

Ruth's Journey

Ruth 1:1-17; Mark 3:33-35

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Let me introduce you again to Ruth who reminds us of the importance of taking risks and following God into the unknown. Ruth is experiencing experiences the ups and downs of living her life. (Turns away from the congregation, and turns back with a head covering. Hereafter, all bold italic type is Ruth speaking)

I am Ruth. As a young woman, my life seemed to hold a bright future. I married a husband with strong family ties. We began building a life together. But in a few short years my family is crushed by death. My husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law all three die. With two women—my sister-in-law Orpah and mother-in-law Naomi with whom I have no blood relation, I have to start over.

My sister-in-law Orpah and I are both Moabite women, and each of us met and fell in love with a man from another country (two brothers from Israel, the land across the border) and were welcomed into their family. As time went on, each of

us grew to love our mother-in-law, Naomi, very deeply. Both Orpah and I shared the same pain of childlessness and the same tragedy of widowhood at a young age. Because our situation was one of poverty because of the loss of male support, we willingly agreed to go with Naomi to Bethlehem when she decided to return there. In many ways, Orpah and I have the same past and the same present., yet we were soon to discover very different futures.

Orpah and I began our journey with Naomi to Bethlehem but Naomi soon sensed that we would have a better chance at remarriage if we returned to Moab.

I can still hear Naomi's words. "Go back each of you to your mother's house," urged Naomi. "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me" (Ruth 1:8). Naomi also remembered that her relatives in Bethlehem had a negative view of immigrants —they complained that immigrants don't pay their taxes, they bleed the welfare system dry, they take jobs away from Jews, and so on. Naomi loved us like we were her own daughters. She shared her love of her one God with us. I think Naomi did not want us to be victims

of deeply entrenched prejudice and discrimination about race and ethnicity. So she sent us back to Moab.

Orpah kissed Naomi and returned home, but I refused to budge. I think Naomi was surprised that I hugged her tightly. I said to Naomi: “Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (v. 16).

What a bold and faith-filled statement this is! Ruth turns away from a culture in which women are considered to be nothing without a husband. She refuses to be intimidated by a town that is full of racial and ethnic prejudice. She commits herself to moving in a new direction, trusting completely in Naomi and in Naomi’s God — the God of Israel. Ruth realized that she could be OK and happy without the things she once thought she needed. Like so many others today, Ruth chooses resettlement and all the negative possibilities, but with an optimism and hope. I wonder how modern-day refugees are feeling as they seek a new home!!!!

What do you and I need to be OK and happy?

One morning, as I was walking to a coffee shop in East Haddam, a school bus stopped in front of me and a little kid waved at me frantically through the bus window. I laughed and waved back. There was instantly a look of surprise and then extreme happiness on the kid's face just because I waved back to him. This reminded me of how, as children, we need very little to make us happy.

As adults we somehow grow into the belief that we need everything to be a certain way in order to find and appreciate moments of happiness. But the truth is, to be happy we need much less than we think we need.

Ruth realized that she could be OK and happy without the things she once thought she needed. Within her soul, Ruth had embraced the faith of her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth's belief in God, not only gave her strength through the difficult times but opened her life to new beginnings. When our life is at a crossroads, we have a choice which path and direction we will follow.

We have a choice about our attitude. Ruth chose to be positive and grateful for what she had and this determined how she was going to live the rest of her life. Ruth had found a confidence to decide for herself who she was and what she wanted. For this big decision at the crossroads of her life, Ruth's faith guided her, fortifying her with the courage and self-knowledge to seek a new life and discover new dreams and goals.

Ruth certainly did not have a perfect past. Things had not worked out for her as she hoped. Very few of us have had everything in our life work out perfectly. Until my mid-forties, my life was almost too good to be true. But then, when my sons were in high school, I went through a very painful divorce. For several weeks, I had trouble eating, sleeping, thinking. I was devastated and I had lots of negative thoughts. I was depressed and I could have chosen to pity myself and sink lower into a dark depression.

However, God intervened. One summer Sunday, I had the chance to be in church for the entire service and the pastor, my colleague, seemed to be preaching directly to me. I had

not shared my situation with him but his message spoke of how God opens new doors and windows for us when others are closed. I chose to lift myself out of the darkness into the light of God's blessings that were still very much there for me.

Both Ruth and I did not let the shadows of our past darken the doorstep of our present and future. We were able to let go, forgive and move forward. Just because the past didn't turn out like we had hoped, didn't mean our future couldn't be better than we had envisioned. In fact, we often grow stronger in the places we were once broken. Because it's not until you're broken for a while that you truly learn what you're made of on the inside. And this insight gives you the ability to rebuild yourself, stronger than ever before. God is present with us to guide our steps as we come to that crossroad of long-term happiness and long-term despair. God can help us not to quit or give up. We can reach out for God's help.

Life is constantly changing and we're changing with it, as both Ruth and I learned. We're not the same persons we

were a year ago, a month ago, or a week ago. Life's cycle doesn't stop. Change is what it's all about. But every ending is the beginning of something else. Every exit is an entry somewhere else. Today is a new beginning.

Faith is a journey. It takes us beyond memory, beyond understanding, beyond comfort, beyond control. Faith is about a road, not a specific place on the road. Along the way, we will see new things, hear new words, reconsider old words. New companions will appear, and they will stretch us. New needs will require us to abandon former ways of perceiving reality.

As you continue your lifelong journey of faith, may you be blessed to live simply, love generously, speak truthfully, breathe deeply, do your best, and leave the rest to the powers above you.

May God be with you always. Amen.

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