

Grace Anglican Network, sermon for Sunday 19th July 2020

Ruth 3:1-18, “The Return of Hope”

Preacher: Shane Ellery

In my view, the book of Ruth could have just as easily been called the book of Naomi. Now, I know that Ruth probably features more prominently in the text, and that she’s the one who is more often at the centre of the action, but it all happens on the background of Naomi’s story.

In fact, the whole book begins more-or-less with Naomi, in those tragic opening verses where, following the lead of her husband, Naomi moves out of the land of Israel, during a famine, in search of food and stability, but then loses everything. Her husband and both her adult sons die in Moab. Naomi is left destitute, in a foreign land, with two foreign widowed daughters-in-law. Her only hope, really, is to seek refuge back in Israel. And that’s how the book of *Ruth* begins.

And the book of Ruth ends, again, with Naomi. As we will see next week, the narrative section of this book closes with Naomi, some years later, back in Bethlehem (in Israel), nursing her miracle grandson, with the other Israelite women looking on and declaring her blessed by God. It’s a remarkable turnaround. A story of redemption indeed. And I’m suggesting, that to a significant degree, the book of Ruth is the story of Naomi.

Now, that said, the other key storyline here, clearly, is Ruth’s. And hers too, is a story of redemption, and in some ways it’s the more spectacular of the two. Because (if you recall) Ruth is a Moabite. A foreigner. One of Naomi’s two widowed daughters-in-law, and the only one to follow Naomi back to Israel.

And if it was going to be hard for Naomi to find refuge back in Israel, having deserted her people during the famine, and now back, poor and destitute, seeking to rebuild some kind of viable life for herself out of the ashes – how much harder would it be for Ruth, a foreigner, with no claim (by birth) even to be in Israel, let alone to expect the people of God to receive her as one of their own.

So yes, Ruth’s story is also a staggering story of redemption (as we’re seeing in this series). But it plays out within the story and life of Naomi.

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The real turning point for Ruth, I think, happened back in chapter 1 – when Ruth binds herself to Naomi’s fate with these remarkable words ... she says to Naomi (Ruth 1.16): “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 and there will I be buried. May the LORD do all this to me, and more as well, even if death parts me from you!”

That’s the moment Ruth’s story gets kind-of fused together with Naomi’s. And we’ve been learning about Ruth, haven’t we – about her character. That she’s kind and loyal and passionate – and *hopeful*. I think Ruth really shows great hope here – in Naomi, and in Naomi’s people, and in Naomi’s God. She’s binding herself not just to Naomi’s fate, but also to Naomi’s faith – in the God of Israel.

But Naomi, by now, has become a bitter woman. Beaten down by grief and poverty and disillusionment, she doesn’t share Ruth’s youthful hope for the future – she just can’t see it. Naomi’s understanding of God assures her that he has been sovereignly overseeing everything that has happened to her in Moab, including the multiple tragedies, and so she concludes that it is God who has brought this calamity upon her. “I went away full, she says, but the Lord has brought me back empty.” (Ruth 1:21)

So we have the stories and lives of these two women, converging in the book of Ruth – an unlikely mess of faith and bitterness, tragedy and loyalty, hope and despair. And now we come to Naomi’s moment.

Chapter 3 is an interesting chapter. Really, it’s the turning point of the whole book. And again, it’s Ruth (and Boaz, now) who are central to the action, but again, this critical episode in the story is bookended by Naomi. And in many ways, this really *is* Naomi’s moment.

And Naomi has not lost her faith, but she has all-but-lost her hope. And we can understand it, can’t we? Perhaps even, identify with it?

And Naomi’s struggle has not been with the sovereignty of God. She’s not asking: is God real? Or is he there? Or is he powerful? Or in control? No, as an Israelite, that was a given for Naomi. I don’t think it would have even occurred to her to doubt the sovereignty of God. That God exists and that he is ultimately in

charge over all that he has created. Intellectually, that was more-or-less the starting point of the Israelite worldview. The first principle of Naomi's faith.

And it is for the Christian, too, right?

How often do we say (almost flippantly, sometimes) - God's got this. He's in control. Nothing's impossible with God. He is Lord of all! - We rehearse these truths a lot, don't we. I caught myself just this week, saying to someone, in a pretty casual conversation about what's happening right now with Coronavirus - "Well, we know that God's ultimately in control." And it's not that that's wrong. Or that I don't believe it. It's just not really the sticking point for most of us, is it?

That God is sovereign is not really what causes the tension in our Christian walk. It's what God is doing with his sovereignty. It's how he chooses to exercise his sovereign power and right to do whatever he wants - in the world at large, and especially, in the circumstances of our own lives. What governs God's decisions to intervene or not? To act in one way and not another? That's where the rub is, I reckon, for most of us.

And it was for Naomi too. Naomi's wrestle was not really with the sovereignty of God, it was with the providence of God. And to a large degree, she had lost hope that God had anything good left for her.

