

Ruth 1:1-22 NLT
God in our Suffering
WRCoB 6.7.2020

What do you do when life comes crashing in around you?

You develop physical disabilities that limit what you can do
And your otherwise independent life
Becomes very dependent on others?

You lose your job and have no way to support yourself
And the bills keep coming in
And you don't know which way to turn?

A lifetime mate dies and you are alone.

You lose a child
A friend
A dream.

What happens when you feel you've had all you can handle
And can't imagine it could ever get worse
And another tragedy lifts its ugly head?

And you ask yourself where is God in all of this?

This is the story of Ruth.

A story of how a young, foreign, widowed woman
The lowest rung on the ladder of hierarchical society
Overcame an oppressive, segregated
And racist culture

By not letting it define who she was
And using the system not only to her advantage
But for God's ultimate plan of redemption.

We begin

1

Ruth 1 (NLT) In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a severe famine came upon the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and two sons with him.
2 The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. And when they reached Moab, they settled there.

~~

Chronologically, the Book of Ruth is located

Between the Book of Judges and the Book of 1 Samuel.

The story takes place during the time
Before kings ruled Israel.

The timeframe is somewhere between 1200 and 1100 BCE
Roughly 3200 years ago.

It was a time of war and conquest.

When the new nation of Israel

Coming out of 40 years in the wilderness

Fought for place in the land of Canaan.

Elimelech, his wife, and two sons

Were forced from their home because of hunger.

They emigrated to Moab, hostile territory for an Israelite.

Moab refused permission for the Hebrew people

To pass through their land on their way to Canaan.

It must have been a touch call, a last resort

For Elimelech and Naomi to move there.

~~

Here was the first tragedy
Leaving their home to live as refugees
In a foreign country.

Our Scripture Lesson states “they settled there,”
For how many years . . . we don’t know.

2

³Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. ^{4a}The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth.

~~

Again, tragedy strikes.

Naomi’s husband dies and leaves her and her two sons.

Certainly the loss of her husband was painful.

But she still had Mahlon and Killion.

And with the prospect her sons marry
It gave Naomi some consolation
That she would become a grandmother.

However, disappointment continued
For neither son had children.

3

^{4b}But about ten years later, ⁵both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her two sons or her husband.

~~

Once more, tragedy strikes
Leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth as widows.

For Naomi, being a widow in a foreign land
Was as helpless a situation
A woman would want to be in.

4⁶ Then Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland. ⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she set out from the place where she had been living, and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah.

~~

When you have no place else to go
What do you do?

You go home.

What was in Moab anyway
Except three stones marking the graves
Of her husband and two sons?

5

⁸ But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back to your mothers’ homes. And may the LORD reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. ⁹ May the LORD bless you with the security of another marriage.” Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept.

6

¹⁰ “No,” they said. “We want to go with you to your people.”

7

¹¹ But Naomi replied, “Why should you go on with me? Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? ¹² No, my daughters, return to your parents’ homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? ¹³ Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD himself has raised his fist against me.”

Naomi told Orpah and Ruth to go back.

They were still young and had a chance for some kind of life.

To Naomi, following her to Judah was not an option.

What could they do?

Find husbands? Probably not.

Who would marry a Moabite?

A life?

A life begging in the streets, maybe.

And so in despair

Naomi turned back her only loved ones still alive.

Standing on that road

Naomi said her anguished goodbye.

8

¹⁴ And again they wept together, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth clung tightly to Naomi. ¹⁵ “Look,” Naomi said to her, “your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same.”

9

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, “Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!”

10

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more. ^{19a} So the two of them continued on their journey.

What a powerful scene!

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye
Obediently listened to her command
And turned and went back the way she came.

But Ruth would not let Naomi go.

“Don’t ask me to leave you because I won’t.”

Few vows of devotion compare to Ruth’s
On the road to Bethlehem.

11

^{19b} When they came to Bethlehem, the entire town was excited by their arrival. “Is it really Naomi?” the women asked.

12

²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi,” she responded. “Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the LORD has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?”

13

²² So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by her daughter-in-law Ruth, the young Moabite woman. They arrived in Bethlehem in late spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest.

~~

Looking closely at the words of Naomi
We can certainly feel her despair.

And why not? For all she’s been through.

And it may seem she’s a bit self-absorbed
What with the “woe is me” language.

But who wouldn’t be?

It is difficult if not impossible
To see through one's own tragedies
And see that others suffer too.

Naomi leaves Judah full of promise
And comes back a broken woman.

No home, no close relatives
No way to make a living
Completely dependent on the mercy of others.

Naomi, in her grief and despair
Sees nothing else
Not even Ruth who, too, has experienced loss.

Naomi and Ruth, two broken widows

A mother and daughter-in-law
Consumed in their suffering
Standing at the brink of an unknown future.

We will leave them there in Bethlehem.

God has not forsaken them.

~~

And so I ask, why is the story of Ruth so important?

Why did they include this folksy story in the Bible?

Is it just a story of inspiration?

A small window we can look through
To see what life was like in 1200 BCE?

Certainly, it is that.

But it's more.

~~

It is a story of the bond between two women.

A bond that is not restricted by nationality, race or culture.

A bond that rises above the typical mother-in-law
Daughter-in-law troubles and difficulties.

A bond created by common tragedies in their lives.

It is a story of Ruth's vows of devotion
To her mother-in-law, Naomi
To Naomi's people
And to Naomi's God.

It is then, too, a story of a religious conversion.

It is a heartwarming story of love and devotion
In the midst of tragedy and despair.

It is in the Bible, in part
For the inspiration it may offer
Others who experience tragedy.

~~

It is also a story that on the surface
Doesn't appear to be of great historical significance.

But as we will see later on
Ruth plays a huge part in the history of Israel
And even greater part in the history of humanity.

And it is only in looking forward several generations,
That we begin to see God's handiwork.

~~

It may be, as in the story of Naomi and Ruth
We see only tragedy and despair
And feel the absence of God in our suffering

And only later from the vantage point of hindsight vision
We view the overarching plans of God unfolding.

~~

And so in your own despair
When in the midst of suffering loss and tragedy

When you're tempted to ask where God is in all of it
Look around you . . .

Maybe God has placed a Ruth in your midst
Who stands by you through those dark times
And declares

"Don't ask me to leave you . . .
Where you go, I will go
Where you live, I will live.

Your people will be my people
And your God will be my God."

~~

And it is my prayer, too, that perhaps later on
Maybe years from now

We might look back and see God in our suffering,
And might see how he has used us
For the building of his kingdom.

To God be the Glory!