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Ruth 1:1-22; 4:13-17 – *Women of Jesus' Genealogy: Ruth*

Preached at Trinity CRC

December 12, 2021 – Third Sunday in Advent

Ruth 1:1-22; 4:13-22

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ²The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

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 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."

¹⁶ But 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. ¹⁷ Where 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.” ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

¹⁹ So 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. ²¹ I 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.”

²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

[...]

¹³ So 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. ¹⁴ The 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! ¹⁵ He 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.”

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

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

This story can be summed up with the words:

From empty to full.

And while we think it’s a book about Ruth...

If you read the whole story, you’ll see that it’s really about Naomi—

Ruth’s mother-in-law—

And how God uses Ruth to bring Naomi from empty to full.

The story doesn’t start out with Naomi’s emptiness though...

It actually starts with Naomi being quite full.

Naomi has a husband—

Named Elimelek—

And in this culture that means everything.

It means she is protected and provided for...

It means she has a name and a future.

Not only does Naomi have a husband...

She has sons...

Two sons!

Two sons to care for her and Elimelek when they get old...

Two sons to carry on the family name.

This Israelite is blessed and favored by the Lord...

Naomi's life and future are looking good...

She starts from a place of fullness.

But things quickly unravel for Naomi in the story.

First, we read that there's a famine in the land.

(Oddly enough a famine in Bethlehem...A word which means, "house of bread.")

Naomi's husband moves them out of Bethlehem in Judah—

A land associated with the Lord—

To the land of Moab...

A land out east...

Hoping to find food there.

And whenever God's people move east...

This usually isn't a good thing.

Shortly after the move...

Naomi's husband dies.

Some of you have lost a husband or a wife...

And you know the sting of death...

And the darkness of grief.

Naomi no doubt felt this too...

But Elimelek's death is more than just sad for her.

She is now the head of the house in an unfamiliar land...

In a culture where everything is dependent upon the man.

Tasked with raising her sons and carrying on the family line...

Naomi finds Mahlon and Kilion Moabite wives...

And things start looking up:

“Yes, my husband is gone...”

“But there's hope now that the family will continue.”

Something must have been wrong though...

Because we don't read of any grandchildren for Naomi.

Her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah—

After 10 years—

Don't have any kids...

Leading us to believe they're barren.

The tiny flicker of hope that Naomi has—

The hope from the prospect of grandchildren—

Is finally snuffed out when her two sons die.

Naomi is too old to have any more children...

And now she has no sons to carry on the line...

To care for her and provide for her.

First a famine in the land...

Then the death of her husband...

Then the barrenness of her daughters in law...

Now the death of her two sons.

“Don't call me Naomi...”—

Which means pleasant—

“Call me bitter...”

“For I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.”

Can you relate with that?

“Don’t call me pleasant...”

“Call me bitter.”

“I’m empty...”

You remember a time when you were full...

But now you feel poured out...empty...

And it feels like God has his thumb on your back.

Life is not easy right now:

In another week we’ll be at the shortest day of the year...

9.5 less hours of daylight than in June;

We’re still in the middle of what feels like a never-ending pandemic;

The holidays always bring added stress;

Fuel, grocery, and gas prices are outrageous;

And on top of all of this...

Oh yeah, life still happens:

Our loved ones still get sick;

Maybe our own health is failing;

We still have trouble with our families;

Work stress has increased;

Life doesn’t stop just because we’re in a pandemic, or because it’s winter...

No, hard things continue to confront us.

It’s easy to throw our hands up and say:

“God, what am I doing wrong?!”

“Why does it feel like you’re against me?!”

“Why does my life feel so empty...”

“Why do *I* feel so empty.”

And with Naomi we could easily say, “Don’t call me pleasant...”

“Call me bitter.”

Naomi is in a place of emptiness—

Even questioning God’s hand in all of it—

But God has plans to make Naomi full once again...

And he uses Ruth to do it.

God uses Ruth to bring about Naomi’s redemption!

Ruth is a young Moabite girl...

Probably no older than a teenager when she’s married...

In her mid to late 20s when her husband dies...

Nothing that makes her stand out or “pop”...

Just a young girl from a different culture and place.

But this seemingly insignificant girl does something completely irrational...

Irrational yet self-sacrificial.

After her husband dies, she decides to stick with Naomi...

Her *mother-in-law*.

Our reading says, “Ruth *clung* to Naomi”:

She says to Naomi, “I’m going back with you.”

“Where you go, I’ll go.”

“Your people will be my people.”

“Your God my God.”

“I’m with you until death.”

“Even when you die, I’m still staying in your land with your people.”

This is an incredible act of faithfulness shown to Naomi...

But it’s also completely irrational for Ruth to do!

She is setting herself up for a barren life:

Naomi isn't going to have any other sons...

And who in Judah is going to want to marry a Moabite?!

Who in Judah is even going to regard Ruth as an equal?

Ruth's best shot is to go back home to her mother's house...

Go back to her own people—

The Moabites—

Find a husband, raise a family, and live a secure life...

In a culture she knows...worshiping gods she's familiar with.

But Ruth gives all of that up...

And for what?!

For an unknown land;

An unknown people;

And an unknown culture...

Far away from her family and friends.

Ruth is pushing the self-destruct button on her own life.

And God is working behind and through it all!

We see God's fingerprints all over this story.

The rest of the story goes like this:

Ruth and Naomi head back to Bethlehem...

And they need to secure food for themselves.

So Ruth heads out to the grain fields.

Back in those days, the foreigner, widow, and orphan were allowed to glean in the fields...

