



Ruth

Ruth 1:1-17

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As the Advent season draws us nearer to the manger, we wait in holy expectation for the birth of Christ. In these weeks of waiting, which lead us to the celebration of Christ, we are invited to consider why it is God becomes incarnate, why God gifts us the birth of a Savior, and what about us as God's created necessitated that God might enter the world in such a vulnerable state while proclaiming such glory and power.

In this season of Advent, we are looking at some of the most vulnerable of Christ's family tree to understand better the reason for Christ – the proclamation of good news in the gift of Christ. In the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, 41 generations of Jesus' ancestors are named dating back to Abraham. In such a patriarchal heritage, the genealogy follows the lineage of the men in the family tree. Yet, five times in the historical catalog, the woman of the family is named. The past two Sundays, we learned about Tamar and Rahab. This morning, we are learning from and about Ruth.

Ruth is markedly different than Tamar and Rahab. The first two women named in Jesus' genealogy are given just one chapter of introduction and story in the books of Genesis and Joshua. Ruth, on the other hand, is given her own book – 80 verses over 4 chapters – to tell her story. One might think that the extended narrative warrants Ruth greater appreciation and affirmation in the Biblical narrative. However, even as I was reading from additional sources to learn about Ruth this week, I found there are some scholars who argue the book of Ruth is more about her mother-in-law Naomi than Ruth, herself.

So let us consider this morning, who is this woman, and what weight does she carry in Jesus' genealogical listing that may help us prepare for the birth of Christ in this Advent season?

Even before we get into the book of Ruth, we need just a little bit of Biblical context to understand the world into which Ruth is introduced. In the order of the Biblical text, the book of Ruth is printed just after the book of Judges. As the book of Judges is ending, we find the narrative to have as a central concern the longevity and continuity of the tribe of Benjamin – one of the 12 tribes of Israel. There is an expressed concern that the tribe of Benjamin will be blotted out because there are no women left within the tribe. However, the rest of the Israelites refuse to give their daughters into marriage with a Benjaminite to further their line, saying "Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin."

Since there are no Israelite women for them to marry, the men of Benjamin are instructed to go and lay wait in a vineyard in a region north of Bethel, outside of Judah, and to abduct and take as wives the women of Shiloh. ... yep. That's exactly what they did. The text reads, "They took wives for each of them from the dancers whom they abducted."

(For those keeping track, marrying a woman you have abducted from another ethnic group is among the list of acceptable marriage practices according to the Biblical text.)

This is the world into which we find Ruth introduced. Following Judges, our text this morning gives the details of Ruth's arrival.

There was a man named Elimelech who lived with his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion in the city of Bethlehem. It just so happens that there was a famine in the land, an ironic detail for Elimelech and his family from Bethlehem, given the city's name in Hebrew means "house of bread." There was no bread in the "house of bread."

To ensure his family's well-being, Elimelech uprooted the family from their home in Judah and moved to the country of Moab. We don't know for sure, but we must assume that there was more food stability in Moab at the time than in Bethlehem – or anywhere else in Judah. See, Moab is a region that is considered perverse and is shunned by the people of Israel. "This move is problematic: Moab is associated with hostility and sexual perversity."¹ The only reason Elimelech would have moved his Israelite family to Moab is out of sheer desperation.

After settling in the region of Moab, Elimelech dies. Naomi is left widowed, living with her two sons. The sons marry women from Moab. The text writes, "they *took* Moabite wives."

The verb "to take" is often used to define how marriages were arranged in the Bible – the men of the scriptural text are often defined as having "taken" wives. However, coming on the heels of Judges 21 where the Benjaminites took wives from the women they abducted, the verb has a bit ickier of a feel. And yes, in the original Hebrew text, the same verb is used both in Ruth and in Judges 21.

The two Moabite women who were taken as wives are Orpah and Ruth. After 10 years of marriage, Mahlon and Chilion – Naomi's two sons – both die. While not naming this explicitly, the text implies that the wives have no children. So Naomi, who is widowed, is now living with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, who are also both widowed. These three women, though connected with each other, have become quite vulnerable to the world. With no husbands and no sons, these women – in the cultural context of the ancient near east world – have no provider or security left.

