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The National Presbyterian Church

Two Mothers: Ruth and Naomi

Ruth 1:1-8, 15-18; Matthew 1:1-6

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Our second reading, the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, leads us from Abraham, through King David, to Jesus the Messiah. This list may not be the most scintillating passage of Scripture – but it is still Scripture, and it contains some fascinating names, including the names of three women who find themselves in Jesus' family tree – ancestors of Jesus, and ancestors of Israel's greatest king, David:

- Tamar (who disguised herself and pretended she was a prostitute – and through a liaison with her father-in-law, Judah, bore twin sons)
- Rahab (who was both a prostitute and a foreigner, but who helped Joshua and the tribes of Israel enter the city of Jericho)
- And Ruth. Now Ruth was a nice person. If the other two women might be characters whom you'd like to omit from your family tree, Ruth was one to keep in – except that she, like Rahab, was a foreigner . . . and it's her story, recorded in the book that bears her name, that I'd like to share with you this morning.

Her story, and the story of her mother-in-law, Naomi, is set in history at about 1050 years before the birth of Christ, but in all likelihood, the story was probably told by word of mouth, without being written down, for some 500-600 years before ending up in written form. Scholars surmise this to be the case because the language in which the book of Ruth itself was written is the language which comes from the period of about 450-500 B.C., whereas the story itself is set in a period 500 years earlier. That is, just as we would read a translation of the bible and can tell easily that it is a new 20th or 21st century version, or we read the King James version and say "wow that is old, it must have been written hundreds of years ago," so scholars looking at the ancient Hebrew can tell what is more recent and what is more ancient; and they draw the conclusion that though the book of Ruth tells a story that comes from about 1,000 BC, it doesn't seem to have been written down until 500-600 years later. And then they begin to ask *why this might be*, and one of the reasons, perhaps the main reason, *has to do*

with what was going on in ancient Israel, not 1,000 years before Christ, but around 500 years before the birth of Christ, at a time when the people of ancient Israel had recently been in exile in Babylon.

At that later time, their nation had experienced defeat. They had been carried off to Babylon, and now after many years, they had come back to their land, and a number of things were happening when they came back to their land that would lead someone to say, "Ah, that old story about Ruth and Naomi has something to say to these people and it's time for me to write this down so that people can remember and retain the message."

So, what was going on in the land around 400-500 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ? Well, people were regrouping. They were trying to rebuild Jerusalem. They were trying to rebuild the nation after 70, 80 or 90 years of desolation. In order to do this, they had to hang in together. But, by "hanging in together" and becoming a cohesive group, they also became exclusionary, and their prejudice began to rise against other people who were not in their group; racial prejudice against those who were not Jewish, and religious prejudice against those who did not share their faith in the God of ancient Israel. And that became a problem. And the problem was not just racial or religious, there were also problems relating to gender, and to a general feeling of cynicism. This was a period of time when women were being put down: all the heroes were men and the women were not being valued at all. And then as the years went by, a widespread cynicism settled in.

You see, when the people came back from exile, they came with huge enthusiasm and huge faith to rebuild the holy city, the city of Jerusalem. They set about it with an enormous will and enormous strength wanting to be faithful and obedient to the living God, and they believed that they would see the reward of their labors soon, that they would see their reward quickly. But the days went by, and the months went by, and the years went by, and here it was just this normal city, not a holy city it seemed; just a normal temple, not a massive wonderful temple being rebuilt (read the book of Haggai!) and they began to say to themselves, "*What good is it being good?*" What value is it being faithful to God? We have given ourselves to this project and we see very little fruit for our labor (read the book of Malachi!). So, many people became cynical and that is the background, I believe, to the writing down of the story of Ruth told for 500 years or more by word of mouth until a story teller decided to write it down, as if to say to the people around about him,

"Do you remember this story that was told from generation to generation?"

And the people would say, "*No, don't remember it!*"

"You don't? Well, let me take you back to King David, the greatest king of Israel. Do we all agree that he was the greatest king of Israel?"

The people would say, "*Yes.*"

"Well, do you have any clue as to who his great grandmother was or his great-great grandmother?"

And they would say, *“No, we have no clue at all. What do these women have to do with anything anyway?”*

“Well, let me tell you. But, before I tell you the story, let me ask one other thing. Do you know that our greatest king, King David, his great grandmother was not Jewish at all but she was a Moabite woman?”

