

Faithfulness

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz

Text: The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth has been placed between the Book of Judges and the Books of Samuel in the Old Testament. The period between the 12th and 10th centuries BCE was a time of great lawlessness. There was no monarchy. Judges or leaders sprang up from among the people to maintain law and order within the community. The story of Ruth begins with a reference to this period and ends with a reference to the established monarchy of David.

God's voice is not heard throughout the Book. Nor does God intervene in any of the events. Yet the presence of God permeates the whole story. The faithfulness of God and the faithfulness between those in the story are important to the resolution of events in the story.

Who were Naomi, Ruth and Boaz?

Scholars now attribute the original story to be one used by professional story-tellers in Israel. It is probable that a story-teller resembling Naomi used this story to illustrate the preservation of family while including a foreigner within family. The final verses in the Book refer to Ruth as becoming an ancestor of King David. There is no evidence to show that she became a citizen of Israel once she married Boaz. Her name is included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5-6).

Retelling the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz: What follows is a retelling based on the Biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Naomi reflects:

I was happy living in Bethlehem with my husband, Elimelech, from the tribe of Ephrath, and our two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. However when famine gripped our land, Elimelech decided that we would move to another country where there would be food and work. When he said that we were going to Moab I couldn't believe it! How could he forget that Moab was the land of our enemy? They hated us and we hated them.

Why, even the teaching of the Law says clearly that "... no Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation..."(Deuteronomy 23:3). So why were we trying to seek asylum in a land that would be hostile to us? I followed my husband into this foreign land with a great deal of anxiety.

Surprisingly, we began to settle down. My husband died and I was left to care for my two sons. I realized that I was losing my identity, since I could no longer be called the wife of Elimelech. Now I had no name. Most people referred to me as 'the woman' (1: 1-5) It wasn't long before my sons decided to marry two Moabite girls: Ruth and Orpah.

Tragedy struck again! Mahlon and Chilion died. Neither Orpah nor Ruth had produced sons. In my culture a woman derived her identity through her father, her husband or her son. And here we were – three widows and not a male in the family. Those were dark days. I grew bitter and angry with YHWH my God. We came here as a family and now I was left with nothing because God did not give me any grandsons. I grieved and grew bitter with each passing day. Then I heard that the famine had ended and decided to return to my place of birth – Bethlehem.

I advised Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers' houses. Both girls refused to leave me. As we walked, I tried again to convince them to return to their mothers' houses. I called on my God to bless them and reward them for their kindness, faithfulness and caring for my family. There was nothing more I could give them. Still they continued to stay by me. But I persisted till Orpah finally gave in. She turned and walked back to Moab, while Ruth continued to cling to me. As I watched Orpah leave I remember praying that God would be kinder to her than he had been to me. (1:7-14).

Now I was left with Ruth: loyal, courageous, beautiful and stubborn! I tried again to convince her to return to her home. Instead she made a declaration of loyalty to me that left me speechless. It was a commitment made by one woman to another, one widow to another, a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law. She pleaded with me not to reject her. When she pledged that my people would be her people, did she realize how hard it would be for my people to accept a woman from a hostile ethnic community? When she pledged loyalty to my God, did she realize that no Moabite was permitted to enter our place of worship? When she claimed that she would be buried where I was buried, did she believe that she would stay with me till I died? More importantly what would the people of Bethlehem think of me when I returned with a woman from Moab at my side? (1: 15-18).

PAUSE. Reflect on Naomi's bitterness towards God.

Can you identify with her feelings?

Reflect on Ruth and Orpah's faithfulness to Naomi.

How important is faithfulness in personal and community relationships in a church?

My worst fears were realized when we arrived at the gates into Bethlehem. A group of people were gathered there and no one recognized me. Finally a few women asked "Is this Naomi?" With bitterness I replied, "Call me Naomi no longer. Call me Mara for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full but the LORD has brought me back empty." [1:20]. No one had spoken to Ruth. No one asked who she was. She was ignored almost as though she were invisible.

Life settled down after that. Ruth and I made a home together. Ruth surprised me again by deciding to be the wage earner for us. A foreigner with no skills, no status in our community and yet she decided to take control of our situation. Since I had a good idea as to who the landowners were, I suggested that she try to get work in the fields that belonged to a man named Boaz. The choice of Boaz had other implications for us. He was a relative of my dead husband and I hoped that maybe he would notice Ruth and realize that she was my daughter-in-law. (Ch. 2).