And I don't know, perhaps you're at a similar place in your walk with God today. Where you're not sure anymore, if God has a whole lot left in his plan for you either. Your faith's still alive, but at this point, you feel a bit damaged by life, and to be honest, neglected by God. Well, I think that's essentially Naomi's story, to this point. And yet, now she springs into action.

If you remember last week, Ruth met Boaz in the barley field. Boaz is a wealthy and righteous man - and kind. And he just happens to also be a distant relative of Naomi's - and one who, under Jewish law, had the power to dramatically change the future prospects for both Ruth and Naomi - as a kinsman redeemer, *if* he's willing. And Naomi has been pondering this "chance" encounter - watching and waiting - until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And in that time, I think we're meant to see, her hope has returned. And now that hope, which no doubt is still somewhat tentative, nevertheless, it permeates through every verse in this delightful chapter. Beginning with Naomi's decision, now, to act.

Let me just re-read for us, those first 5 verses (from today's passage):

Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ² Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Now wash and anoint yourself, put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." ⁵ And Ruth said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

I think we're seeing Naomi, here, reenergised by hope, and on the front foot again. What has changed? What moved her from bitter resignation to hope-filled action? It was a fresh revelation of God's love. Ruth's unwavering loyalty, this unlikely encounter with Boaz, Boaz's compassion and generosity, the abundant barley harvest - all of it, had been conspiring in Naomi's heart break through her bitterness. And for the first time in a long time, Naomi is beginning to see the loving hand of God at work; the perfect providential care of her Heavenly Father.

Now, was her pain gone? Her grief resolved? The agonising questions Naomi had been carrying (for years) about why God had allowed things to play out in her life the way they had - were they instantly answered? Surely not! The kind of suffering Naomi went through - actually, all suffering (really), leaves its mark. But the deeper question still, and in the end, the more important one, is: does God love me? *Does God love me?* That's always the more important question.

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Well, Naomi's decision to spring into action here is not without risk. Risk of further pain and disappointment. Risk to Ruth, who is really making herself quite vulnerable here, with this strategy to gain Boaz's attention. (I *do not* recommend it as a strategy to be used today!) But the point is, as Naomi is starting to really see the loving providence of God operating in her life, her response is not simply to wait passively for God to reveal the next part of his plan - I mean, she is waiting for that, but with her new-found hope and growing confidence in the Lord, she takes a few steps forward of her own, not without risk, but in faith.

And every believer has moments like this, yeah?

Perhaps not quite as dramatic, but we all know what it's like to take a risk in faith. Maybe we have a real sense of God's leading in some direction or decision in our

lives. And in those moments, there is always a risk, that God won't deliver what we expect, or in the way we expect it. That is a real risk in the Christian life.

And most of us (I'm guessing) know what it's like to have taken a risk in faith, and for it not to have not worked out as we'd hoped. And that's hard. Really hard, sometimes. Which is why we need to know (more than anything else) the unshakable reality of God's deep love for us in Christ - no matter what!

The many 'why' questions that come up in life, for the Christian, that can be so painful and disorienting for us, are ultimately 'who' questions. So often, at root, our real struggle is not so much with what God does, it's with who we think God is. With his character. Feeling neglected, forgotten, ignored, punished, rejected by God - these are character questions. And the assurance we need to move forward in the Christian life, comes not from knowing exactly how God is going to act in our lives, but that whatever he does or doesn't do, it's in love. And often it's only through suffering, that we come to learn that more deeply. Eventually.

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So, Naomi has had a fresh revelation of God's love. And she is willing to take another risk in faith. And it plays out beautifully. And it's a reminder (perhaps a necessary one at this point) that God does outrageously wonderful things in our lives. He does! And it's not wrong to expect good things from God. I mean, it's not our business to be prescribing God's plans for us or anyone else, but he does have plans for us. I'm not sure we say that enough in evangelical circles, for fear of it being misunderstood - but God has a plan for your life and mine. And it is consistent with his character, so it is good, and it's born of his love.

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Now, I want to be careful not to underplay Ruth's role in all this. After all, from v. 6 onwards in this chapter, she and Boaz are at the centre of the action! And Ruth follows Naomi's instructions to a tee. And her character shines. With dignity and care she places herself in the way of Boaz, late at night, on the threshing floor - it is a pretty odd Jewish custom (let's be honest).

But the idea here, is that this is the clear signal to Boaz, that Ruth wants him to exercise his right as kinsman redeemer - to marry her, so that she (and by extension, Naomi too) will come under his protection and care, and so be restored to a full and fruitful life again in Israel. For Ruth, this is her opportunity

for security and acceptance among Naomi's people. And for Naomi, this really means redemption from a life of disappointment and dishonor, and (maybe) the end of her bitterness.

It's a bold move. And a move made in faith. And Boaz does not disappoint. After his initial surprise at seeing Ruth curled up at the end of his bed (understandably!), he commends her (v. 10) for her loyalty to Naomi. For their plight is well-known to Boaz. And he knows that Ruth had other options here, but she honours her promises to Naomi.