Word makes its way to Naomi that Bethlehem, the area in which she so long ago called home, is no longer facing the food scarcity that had caused the family to move to Moab some 10 or more years earlier. Having no husband or sons left to provide for her, Naomi makes the decision to move back home. Perhaps, she must be thinking, some of our family back home will offer care for me.

As she begins the journey home, Orpah and Ruth are traveling with her. There is an indication that they will return to live with Naomi back in the land of Judah. The cultural expectations of the time regarding the situation these women find themselves in are a bit unclear. Naomi had been living in Moab – would they now be following Moabite customs regarding marriage and remarriage? Or, given that Naomi is a member of the people of Israel, and that the daughters-in-law married two men of Israel, is the

expectation that they would have followed the customs of Israel? It's unclear what would have been culturally appropriate.

What is clear is that, as they are making their trek back to Bethlehem, Naomi decides that these two Moabite women shouldn't go with her. Remember, the Moabites are a detested people by Israel. Is Naomi's motive in telling these two Moabite women to return to their families to offer support and love to her daughters-in-law, genuinely caring for the future well-being of the two? Or is her motive self-centered? Is she worried about her own protection, being unsure how she will be treated back home if she were to return with Moabite women who had been married to her sons? There would have likely been some significant shame associated with such a branch on the family tree.

Without knowing the motive behind the decision, three times Naomi encourages – even insists – that the daughters-in-law go home. Orpah agrees to return home after the second invitation. But Ruth refuses; she offers a monologue that has become a popular wedding scripture. “Where you go, I will go;” Ruth says. “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.”

Her pledge is a total abdication of her own people. It's a very counter-cultural statement of commitment. Made from a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law, Ruth's promise “challenges the “us versus them” categories that make people feel secure in their identity.”ⁱⁱ For all of the flack we give “in-laws” in our society today, usually offering jester-like statements that abdicate relationship with the “other half” of the family, Ruth's proclamation not only professes her commitment to her mother-in-law, it declares that she is leaving her own people *all together*. She's willing to give up on her ethnic and religious identity to go with Naomi.

Try preaching that sermon at a wedding. As if it isn't hard enough for a parent to see their “baby” all grown up, try making the statement in the wedding homily that the couple is completely abdicating their family's heritage in making their marital vows. That's one way to lose an invitation to the reception.

Yet, while Ruth seems willing to give up her connection and claim to the people of Moab, the scripture will not be so quick to affirm such a change in identity. Throughout the rest of Ruth's narrative, we will be continually reminded that Ruth is a Moabite. And, unlike Tamar and Rahab the past two weeks, Ruth never offers a statement of faith – she never utters a profession of belief in the God of Israel. In fact, the only time we see God named in the book of Ruth is in chapter 4, where it is affirmed that the Lord allowed Ruth to conceive a child. For someone who says “your people and your God will be mine,” she doesn't do much to validate that promise.

Having arrived back in Judah, Naomi and Ruth found little support from the community. Ruth had to glean from the fields, relying on the leftovers of the local community just to provide for her and her mother-in-law. Whatever hope Naomi may have had for security from the extended family back home seems lost. Perhaps she was not mistaken when insisting that these Moabite women not return home with her – perhaps the community did not welcome her as they may have had she not returned with a Moabite carrying the family name.

And, should there be any question, we know Naomi has family in the area, for the property on which Ruth has found herself gleaning is that of Boaz, who is defined as a “kinsman.” Boaz is related through Naomi’s deceased husband, Elimelech.

Naomi helps guide Ruth into a relationship with their kinsman Boaz. Such a relationship not only provides security for Ruth, it may also provide a family heir for Naomi, offering Naomi security that she has no other way of procuring. Boaz learns that Ruth is a Moabite; the text refuses to give up her ethnic identity. And, though there would have been cultural expectations of avoiding her because of her being a Moabite, Boaz finds great compassion for Ruth in witnessing her compassion for Naomi.

