

Sermon: "Ruth the Moabite, Grandmother to a King"

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Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

Scriptures: Ruth 2:1-23

This week, we are continuing to look at individuals who have faced difficult days throughout our scriptures. The focus we are sharing is meant to last between now and the beginning of Lent in the middle of February. Last week on Sunday we looked at the rich man Job who was deprived of wealth, family, and health for a season of his life. Job's life trials were neither easy nor pleasant, but there was a way forward. This past Wednesday on Youtube we looked at Naomi who is in our story today. Naomi's life was also marked by considerable challenges. Both Job and Naomi exemplified a simple concept: despite their challenges, they watched for God despite their circumstances.

Today we are looking at the person of Ruth and this Wednesday we are looking at the Jewish exile Daniel. Both Daniel and Ruth's actions in times of trouble exemplify another noble attribute found in the scriptures. Ruth and Daniel are both steadfast. They are persistent in their faithfulness despite the challenges which reasonably could have led to a change in their behavior.

We will get to Daniel on Wednesday, but today let's take a look at the person of Ruth together. Ruth is the titular figure of the book of Ruth in our Hebrew Scriptures. Ruth's story is found in the eighth book in the Bible and shares the story of a young woman who marries into a family that has traveled southeast from Bethlehem in Judah to settle in the Kingdom of Moab across the Dead Sea. The people of Moab were often uneasy neighbors with the Jewish people across the Dead Sea. Jewish people like Naomi and her husband would not move to the Kingdom of Moab without good reason and they do have a good reason.

Ruth's family by marriage came to Moab in order to escape a famine. Sadly, after arriving, Naomi, Ruth's future mother-in-law became a widow with two sons. Each son took a Moabite wife. One son married a woman named Orpah and the other married Ruth. Naomi's family lived in Moab for around a decade before tragedy struck the family again.

At the time of our reading today Ruth is a young widow who was likely in her twenties around the time of our story. Assuming the Moabites had similar marriage rituals to the Hebrews, Ruth was likely given in marriage in her early teens. Having lived with Naomi's sons for a decade, Ruth and Orpah prepare to stay with Naomi even as a famine hits Moab. Naomi pleads with both of them to stay in Moab with their birth-families. Orpah leaves with Naomi's blessing, but Ruth refuses to be parted from her new family. Even as Naomi travels back home in sorrow and bitterness, Ruth remains by her side, even though Ruth would likely expect nothing but contempt and rejection from her new Jewish neighbors.

Let's not mince words about Ruth. We are reading about Ruth today because Ruth is a tenacious person in the best sense of that word. She is relentless in her dedication to Naomi. Ruth stays with Naomi and cares for her despite all of the challenges. Ruth loses her husband, but Ruth remains committed to Naomi. Moab becomes a land of famine and Ruth stays with Naomi when she sets off because she has heard that there is food in Judah. Naomi is off to pursue a story that may or may not be true, but Ruth remains committed to Naomi and travels to a strange land with strange people. Naomi is filled with grief and remains at home in her bitterness, but Ruth remains committed to Naomi and goes to glean food for her mother-in-law. Naomi has somewhat scandalous plans on how to provide for Ruth's future, but Ruth remains steadfast and committed to her mother-in-law. In time, Ruth will give birth to a son and Naomi will raise the child as her own. King David's father enters the world because of Ruth's stubborn commitment in a time of sorrow and famine.

This stubborn persistence shown in Ruth's life is why we are reading about a part of her life today. As a nation, we are approaching an entire year marked by the struggle and challenge that have come as a result of a deadly pandemic. As we approach a year in this struggle each day lately has seemed deadlier for our nation than the last.

As I wrote these words on Wednesday evening, the daily death toll from COVID-19 and the variant strains in the United States was at around 4,400 cases. The H1N1 virus that caused the pandemic in 1918 killed approximately 675,000 people. As I wrote this paragraph on Wednesday, since the beginning of the pandemic approximately 381,000 individuals had died in the United States alone. If things do not change in terms of daily deaths, in around 67 days COVID-19 will surpass the deadliness of the 1918 pandemic. If nothing changes, this very week the Coronavirus will have killed more Americans than the number who died during World War II. What's sad is that it is very unlikely to shift before that milestone passes.