And I don't think it's being too 'Hollywood' to detect some romantic tension in this text. I think Boaz is *very* impressed with Ruth here, and possibly quite excited about the prospect of marrying her. But he does everything right. Honours Ruth in how he handles the moment, and honours Jewish law and tradition, by deferring first to the closer relative.

And there's a sign too, for Naomi here - when Boaz sends Ruth home to her mother-in-law with a cloak full of barley. Remember, back in chapter one, when Naomi declared (v. 19): "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara (which means 'bitter'). For the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty."

And now this cloak full of barley, this gift from Boaz - for Naomi, it's a sign. It's like a pledge. That the days of her emptiness are over. She will be full again. In many ways, I think, she already is. The great turning point in Naomi's faith has already happened. Her confidence is in the love of her Lord.

Naomi's life has been hard. Unexpectedly hard. And the pain of her years in Moab will not be forgotten. And she can see that God is doing a new thing now, an exceptionally wonderful thing, through Ruth and Boaz - but God himself has not changed. Naomi will never solve the mystery of God's providence completely, but she knows that he can be trusted - yesterday, today and forever. And that fullness she longs for, is found in knowing and trusting him.

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Well the chapter ends, as far as the story is concerned, unresolved. Redemption has been pledged but not yet realised. And there is the small matter of that

somewhat inconvenient closer relative to be dealt with. So, we are left waiting (with Ruth and Naomi) for fulfillment.

And when it comes to trusting in God's providence, there are times to act in faith (like Ruth going to the threshing floor), and then there are times to wait in faith. And often it's the waiting, that we actually find the more challenging. But on this occasion, Naomi and Ruth don't have to wait very long - unless, of course, you count all those years of struggle.

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Friends, in the final assessment, this book is not ultimately about Ruth, or Naomi, or Boaz. It's about Jesus - that's going to become very clear next week, in the final chapter. This remarkable, confronting, deeply moving story of redemption, was written on the pages of history, and has been preserved for us in Scripture, to point us to the infinitely greater work of redemption that God would eventually do in Jesus Christ.

Our threshing-floor moment (if you like), when your redemption and mine hung in the balance (or so it seemed) - has already happened. It happened when Jesus went to the cross, and laid down his life, as a willing sacrifice for our sin, to redeem us back into the family of God.

And here's the thing - it wasn't really in the balance. Because it was the sovereign will of God that his Son should die and rise again for us, and the loving providence of God that accomplished it.

Do you believe that? That it was God's deep love for *you*, that sent Jesus to the cross? Because to know that, is also to know (and trust) that that same love, that drove Jesus to the cross, is just as surely at work in your life right now, in all the details, in a thousand ways. Do you know that?

Friends, following Jesus guarantees no one a pain free life. But it does guarantee that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It's true, God can lead us through some pretty dark and painful valleys, but never has he left us or forsaken us. That's the promise, and the reality, for every redeemed child of God. We may feel like the exception, for a time, or a season, but we're not. God does not neglect or abandon his children.

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I want to close by reading a poem. It's a poem that I wrote recently, inspired by the book of Ruth. If you saw the welcome sheet this week (in email), you might have read it already. It's my take on the book of Ruth, but through the eyes of Naomi. And it kind of captures a lot of what I've been trying to say in this talk (in a lot less words) – and it will help to set the scene (I hope) for next week, when we conclude our series. So here it is.

Call Me Mara

**The meaning of Mara is "bitter" (see Ruth 1:20)*

If I'd known, I never would have gone.
Fleeing famine seemed fair, even faithful.
Is not your desire for your people to be full?

Perhaps it *was* in fear we left for Moab
and false hope we could evade famine's long arm.
It matters not now. All is lost.

Call me Mara.

Returning empty, embarrassed, exposed.
A widow for all to see, and to whisper, "She should never have gone!"
The only dignity left for me now is to own my plight.

Call me Mara.

The one surprise in all of this is Ruth.
A foreign woman in the prime of life, caught up in a Hebrew tragedy.
Why she refuses to let me go, I do not know.
"I will cling to you," she says. Or is it my God she clings to?
Strange to feel some pride in the midst of this despair.

Still, call me Mara.

Yes, I am grateful for Ruth. And for the barley harvest.
Signs that God may not have abandoned us to utter ruin.

Then one day, as divine luck would have it, my dear Ruth meets Boaz.
A kinsman redeemer, gentle, with oh such generous wings!
At last my eyes can see the providential hand of the Lord.
Faintly at first, but true, as my bitterness is betrayed by grace.

What is this mystery of divine providence,
that wounds one day and comforts the next?

One thing I've learned is that you cannot flee the providence of God,
but nor can you evade the long arm of his redemption.

My friends, the severe mercy of God should never be sought,

but sometimes, it seems, we must be emptied for hope to be re-born.
It's true too, that hope from the ashes is the last kind of hope,
and most to be prized. Because the Lord himself is its author.

I now see the loving purposes of God in the eyes of a baby.
My miracle grandson. And it is enough.
Yet somehow I know, nursing this precious one,
that this is just a foretaste of a greater redemption to come.

I am Naomi. Call me blessed.