

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024

## Ruth 1; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 “We Can’t Go Alone”

That big ol’ passage we read from the Book of Ruth? That is a foundational story in the Bible. I like it because I know these people. In my 33 years of ministry in the Christian Church, I’ve run into them many times. I imagine you know them too – folks who have been forced to move away from the place they call home because of circumstances beyond their control. In Ruth and Naomi’s time, it was a famine that drove Naomi’s family out of Judah into Moab. Here in Butte County, it’s been the Camp Fire or the Dixie Fire or the Park Fire that’s been responsible for driving people out of their homes to settle in unfamiliar places. Then there are the folks who fled from one of these fires only to settle in a place that was threatened or destroyed by *another* wildfire. Some people just can’t seem to catch a break. Their lives seem like a series of tragic events that makes them wonder, “Does God have it out for me? Is it too much for me to expect just a *little* break now and then?” So yes, I know Naomi, and so do you. Naomi is the person who tragedy seems to follow. Naomi’s family was driven from their home in the town of Bethlehem in Judah into a land of strangers who worshipped unfamiliar gods and where most of her biological relatives died leaving her with only two daughters-in-law – Ruth and Orpah. Eventually Naomi learned that the famine back in Judah ended, so she decided to return home. She figured it would be better to be a poor widow in her hometown of Bethlehem than in Moab. Her daughters-in-law started the journey with her, but then Naomi said, “You all go back to your families. You are *citizens* of Moab. You don’t need to follow an old widow-lady to a place where you’ll be considered strangers. You’ve seen enough loss and grief. Moab is your home. You’ve got family there who will take care of you. Just let me go home and be miserable by myself. Go on now ... git.” Of course, there was a lot of crying and grief because even though these two young women weren’t biologically related to Naomi, they were emotionally bonded to her. Orpah finally went back home as Naomi asked, but Ruth had different plans. She was stubborn and wasn’t

about to let go of this poor woman who would face the many hardships of being a widow in those days. She said, “No. I’m going with you.” Naomi tried to play the “I refuse to be a burden to you” card on Ruth, but that wasn’t going to work.

Ruth said, “Listen, you don’t get to tell me that I have to leave you. You don’t get to tell me who my family is or isn’t. You don’t get to tell me to quit following you. Where you go, I will go; where you settle is where I’ll settle; your people will be my people, and your God will my God. In fact, where you die, I will die— and I’ll be buried there. ‘Til death do us part.” Stubborn, aren’t they? Again, I know these people. So do you. We’ve seen this story played out many times and in many ways. Someone who is feeling lonely and isolated, but doesn’t want to be a burden on anyone, decides to withdraw and face their problems alone. They isolate and push people away. And then a loved one who is dedicated to sharing their loved one’s burden says, “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Now, this scenario doesn’t play out this way every time. In fact, more often than not, people choose the path of Orpah. They’ll say, “Fine. If you don’t want my help, then I’m not going to push myself on you. I’m not happy about it, but this is your choice, not mine.” And I’m not saying her choice was wrong. Orpah loved Naomi. She was weeping too. She indicated that she didn’t want Naomi to go alone, but when Naomi said, “Go on, git,” Orpah said, “Fine. If this is what you want, this is what I’ll do.” Ruth could have also said, “Have a good trip. Be safe. We’ll miss you, but we understand why you want to go back to your homeland.” There’s nothing wrong with that response. Why should they feel obligated to go back to Judah with this woman who isn’t even their mother. All they’ve ever known was Moab. They are Moabite women. Yes, their husbands had dual citizenship, but their citizenship ... their cultural identity was in Moab. We think, “Yeah, that sounds reasonable.” However, for Orpah and Ruth to both want to go back to Bethlehem with Naomi is exceptional. But for Ruth to *insist* that Naomi shouldn’t make this journey alone is extraordinary. And this is why the

Book of Ruth is such an important part of the story of God's people. Ruth and Naomi's story is extraordinary.

