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Ruth 1:1-22
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I Will Follow

On March 13, 1913, in Philadelphia Pennsylvania, a twenty year old Italian man disembarked the S.S. Ancona from Naples, Italy to begin a new life in America. He left behind his pregnant wife, fleeing famine and extreme poverty in his home country. He didn't want to leave. In fact, he'd rather stay. But feeding his family took president over his wants. After he had settled and earned enough money, he would later send for his wife and young son.

It took six years until he finally met his son for the first time.

When you are hungry and desperate, you will do anything just to put food on the table.

That man was my great grandfather, Angelo Montovino.

Our scripture today comes from the Book of Ruth which takes place in Judah where a man named Elimelek also took his wife and two sons to live in a foreign country because there was famine in the land. They left Bethlehem which means "house of bread" because there was no bread in the house. Interesting play on words.

They went to a place called Moab where they made themselves at home among these foreign people. Elimelek's two sons, Mahlon and Kilion met and married Moabite women. They had planned to be there for awhile, until tragedy struck, and God rearranged their plans.

Please join me as we read this story for ourselves from Ruth 1:1-22.

1 There was a time when Israel didn't have kings to rule over them. But they had leaders to help them. This is a story about some things that happened during that time. There wasn't enough food in the land of Judah. So a man went to live for a while in the country of Moab. He was from Bethlehem in Judah. His wife and two sons went with him. **2** The man's name was Elimelek. His wife's name was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites whose home had been in Bethlehem in Judah. They went to Moab and lived there.

3 Naomi's husband Elimelek died. So she was left with her two sons. **4** They married women from Moab. One was named Orpah. The other was named Ruth. Naomi's family lived in Moab for about ten years. **5** Then Mahlon and Kilion also died. So Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 While Naomi was in Moab, she heard that the Lord had helped his people. He had begun to provide food for them again. So Naomi and her two daughters-in-

law prepared to go from Moab back to her home. **7** She left the place where she had been living. Her daughters-in-law went with her. They started out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

8 Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Both of you go back. Each of you go to your own mother’s home. You were kind to your husbands, who have died. You have also been kind to me. So may the Lord be just as kind to you. **9** May the Lord help each of you find rest in the home of another husband.”

Then she kissed them goodbye. They broke down and wept loudly. **10** They said to her, “We’ll go back to your people with you.”

11 But Naomi said, “Go home, my daughters. Why would you want to come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who could become your husbands?

12 Go home, my daughters. I’m too old to have another husband. Suppose I thought there was still some hope for me. Suppose I married a man tonight. And later I had sons by him. **13** Would you wait until they grew up? Would you stay single until you could marry them? No, my daughters. My life is more bitter than yours. The Lord’s power has turned against me!”

14 When they heard that, they broke down and wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. But Ruth held on to her.

15 “Look,” said Naomi. “Your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

16 But Ruth replied, “Don’t try to make me leave you and go back. Where you go I’ll go. Where you stay I’ll stay. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. **17** Where you die I’ll die. And there my body will be buried. I won’t let even death separate you from me. If I do, may the Lord punish me greatly.” **18** Naomi realized that Ruth had made up her mind to go with her. So she stopped trying to make her go back.

19 The two women continued on their way. At last they arrived in Bethlehem. The whole town was stirred up because of them. The women in the town asked, “Can this possibly be Naomi?”

20 “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara. The Mighty One has made my life very bitter. **21** I was full when I went away. But the Lord has brought me back empty. So why are you calling me Naomi? The Lord has made me suffer. The Mighty One has brought trouble on me.”

22 So Naomi returned from Moab. Ruth, her daughter-in-law from Moab, came with her. They arrived in Bethlehem just when people were beginning to harvest the barley.

Prayer of Illumination. Let us pray.

People crossing international borders to flee violence, extreme poverty and famine is not new. Before there were ever national borders, immigration officials,

or walls to keep people out, people did what they had to do to survive. It was no different back then as it is today. We may not agree with the politics surrounding the issue of immigration. That's ok. But what we cannot compromise on is how we are to act as Jesus followers toward people in such dire straits.

This morning, I invite us to put ourselves into Naomi and Ruth's shoes. To imagine what it would be like to be so desperate that you felt compelled to leave a land that you loved and escape to a foreign place where you could feel more safe and save your family from starvation. We will look at Naomi and Ruth's situation at more in-depth. We will hear more about their character and what led them to do what they had to do. And finally, we will ask what is God trying to say to us today.

So first, let's talk about Naomi and Ruth. Truth be told, little is said about them.

Naomi was from Bethlehem which was a city in the land of Judah, just a couple of miles south of Jerusalem, on the west side of the Dead Sea. People from Bethlehem worshipped the God of Israel or YHWH. We also know Bethlehem as the birthplace of David and later of Jesus. Naomi, her husband, and two sons left Bethlehem for Moab because of a famine. After being in Moab for some time, Naomi's two sons married women from Moab, Ruth and Orpah.

Moab was a flourishing kingdom just east of the Dead Sea. Moabites were part of a pagan nation which means that they did not worship YHWH but instead worshipped many pagan gods, including Moloch. Its priests were known to be powerful and cruel, practicing child sacrifices. In the Book of Numbers, God chastised the Israelites for intermarrying with the Moabites because of their pagan worship and sexual immorality.¹ Moab means seed of the father or coming from the father. This is an important fact to tuck away when we later talk about Ruth and her significance in our family tree of faith.