Or come behind the harvesters and pick up whatever they drop.

Being a foreigner and a widow Ruth qualifies for gleaning.

But being a foreigner and a widow...

Also puts Ruth at risk.

The fields were a dangerous place for young, female Ruth to be hanging out...

Because not everyone was kind...

Not everyone showed mercy to the economically disadvantaged...

Some tried to take advantage of them.

It *just so happens* that Ruth goes to work in Boaz's field...

A middle-aged Israelite with a secure place in the community.

Boaz sees the unknown girl in the field—

Pulls the foreman aside—

And asks, "Who is that?"

"Oh that? That's Ruth the Moabite. The one who came back with Naomi."

"She asked if she could glean in your field so I told her sure."

Boaz calls Ruth over and says:

"Ruth, stay here in my field. Don't go into any else's field."

"It's dangerous out there..."

"So, I've told the workers not to mess with you."

"When you're thirsty, go grab a drink from the cooler."

"I've heard how you've been exceedingly faithful to your mother-in-law..."

"That's cool...That's honorable."

Boaz then sends her home with food for Ruth and Naomi and the 30lbs of grain she gleaned...

And Ruth finishes the harvesting season in Boaz's field.

Naomi learns of this...

And sometime later the wheels start turning in Naomi's head—

Hope is starting to mount—

Because Boaz is a relative of her late husband, Elimelek.

He's called a guardian-redeemer...

Someone responsible for looking after the family in times of hardship.

"Go to Boaz tonight," Naomi finally says to Ruth.

“Wash up, put on some nice clothes and perfume...”

“And go to Boaz on the threshing floor.”

“After he’s done eating and drinking”—

“When he’s sleeping”—

“Uncover his feet, lay down, and he’ll know what you’re asking.”

And this is what Ruth does.

She lays at his feet and—

After something wakes him up in the middle of the night—

Boaz realizes someone’s there.

“Who’s at my feet?” he asks.

“It’s me, your servant Ruth.”

“Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

Do you realize what she’s asking?

She’s asking for marriage!

What a bold move!

A move that could only be coordinated by God!

A Moabite woman, the poor servant girl, the uninvited visitor...

Essentially initiating—

Even demanding—

That Boaz fulfill his position of guardian-redeemer.

What happens next is even more amazing:

Boaz says, “You are a woman of noble character, Ruth.”

“I will do whatever you ask.”

He says yes!

Boaz marries Ruth...

The Lord gives Ruth the ability to conceive...

And Ruth has a son.

The women of Bethlehem come to Naomi and say:

“Naomi has a son!”

Not, “Ruth has a son,” but Naomi.

God has used Ruth to bring about Naomi’s redemption.

This woman who lost her husband and two sons—

This bitter woman—

Has been rescued and filled back up by the Lord.

It’s not just Naomi who is redeemed though.

Remember in v. 1 that we’re told when this story takes place?

“In the times when the judges ruled.”

During the time of the judges...

Israel did whatever they saw fit...

And usually, it was contrary to God’s will.

This was a time of apostasy and unfaithfulness on Israel’s part.

But through this child born to Ruth...

The Lord will bring about a king to rule the land...

A king after God’s own heart.

From Ruth and Boaz will eventually come David...

And from David’s line will come the Savior, Jesus.

God uses Ruth to bring redemption not just to Naomi...

But to all of Israel...

And eventually to the world.

But notice, this redemption doesn’t come without a cost...

It doesn’t come without a sacrifice.

Ruth left her home;

Ruth left her family and friends;

Ruth left her gods and her culture...

And instead showed loving-kindness to her empty, bitter mother-in-law.

Ruth makes a completely irrational decision and clings to Naomi...

Willing to walk in the consequences of her decision...

Willing to live a life of poverty and subjecting herself to a bleak future.

All the while, God is orchestrating things behind the scenes...

Using the most unlikely people to bring Naomi and Israel from empty to full.

God's fingerprints and smudges are all over this story...

Because this is akin to Jesus' story...

It's a foreshadowing of Jesus' life.

Jesus, God's own Son, makes the most irrational decision.

Giving up his place in heaven...

To be born on earth as one of us.

The package of redemption that came to Naomi...

Was wrapped in a young, unnoticeable Moabite girl.

The package of redemption that comes to the world...that comes to us...

Is a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a feeding trough.

As Ruth clings to her bitter mother-in-law...

And God uses her to bring about Naomi's redemption...

Jesus clings to us—

As unfaithful and as bitter as we are—

And God uses his life, death, and resurrection to bring about our redemption...

The Son of God who sacrifices his life for God's people.

No, life is not easy right now:

Some of us are bitter;

Some of us are doubting God's goodness;

Some of us are lonely;

Some of us are lost or despairing;

Some of us are exhausted.

But we can be confident that God is working redemption in our lives.

God is bringing us from empty, bitter places...

To places of fullness.

We may not be able to see it right now—

Naomi couldn't see it—

But God is working to redeem his people.

Just as Ruth clung to Naomi and would not take “no” for an answer...

Jesus clings to us and says:

“I’m with you always, even to the end.”

“I will never leave you or forsake you.”

“My plan is to give you hope and a future.”

“You are mine and I’m not letting you go.”

Christ has come once already—

Giving his life to pay for our sins—

And we are promised that he will come again...

To fill up all that is lacking...

To heal all that is broken.

May God give us his Spirit...

So that we may have eyes to see his work of redemption all around us.

And when we cannot see it...

May God give us a heart of trust that he is working for our redemption.

Amen.