Ruth behaved well. She stayed with the women in the field until Boaz noticed her. The reapers identified her as Ruth the Moabite who had returned with Naomi, the wife of Elimelech. Again Ruth was identified as the outsider. Perhaps it was the family connection that led to Boaz being kind to her and making sure that she was protected from the young men working in the field. When Ruth had thanked him for his kindness to her, he had said that he honoured her for the care and kindness she had shown to me and for leaving her parents and her land of birth to find protection from the God of Israel. (ch. 2). At the end of the day Ruth brought home a large quantity of grain left over in the field.

When Ruth shared the day's events with me, I knew I had made the right decision to send her to the fields of Boaz. I explained to her then that Boaz was my next of kin – the closest relative I had from my husband's family. The next step was to devise a plan to draw Boaz's attention to the obligation he had to me as a widow of Elimelech. I was pleased when Ruth responded positively to my plan to find a way to seduce Boaz! Ruth followed my instructions. (3:1-5). She put on her best clothes and anointed herself and set off for the threshing floor in Boaz' field. I had instructed her to wait till he had finished his evening meal and was lying down to sleep. Then she was to uncover his feet and lie down by him.

I found it hard to sleep that night. I felt that the greatest risk would be when Boaz found Ruth lying at his feet. He could reject her for two reasons: one, because of her foreign status and two, because there was another man who was a closer relative to us than Boaz. However Ruth was wise. When he had become aware of the presence of a young woman at his feet, he had asked, "Who are you?". She had replied, "I am Ruth, your servant. I am your next of kin" (3:9). Boaz did not reject Ruth. He accepted her for who she was. She spent the night with him and in the morning slipped away before the workers arrived at the field. Boaz made sure she had more food to bring home to me.

I heard Ruth's footsteps outside our door even before she knocked. I remember calling out, "Who are you, my daughter?". I needed to know quickly if the plan had worked. Was she still my daughter or was she going to be the wife of Boaz?

PAUSE. Reflect: Was Naomi justified in using Ruth and her sexuality as a means to find security for herself and Ruth?

Everything fell into place as Boaz acted quickly. He met with the other near-relative in the presence of ten elders. After discussion and negotiation, Boaz was given the right to be our 'redeemer'. (ch. 4). He now had the right to take care of us because he was now the owner of all the property that belonged to my dead husband and my two dead sons. The elders who were present then blessed Boaz and asked that the LORD bless Ruth so that she may have children who would bring a blessing to the tribe of Ephrath.

Finally God was being good to me! We had a protector who would care for us. God then gave Ruth and Boaz a son. What a day of celebration that was! I was so proud of Ruth, who had walked with me from a time of grief and sorrow to a time of security and joy. As we celebrated the birth of my grandson, the women of Bethlehem came together to name the child. They named him Obed. Then, they came to me and placed Obed in my arms and declared that a son was born to me - Naomi! (4:13ff) For a minute I thought they had made a mistake. Obed was Ruth's son, not mine. But they did acknowledge Ruth when they blessed her for being of more value than seven sons.(4: 7-17).

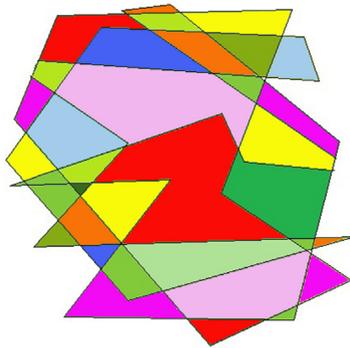
As I listened to the women, I realised that through all these events, God was also being vindicated. I had come back home blaming God for my predicament. But God had been faithful to me. God had never intervened openly during my long journey. God had not spoken directly to me, as he had done to many of my ancestors. But now God's name was finally vindicated. What more could I ask for?

REFLECTION

Is this a “woman’s book”, or is it a story of the survival of two women in a patriarchal family line? It was Boaz and the male elders who gave Ruth the legitimacy to claim her place in the history of Israel.

Reflect on times when you become aware of God’s faithfulness, especially if initially you may not have been aware of God’s presence.

Should we share stories of God’s faithfulness with migrants, refugees, the homeless, the poor, and those who feel that they are the outsiders in our society?



When my day gets fragmented, God,
may I see you in the colours of each day that speak to me
of your faithful presence.