

## Ruth – “Being Brought Back” Series

Text(s): Ruth 1:1-22

- Pastor Ken Nelson

This is a story about a mother-in-law, so let's begin with a mother-in-law story....*Two men were talking at a bar. "My mother-in-law is an angel," says the one guy. "You're lucky," says the other, "My mother-in-law is still alive."*

So much for gratuitous humor at the expense of the *wonderful* women who serve us as mothers-in-law. There are precious few mother-in-law stories in the bible. This is the only one I know that features a woman who so vividly reflects both sides of the human coin - both saint and sinner. The story of Naomi and her daughters-in-law displays suffering and redemption. It is heart-rending and yet in the end, heart-warming. Naomi is from an Israelite family who lived in the region of Bethlehem, Hebrew for “*house of bread*”, and the irony is the house is empty, owing to a famine of wheat and faith. God loves this story line. Recall that with Joseph and his malevolent brothers, a famine led them to hunger for forgiveness from and reconciliation.

In a period of time when Israel was led by judges, military leaders on the one hand, arbitrators of civil disputes on the other, the tribes of Israel were miserable and ironically justice was elusive. The theme at the outset of this story is emptiness - empty bread baskets and empty wombs, but its overall background is empty hearts. Israel wasn't taking care of its faith, and so its people suffered. The “safety net” for a widow in those days was largely her womb, as in marry again, and have kids. If you were too old to marry you'd have to be supported by your sons. Naomi had neither. The secondary safety net was mercy...as in throw yourself at the mercy of the community. Naomi was in the wrong place for that to happen, stuck in Moab.

So when she hears that the famine in Judah has eased she brightens a bit, and makes her confession of faith - *"the Lord had considered his people and given them food"*. Naomi decides she will be better off at home than in a land where she is a foreigner. Not much in the story of the Judges suggest that will be true back in Bethlehem, but off she goes anyway. Her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth start to go with her, but Naomi said to them, *"Go back each of you to your mother's house." "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband."* Naomi realizes that her daughters-in-law would be the husband-less, childless aliens in Bethlehem. The “saintly” side of Naomi, her heart broken, confesses her faith and from it seeks the welfare of the only companions she has on this earth, two equally vulnerable women.

At first, Orpah and Ruth *resist*. *"No," they say, "we will return with you to your people." ?* Now arises Naomi's grief, her losses beginning to ooze into bitterness. *"Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?* The situation seems totally hopeless. Orpah leaves, but Ruth persists, with one of the most heartwarming lines of commitment and love in the entire Old Testament. *"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"*

Ruth is now the one persistent in her faithfulness. Naomi's grief engenders only hopelessness. Here we have a candid example of how God's chosen, the Hebrew people needed a “confessor” to remind them of the *content* and *intent* of their faith. Ruth's words reflect a commitment not only to a mother-in-law, but also to a God, Yahweh, and to a people, Israel. The story celebrates not only Ruth's commitment to Naomi, but also her commitment to a whole tradition.

Such is where this story brings us back to where we need to be. Ruth calls us to embrace the two fold nature of faith. Incomplete is commitment to the church or a congregation which lacks love for the sinner who sits by us in the congregation or the stranger who passes by. Incomplete, as well, though common today, is the confession of a purely humanistic love of people apart from commitment to the faith, demands, and culture of the church. What Ruth did, both for herself and for the sake of Naomi, is bring them back to the creed of Israel, which we heard last week from Deuteronomy. *"Hear O Israel, the Lord you God, the Lord is one. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart...talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise"* Commitment to their God was to be at the heart of Hebrew existence, beginning each day, ending each day, going in and out - all of life was to be ordered around that faith.

Naomi, for her part showed signs that such order in her life was fraying, but let's not sit in judgment of that. Her world had unraveled. The power and beauty of this story is in her lament as well her confession. Her faith was shaky, and she was not afraid to say so. Grief and loss do such to us. If you are so gripped don't give in to the temptation to be silent about your sorrow, think your faith has let you down, or worse you have let God down.

*Do you know why mothers-in-law are buried 18 feet under when 6 feet is enough for everyone else?  
Because deep down mothers-in-law are really nice persons!*

In our story today Naomi, a mother in law, "deep down" had faith as well as hurt and was not afraid to express either. Ruth "deep down" had character conceived by commitment, and was not reluctant to take the risks those called her to make. God is particular about the people he calls. God makes choices. God chose Israel, yet also one who came from outside Israel. God chose Israel for the sake of other nations. God chose Ruth for the sake of Israel. God chose the church and called you to it to give you words of eternal life that hold when everyday life doesn't. But God also chooses you for the church, to bring to everyday life those acts of committed faith that God has particularly gifted you for.

Above all, God is particular about you. Through Jesus he has forgiven you and given you the means to carry on when you fail or the supports around you fail. Isn't that a story coming back to, and leaving all else behind for? You wouldn't be the first to think so. AMEN.