What is almost as disheartening is the very real challenges our nation is faced today. As we gather Statehouses and Capitol buildings across our nation are being or have been boarded up and many are patrolled by National Guard troops. Individuals from across the political spectrum are agitated and the world around us is disheartening and upsetting. As our nation approaches 250 years in existence and as we continue to struggle forward in the political experiment known as the United States, things are difficult in the nation around us. For all the challenges we have faced, for all the struggles we have endured, we seemingly have not surmounted all of the things which can and do divide us.

We are looking at Ruth today because this is a moment in our history where we need the stubbornness of this young woman in our scriptures. We have come a long way and we have a long way to go: Ruth was selected as a figure to study this morning because it helps to remind each other that our scriptures are full of individuals that faced very difficult circumstances and managed to make it through despite the challenges. Ruth's challenges and our challenges are very different, but there's something noble and powerful about looking at a figure from our scriptures who faced her challenges with strength, courage, and honestly a ton of audacity.

Consider for a moment the challenge we find in our story today. Ruth is a Moabite who is living in the land without a husband. Neither being unmarried nor being a foreigner is the safest of lifestyles in ancient Judah. She is one of “those people.” When Boaz later finds his way into both purchasing Naomi’s land and marrying this wonderful young woman, it is only after having a deep conversation with a relative who legally has the right to claim the land if he will marry Ruth. The relative is all about the land, but throw in a Moabite spouse like Ruth and the deal is off. The bias against Moabites was very real and very powerful.

Feminist Biblical scholars point out something very interesting about this point in Ruth’s story. As Ruth goes to glean in the fields in our story, it is after Naomi and Ruth have come into the land. Boaz will one day care for Ruth and Naomi, but as our story begins there is nobody who stands up and cares for Ruth and Naomi. Until Naomi and Ruth step forward in courage, there is nobody coming to the rescue. Indeed, as the story begins Naomi is lost in her grief and it is Ruth alone who steps out in courage. A young woman accepts the challenge before her and goes out to glean in the fields as a foreigner in a strange land.

If you are not familiar with gleaning, I apologize for not being clear earlier about what Ruth is doing. Ruth is following behind the harvesters and gathering what is left behind. As the harvest occurred, farmers and their workers would harvest the plants in the field and bring in what was grown. Gleaning was the process of effectively picking up the scraps that are left behind.

It may seem strange to point in admiration to an immigrant from a foreign land that was often “the enemy” who is collecting scraps. I invite you to consider the courage it seemingly takes for Ruth to not only follow Naomi into the land of her people’s enemies but to also go out alone to find food to care for herself and her mother-in-law.

For her courage, Ruth is met with provision. Boaz, the farmer whose land is being harvested, sees Ruth, admires her character in caring for Naomi, and asks his workers to watch out for the young foreign woman. Boaz is kind to Ruth and helps to provide for the young woman despite her foreign nature. Indeed, he not only lets her glean, he lets her glean from the standing plants, which is pretty much letting her take the best of the crops. He not only lets her drink from the water drawn for his workers, he invites her to share a meal with him. Boaz effectively bends over backwards to provide for this young woman.

These actions give us reason for hope. In reading a commentary on Ruth in the “Interpretation” series by scholar Katharine Sakenfeld, there is the clear notation that we see something quite interesting in the life of Ruth and Boaz. Sakenfeld argues that God is clearly working in our passage this morning. We have two figures doing amazing things which defy the world in which they take place. Sakenfeld says there is no other way to read what is happening other than to see it as being completely divine. It is a bold claim, but the evidence is there.

Do you see how God is at work in this moment in our scriptures? We have two figures that live in a world where the enemy lives across that Dead Sea. Moabites and the people of Judah are enemies: they are born into cultures that treat the others with contempt. Indeed, the Biblical story in Deuteronomy 2 says that the Moabites have been granted their land by God as being descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, but they are a people who consistently fight against the Israelites. Indeed, 1 Samuel records how King Saul (who will reign within the lifetime of Ruth and Boaz's children) was consistently at war with the Moabites and King David, Ruth's grandson, would end up warring with the Moabites. For that matter, there's still tension between the ethnic groups that live in this region today.

