mother-in-law.

In chapters 2-4 we learn what happens to these two and I must say it's a good story. Ruth marries a cousin of Naomi's named Boaz, a successful businessman who seeks to preserve the line of Naomi's family. Ruth turns out to be blessed by all of Bethlehem, and Naomi, too, is provided for by Boaz. The story ends with the birth of a boy to Ruth and Boaz, named Obed. Obed would go on to become the grandfather of King David. Much farther down the line in this family is a man named Jesus. So, Jesus' family had a mixed marriage in its history. And this wasn't the only one!

What do we take away from a story such as this? Well, certainly we see here that God's story includes a bigger family circle than one might have imagined. For a Jew at this time to be told that a Moabite woman would be an ancestor of a Jewish King or one day, a man many would call savior, well, this would rattle a few cages. We see today how easily many imagine God to be a tribal God, casting aspersions on those who are in a different tribe, of a different race, practicing a different religion, or living a different sexual identity than those in "our group." In truth, stories like Ruth remind us that God is at work *universally*, calling us to broaden our horizons about who is really *family*. I don't have to remind you that there is a movement in our country to narrow the American family. Just Thursday night, the entire Somali community of Minneapolis was villainized in one fell swoop by a certain leader. Any observant reader of scripture will recognize that the Judeo-Christian God we worship values and is at work in people of all ethnicities and creeds. And that includes you!

And that leads to my final consideration this morning: the question I began the sermon with. My friend Mark has experienced profound loss. Who will be there for him? Can we learn something from the story of Ruth? Being this is a sermon, the obvious answer to the question of who will be there for Mark - or Ruth - would be God. God is someone you can count on. Yet, God is not even a character in the book of Ruth. There is a reference to God, but only an oblique one. Now what?

Turns out, God *was* there in the story of Ruth. God was there *in Ruth*, giving hope and new possibilities to Naomi. Did you get that? Ruth. There are very few places in all of scripture where you hear a better and more compelling expression of the faithfulness of God to his human children and his solidarity to them: *Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people...* This is the God we believe in, folks, who shows up in human lives for the sake of all his children who need faith, hope and love. And then he won't...let...go. And if you doubt this, look at Jesus! Yes, the Israelites are "God's chosen people," and yet it seems that Ruth was chosen, too - Ruth, a widow from Moab - not Israel - chosen by God to be his instrument.

*Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried*, says Ruth, but of course it was God and Ruth! Because that is exactly what God did in Jesus: he died right there where we die.

Later on, Boaz is an agent of the work of God, too, restoring a family line and reconnecting a widow – two of them, actually - to communal life. And so on and so on.

This is the God that Luther preached and taught about: the God who is at work in widows and businessmen, in the "chosen" and the "not chosen," in the poor, in the rich, in the Christian, Jew, and Muslim. Simply put, anywhere you see someone who is faithful to another, who gives of themselves because someone needs it, God has made an appearance. God is at work in this world through all acts of love, encouragement, and nurture. That includes your own life, whether you consider yourself qualified in religion or not.

So, who will respond to Mark in the midst of his loss? God will, and God will do it through you. That means you are called. Amen.