

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Ruth, Post 2024 Election
November 10, 2024

It's tough to be a woman living in a man's world. Long before the Barbie movie brought that message home, we had the book of Ruth.

Ruth stands out as it is only one of two books in the Bible named for women. The other is Esther. 37 are named for men. It's a short book – only four chapters. So short that though we only read a portion today, I read all of it this week for this sermon. It is a story of loyalty, kindness, and resourcefulness of two women; it is through their actions that King David comes to be as the baby born in today's reading, Obed, is the grandfather of David. How disappointing then that the book of Ruth ends with a lineage of David, Salmon beget Boaz, Boaz beget Obed, Obed beget Jesse, Jesse beget David – a lineage that cuts out all the women.

It is tough to be a woman living in a man's world. Even when the book of the Bible bears your name.

Let's talk about that name. This book is about two women – Ruth and Naomi – but it's only named after one. Books of the Bible are not named after two people so we can forgive that, but Naomi is so clearly the main character of the story, so why not name it after her. Naomi speaks more than Ruth in the narrative, occupying 19 verses of speech to Ruth's 12 verses. More

notably, Naomi speaks about God more than anyone else in the narrative. While Ruth's actions occupy chapter 2 and 3, they are actions she was directed to do by Naomi. The first chapter and last chapter of book feature Naomi prominently, to the point that the last verses in today's reading include the women of the neighborhood said, "A son has been born to Naomi." Just to be clear Ruth is the mother of this baby. So why not name this book Naomi?

Because it is tough to be a complex person living in a complex world. Naomi is a complex character with unresolved issues with God. Ruth is a pretty simple character in this story – she is loyal and follows the advice of Naomi, no explicit trust or doubt in God since this God is foreign to her. Naomi, on the other hand, well let me tell you more of her story.

When the book of Ruth begins, Naomi and her husband and their two sons are leaving their home in Bethlehem because of a famine and make a home in a foreign land, Moab. Over the course of ten years, Naomi's husband dies, and her two sons marry good Moabite (non-Jewish) women, but then the two sons die, leaving three women with no kids, no husbands, no men at all among them. In the society that they were living in, they were incredibly vulnerable without a male in sight – economically, socially, really by every measure.

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem because she hears their famine is over. She encourages her daughters-in-law to stay in their homeland and to find new husbands or at least keep the support of their kin. One daughter-in-law says a sad goodbye, and the other, Ruth, pledges her lifelong companionship to Naomi.

As this first chapter unfolds, it is clear that Naomi, while being practical and loving mother-in-law, is also really angry at God. Unlike other biblical characters, Naomi does not tell God that she's angry, but tells others about the Lord who has let her down. She can't even speak to God about it she's so upset.

"The hand of the Lord has turned against me." She says.

When she arrives in Bethlehem, she declares, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. [Mara means bitter] I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi [Naomi means pleasant] when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

Naomi perceives herself to be utterly alone and without a future. She blames God for her empty life. She does not plead her case, or look for the blessings of the journey, even though Ruth is one of those blessings that stand by her side. Focusing on Naomi's perspective in this story means that we linger in her grief, her anger & frustration, her doubt without condemnation. Her friends do not condemn or counter her feelings, but they also don't call her Mara.

Ruth ends up in the fields gleaning the leftover food for her and Naomi and the landowner Ruth encounters is kind and protective of her. Ruth tells Naomi of this, and when she finds out the landowner is Boaz, a relative of hers, Naomi is excited about a potential match. Naomi waits to see if love will naturally blossom between Boaz and Ruth, but it doesn't, and so she takes things into her own hand which is where the first reading today picks up. Naomi tells Ruth to go land herself this man: wash up, make yourself smell good and look pretty, go the threshing room

floor, wait til he's fed and drunk and lies down for bed, then sneak next to him and uncover his feet, which is a euphemism for something else, and then Boaz will guide you.

Yeah you're hearing what I'm hearing.

Even after several readings, it is unclear to me whether Boaz and Ruth sleep together that night, but when Boaz is thinking more clearly, he acts like a fine gentleman, respecting Ruth, Naomi, and some cultural logistical issues that need to be worked out. Boaz is also quick to repeat trust in the Lord's blessing. The Lord will provide. The Lord will bless us. Standard, acceptable theology for the Hebrew Scriptures. The story ends with a baby cuddling in Naomi's arms.

But not even a baby brings Naomi to her knees.

We frequently encounter stories of struggle, loss, and redemption in the Bible. Those stories often end with the main characters repenting for their doubts, giving thanks, and praising God. But here, Naomi remains silent. It's probably why the book of the Bible is named after Ruth, and not her. Naomi is unresolved with God.

Naomi never reconciles her pain, struggle, and grief with the theology most present in her time – the theology that Boaz articulates – God will protect you. God will bless you. God is bringing God's will to fruition. As someone whose two children and husband die in a foreign land, she is not feeling the protection and blessing. She is doubting God's will at work. Even after the best

possible outcome happens, she never reconciles it, and her story tells us that that is okay. You don't need to reconcile your mixed feelings about God's activity or lack thereof in this world. You don't need to reconcile it in order to receive the blessings of life, or to be a part of blessing others in this life. You can be bitter and act in love. You can be hopeless and incredibly pragmatic. You can be faithful and angry at God.

God is unseen, but present in the book of Ruth. God never intervenes directly. Yet God's work is done through the unshakeable loyalties, gut feelings, and canny decisions of these characters. Even against a backdrop that disempowered women. Even against a backdrop of unfixable loss. Even against a backdrop of not being on speaking terms with God. It is God's plan that is moved forward in the actions of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. It's God's plan that is moved forward, because each person did the next good thing for the person they cared about. Ruth for Naomi in her commitment to stay with her. Naomi for Ruth in her pushing her to find stability with Boaz, Boaz for Ruth and Naomi in his respectful treatment of their vulnerability.

It is tough to be a complex person in a complex world. However you are feeling about God's unseen presence in this complex world — do the next good thing for the person in front of you. God's work is done through each good thing, no matter how the chapter ends this time, God's story keeps going. God's story weaves in grief, feelings of abandonment, frustration; God's story weaves in loyalty, friendship, risk, hope. God's story is still being written and it doesn't leave any of this out. It doesn't leave any of us out. Be honest. Be pragmatic. And choose a few good companions. God's story needs you to write the next chapter.