We are told that Naomi's husband Elimelech died as did her two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. This left Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah widowed with no rights, property ownership, or ability to fend for themselves. They were completely vulnerable and destitute. So when famine hit Moab and Naomi had heard that Bethlehem had food, they were forced to leave Moab and return to Naomi's home in Bethlehem hoping to find someone kind enough to care for them.

Naomi was so desperate that she encouraged both daughters-in-law to return home to Moab and find new husbands who might be able to take care of them. There was still time for them to have a decent life. But for Naomi, her options of remarrying were over. Orpah accepted the offer. But Ruth chose to remain at Naomi's side, for better or for worse, for thick or thin, until death parted them.

¹ Numbers 25:1-9

Verse 20 gives us some insight into the depth of Naomi's despair. When she finally arrived in Bethlehem and people recognized who she was they said, "Can this be Naomi?"

Naomi responded, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." Naomi completely lost sight of who she was in the shadow of her extreme poverty. Poverty is such a dehumanizing experience. People avoid you. They don't help you. They just wish you would go away. Perhaps in the same way that people wish asylum seekers at our country's borders today would also just go away.

Have you ever felt this way before? Where you were at a place where you had lost all confidence in yourself or in your ability to take care of yourself? Have you ever had to rely on the utter kindness of strangers, family, friends, or perhaps the church to help provide for your daily needs? Naomi did. God saw her and took care of her. Well guess what? God sees you. You are not invisible. You have a name. You have value. And God loves you. In fact God might be working behind the scenes in ways that you have no idea just yet to rescue you out of the slimy pit you're stuck in. It may just not be as evident yet.

Whatever we do, let's not isolate ourselves like Naomi tried to do. We need to lock arms with those who are around us. We need to remind ourselves of the promises of God who said he would never leave nor forsake us. We need to take hold of the truth that its often at rock bottom where God tends to do some of his most impressive work.

God was with Naomi through the unwavering commitment of her Moabite daughter-in-law who would not leave her side come what may. In fact, the chapter closes with what I think is some very important information about what would happen next. Look at verse 22.

"So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was just beginning."

The barley harvest was just beginning. The fact that there was even a harvest in the land was promising enough. At least there would be food. But this was also a sign of something new, a new beginning, a fresh start, not the end of her journey as Naomi had imagined. As we would soon see in the next chapter, Ruth meets Boaz, a distant relative of Elimelech from Bethlehem who would take her and Naomi into his home as part of his family and care for them.

Now skip forward to the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1. We see that Boaz's mother was Rahab the famous prostitute from Jericho. Boaz married Ruth, the Moabite, and together they had Jesse, who was the father of King David. And David is the kingpin of Jesus' family tree. "Fourteen generations in all from

Abraham to David, fourteen from David to exile in Babylon, and fourteen from exile to the Christ.”² What God began in Bethlehem generations before with Naomi and Ruth and Boaz, God finished in Bethlehem with the birth of Jesus Christ many generations later.

Pretty awesome isn't it?

So what then does this show us about God and what God might be saying to us today?

Firstly, the end for us, might just be the beginning for God.

The Apostle Paul understood this when he quoted the Prophet Isaiah to the Corinthians. “No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”³

Paul uses the Greek word for Agapato to describe those who love God. But the Hebrew in Isaiah implies a much different wording. The word used is not Agapato but Chakah which means to tarry long, to wait for a long time, to be patient. So really it should read, “No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who wait on him.” This kind of waiting is active, not passive. An active waiting waits with hope of how God is going to come through. That is how we are to love God as we are waiting for what is to come next.

So coming to the end of ourselves, might just be the beginning of something awesome that God is going to start next. Lets hold fast to that hope.

Second, Naomi praised Ruth and Orpah for their kindness with how they treated their mother-in-law. And we see how that kindness is rewarded with kindness in return by Boaz showing kindness to Ruth and making her his wife.

Jesus said, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”⁴

The world knows this as The Golden Rule which is the principle of treating others as one would want to be treated by them. It is sometimes called an ethics of reciprocity, meaning that you should reciprocate to others how you would like them to treat you (not necessarily how they actually treat you).

Imagine if we took this to heart in today’s political culture? Imagine if instead of name calling, making up lies, and saying nasty things about our opponents, we treated them with love, respect, and kindness as we discussed our positions...even in our disagreements. How might that change the way we do politics? You see, what goes around, truly comes around.

² Matthew 1:17

³ 1 Corinthians 2:9 where Paul quotes Isaiah 64:4

⁴ Luke 6:31

And finally, I think Boaz' gracious and generous treatment of these two asylum seekers shows us something of God's heart toward those arriving at our American borders today, especially those who are orphans and widows.

In fact God commanded the Israelites in Deuteronomy to care for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow by leaving some of their harvest in the field for them to glean. The reason God gave, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you do this."⁵

In the same way, James the brother of Jesus said, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Notice that God does not qualify them as only being from within our country. It just says orphans and widows!

So what then is God saying to us today?

When we come to the end of ourselves, just wait... God might just be about to bring something exciting. A new beginning.

Be kind to everyone we meet, especially those who might be foreign or in opposition to us. Treat others the same way we want to be treated. This applies just as much to adults as it does to kindergarteners.

And finally, look at the boarder crisis with God's eyes, and God's heart, not the king's narrow vision that calls for isolation and protectionism.

So may we be excited about what God is going to do next. May we not be polluted by the world's way of doing politics. And may we look at all people as created in the image of God, worthy of love, respect, and kindness.

Amen!

⁵ Deuteronomy 24:19-22