Last week we mentioned that it's appropriate that Advent season starts before the winter solstice. Before we celebrate the birth of the one who is called the "Light of the World," we've got another 13 days of the nights getting progressively darker until this year's solstice on December 21<sup>st</sup>. Then we've got to wait another three days after that before we have our candlelight service over at First Baptist. When the nights grow longer it sometimes feels like there's this weight on us. Some people feel a little stir-crazy as we wait for the world to thaw out. That's what a lot of folks felt like during the pandemic – especially during the winter months. The Spring and Summer were okay because we could get outside and enjoy the sunshine. But the winters were more difficult because we were sheltered in place. That's why Advent season is so important. It's the season where we can affirm this ancient truth – We were never meant to walk these paths alone. That's the lesson of Ruth. Naomi was hurting. She even re-named herself "Mara" which means "bitter." She was overcome with loss and grief. She believed that she was out of favor with God. She was determined to suffer alone. But Ruth chose to stay by Naomi's side. Ruth's choice wasn't just about devotion. It marked the formation of a new family that wasn't built on DNA, but by kinship and daring to believe that our lives are better lived in connection with others.

Sorrow can make us shrink into ourselves and believe that solitude is safer than the vulnerability of connection. When the weight of loneliness makes us feel forgotten to the point where we wonder if our place in this world even matters, it's easy to get sucked up into a cascade of lies. We start thinking that we're the only ones carrying the weight of loneliness. We start thinking that we are the only one on the outside looking in. And it snowballs into other struggles like inadequacy, insecurity, and insignificance. Vivek Murthy, our current Surgeon General once called loneliness an epidemic. He said loneliness not only hurts us on an individual level, but negatively impacts society as a whole. Feelings of

isolation hurt our mental and physical health. A study that Dr. Murthy led in 2023 showed that loneliness can take the same toll on our bodies as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. We are better together. Dr. Murthy says that if we fail to address this, we will, “pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being, and we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country.” As the text from Ecclesiastes that Kevin read reminds us – “Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil.” If one falls, someone else is there to pick us up.

Okay, this is all good and well pastor, but this is Advent. What does this have to do with anything? Glad you asked. Ruth and Naomi’s journey to Bethlehem mirrors another future trek to the same town by Mary and Joseph. Both journeys are pilgrimages of faith. Both hold discomfort and uncertainty, yet the travelers take it on together. This kinship between Ruth and Naomi echoes through the lineage of Jesus himself, because Ruth, a woman who embodied the strength of connection over isolation, is named among Jesus’ ancestors. We are not alone because others who have gone on before us and will go on after us have learned this lesson too. Turn to your neighbor and say, “You are not alone.”

Let’s remember that for some, there’s a shadow side to this season where we have all these lights and bows and greenery. It can be a season filled with loneliness and grief for some and doesn’t feel *anything* like “the most wonderful time of the year.” But this season does offer ample opportunities for kinship and connection. It’s a time where we can reach out to those grieving. It’s a time where we can invite those who are lonely into our homes and hearts, and to show that in God’s family, no one has to face their sorrows alone. What would it look like to build deeper connections in this season? And I’m not talking about at holiday gatherings where we exchange pleasantries or gifts. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes reminds us that “Two are better than one ... for if they fall, one will lift up the other.” What if we were to build opportunities throughout the year for true human connection no matter the relationship or what season of life we’re in? You are not alone. In each other’s

companionship, may we find the reflection of the One who, in becoming flesh, chose to be with us, to share in our humanity, and to show us that we need each other.

**READER 1 (Jesse)** - In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. <sup>2</sup>The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. <sup>3</sup>But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, <sup>5</sup>both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

**READER 2 - (Nancy)** -Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup>So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.’ Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. <sup>10</sup>They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’ <sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.’

**READER 3 – Mary** <sup>14</sup>Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said,

‘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.

<sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,

if even death parts me from you!’

<sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’ <sup>20</sup>She said to them,

‘Call me no longer Naomi,  
call me Mara,  
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

<sup>21</sup> I went away full,  
but the Lord has brought me back empty;  
why call me Naomi  
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,  
and the Almighty\* has brought calamity upon me?’

22 So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.