Indeed, the story of Ruth and Boaz is a story of two individuals who seemingly should meet each other with distrust, but we do not find mistrust. Boaz not only treats Ruth without hatred: Boaz treats Ruth with kindness. What's more, Ruth does more than simply accept a marriage into the strange Jewish family: Ruth cares for her mother-in-law with respect and bravery, even in a strange land.

The scholar Katharine Sakenfeld rightly points out that God is truly at work in the Book of Ruth because both Boaz and Ruth refuse to do what is culturally expected of them. They are faithful to the God of love regardless of where they are from or who they are dealing with in the story. When Boaz marries Ruth, Boaz is marrying a woman who is resourceful, brave, dedicated, and courageous: it doesn't matter that she is from Moab. When Ruth marries Boaz, she is marrying someone who is hospitable, kind, gracious, and is a hands-on landowner who joins in both the work and the celebration: it doesn't matter that he is from Judah. For the scholar Sakenfeld, we do a disservice if we do not see God's presence when faithful people move beyond their expectations to act in faithful ways.

Like I said before, what a powerful example for a time like ours. We are facing challenges that are unprecedented in most of our lives. Whether you are stressed by the pandemic, the political turmoil, or something else, what better examples could we ask for than these two brave individuals?

Consider for a moment the chaos that divides people across our land this week. One side believes one person was elected while another believes the other person was elected. One side clings to one vision of the world while the other clings to an alternative way of seeing things. In many ways, the two views cannot coexist and there is an inherent tension.

What happens when we believe that God can work in the lives of people despite their differences? What happens when we see two sides that are absolutely opposed and believe in another way? In a world that is anxious, fearful, and angry, how powerful it can be to believe in a God that leads us in ways of peace and courage. In a world that is upset, aggravated, and furious, it can be powerful to remember the example of people like Ruth and Boaz who stepped out to do the right thing regardless of what neighbors would say, what people would think, and how it appeared.

Perhaps you can see how these two set an example of faithfulness for us in a world of division, but you might think it a stretch to consider how their faithfulness might set an example of faithfulness for us in a world fighting a pandemic. I would invite you to remember that there is an easy response to the unknown. It is easy to see that person who is nothing like you or your family and say "They need to go back to where they came from." It is easy to fear the unknown, but Boaz did not fear the unknown and neither should we. We are called to something greater than fear, even when we face something unfamiliar and scary. We can face the unknown and not live in fear.

What's more, we can be faithful despite our fear. There are times in life when it can seem easier to walk away from a challenge: to say to the world that you have done enough and go home. It can seem so easy to look out for yourself, to care only for number one, and to only worry about your own skin. Ruth didn't do that in our story though. Ruth stood by her mother-in-law in uncertain times and did more. Ruth stepped out into a place of vulnerability by herself to help care for both her needs and her mother-in-law's needs. Ruth did not allow her fear to dictate what she could do when facing the monumental challenge of loving her mother-in-law in the middle of traveling to a strange land while fleeing a famine. Ruth stood up and showed true bravery.

The whole reason we are looking at these figures facing challenges is that they are examples to us of individuals that faced difficult days. These stories, like many Biblical stories, are not perfect and the people in them do not always do what we would expect or what we believe they should do, but they do challenge us to consider more than what we would do in their shoes. These figures also challenge us to consider what they would do in lives like ours.

My friends, our world is a challenging world. It can be easy to give into simple strong feelings like fear or hatred. We could easily be swept along by every spirit that comes along, but the ancient words of 1 John 4:1 speak to us all. That verse tells us: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

There are so many voices out there telling us to hate, telling us to fear, and telling us to abandon what it means to live faithful lives. Beloved friends, test the spirits, seek the Holy Spirit, and let us find courage in our stories of faith as well in the lives we live together. Let us pray...