As we move into chapter 4 of Ruth’s narrative, through some shady patriarchal under-the-table dealing, Boaz “acquires” Ruth the Moabite and all the land that had previously belonged to Elimelech. Boaz becomes the heir of Elimelech, offering the security for which Naomi had moved back home. And Ruth becomes Boaz’s property, and he takes her as his wife.

Ruth bore a son, and his name was Obed. Obed had a son, whose name was Jesse. And Jesse had a son, who becomes the King: King David. Ruth is King David’s grandmother.

These women of Jesus’ genealogy offer some complicating stories in the Savior’s family tree. They are complicating because they challenge the simplicity and ease of which we try to approach the manger. I think for many of us, certainly myself included, we look to Christmas to be a clean and easy reminder of a simplified vision of God’s love. We like to decorate with Christmas trees and lights that lift up our spirits. We like to share at the table with family and friends, reminding ourselves of the love of community. We like to share in the tradition of passing gifts, because ... well, we like gifts. We like stuff. We like receiving tokens of one another’s familial affection.

But in the lead up to the birth of Jesus, Matthew is trying to catch our attention. In the naming of these five women in Jesus’ genealogy, Matthew is trying to help us understand the gift we are receiving in the incarnate One. Jesus’ birth is not some simplified reminder of God’s love for just me or just you. Jesus’ birth is a statement of what God desires for the whole of humanity and creation. So, let’s consider what Ruth has to offer us in this season of expectation.

First, Ruth’s dedication to the family, to her mother-in-law, is a powerful statement of commitment. Ruth was willing to give up her cultural identity to be a part of the story of God’s people. But ... and don’t miss this ... the scripture won’t let her. Ruth doesn’t become an Israelite. Ruth is welcomed into the lineage of Christ as a Moabite – as a people who had been shunned by Israel. The scripture does not let her give up her people, and yet she is still very much a part of God’s people.

We do a lot to try to exclude and “other” people in the world today. Ruth’s story is a reminder that Jesus does not come to change our cultural or ethnic identities. Jesus doesn’t come to try and make everyone more white or right. Jesus comes to proclaim God’s love and grace, God’s expansive inclusion to all people.

And Ruth's witness should call into question the way we generalize about others. We often try to make it easy for ourselves, giving ourselves permission to dismiss others because they check off certain boxes – be it the car or motorcycle they drive, their arm sleeve of tattoos, their hair color, their housing status, their skin colors ... whatever it may be that our implicit bias tries to convince us is “wrong” or “dirty.” But the advent of Christ challenges us by shedding light on our unconscious biases, helping us see that God is able to work in, through, and with any of us, using for God's purpose even those the world would condemn.

This is the work of Advent, to help us see why God would need to send Christ into the world. We are a broken and messy people in need of one to exemplify God's love and to shed light of the darkness that lies even within us.

Finally, Ruth's story invites us to challenge the broken structures of society. Christ does not just come to redeem us, individually, Christ's presence is proclamation of God's redeeming work in the collective world. The story of Ruth is one that highlights the brokenness of the patriarchal society which relegated Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah to begging. Naomi thinks that she has no worth – she is past child-bearing age, and has no husband or son. And yet, it is her involvement in the story that leads Ruth to marry Boaz, and to continue the family tree that would give life to Jesus. The story declares that God determines our worth, not cultural stigmas.

Jesus comes to redeem our brokenness, to be truth in a world that is driven by lies, to be love in a world that is filled with hate, and to bring peace in a world that seems to thrive on division. The preparation we make for Christmas, along with decking the halls with boughs of holly, is calling out the places in need of redemption and reconciliation for which Christ comes. We give thanks for Ruth and her witness as a part of Jesus' story. May she accompany us to the manger. Amen.

ⁱ Amy Jill Levine. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

ⁱⁱ Tom Fuerst. *Underdogs and Outsiders, A Bible Study on the Untold Stories of Advent*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.