And you could almost hear the people saying, *“Oh no! Surely not a Moabite! Not Jewish? Someone from another faith?”*

“That is exactly the case,” the storyteller would say. *“Let me tell you the story.”*

And the people would settle down to listen . . .

The story begins with a woman, Naomi and her husband, Elimelech. They grew up in the village, as it would have been at that time, of Bethlehem, which is about five miles south of Jerusalem, and they lived there when famine struck the land. Just as famine had struck the land hundreds of years before, and the people of ancient Israel, the descendants of Abraham, had gone to Egypt, a foreign land, to find food in time of famine, so Naomi and Elimelech decided that they needed to leave their country and to go to another land, the land of Moab, to find food for themselves and for their two boys, Chilion and Mahlon.

They headed out across the Dead Sea, about 50 miles away, to the land of Moab. Only 50 miles – but it was like going to another planet: they were among another people, worshiping another God. But they settled down there, and God it seemed, provided for them. The two boys grew, and married local, Moabite women, one called Orpah, and the other, Ruth. Indeed, everything went well until death struck. Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, suddenly died, leaving her with the two sons and their wives. One could easily have surmised, with Elimelech’s death, that God was not happy with the family – and the thought might have been confirmed when not long afterwards, their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, themselves died. They had married, and now had left behind, two widows and a mother who was a widow as well.

Naomi, at that point, could have thrown up her hands in the air and wallowed in grief and self-pity but she didn’t do that. She picked herself up and she made a decision to take action. No matter what the people back in Bethlehem might say “about fleeing Bethlehem when the going got tough,” or “inter-marrying with Moabite women,” she was going to return there, and she headed off on her way.

In those days, as in some cultures today, the relationship between a mother-in-law and the daughters-in-law was extremely close and the daughters-in-law immediately set out with their mother-in-law to head back to Bethlehem. But Naomi was a person with enormous faith, grace and integrity, and she turned to those daughters-in-law, those Moabite women, and she said to them, “Now listen. You do not need to come with me. You need to say here. In fact,

you need to go back to your mothers. You are young. You can re-marry. You can have children of your own. Stay here and do not come with me.” And Orpah, one of the daughters-in-law agreed: with weeping, she left Naomi. But Ruth would not leave Naomi. Instead, Ruth turned to Naomi and made a promise – a covenant obligation of steadfast love – the kind of promise that God makes to you and me, on which our lives depend; the kind of covenant that we make in a marriage ceremony, so that we sometimes find Ruth’s words spoken at a wedding. Ruth, the daughter-in-law, grieving herself, turns to her grieving mother-in-law and says to her,

“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. Your God shall be my God.
Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried
and may the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well
if even death parts me from you.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

And when Naomi saw that Ruth was committed, she headed on her way and she brought Ruth with her to Bethlehem.

There in Bethlehem, the grief began to hit home with Naomi. What she had been holding in began to burst out. She found her friends – and the good news was that her friends had not rejected her. It had been a risk to come back to them, but they had not rejected her for leaving or for allowing her boys to marry those foreign women. And so there, in the midst of her friends, Naomi’s tears began to flow, and she said to them,

“My name should really not be Naomi. It should be Mara (or Mary), which means “bitter,” for I left here and I had everything. I had my husband and I had my two sons and now I return to you and I have nothing. I have absolutely nothing.”

That’s how she felt in her heart, but, of course, it wasn’t really true, was it? She had something. She had *someone*: Ruth. She had her daughter-in-law, who, her friends later on would say, was “more to her than seven sons” could possibly be (Ruth 4:15). She had that one person, and that one person had the power to change Naomi’s life.

Think back on your lives for a moment or two to those turning points in your life when you moved forward, when perhaps you were stuck at some place in your life, and think of those people in your lives who made a difference. For some of us, there may be lots of people, but for others of us we can think of one person or two, just a few people who at critical junctures in our lives said something to us, touched our lives, comforted our lives, challenged our lives – and it made all the difference in the world.

And, surely God longs not only for us to be blessed by such people, but for us *to be that person, to be that gift*, for somebody else.

Some of you may be familiar with Dr. Ben Carson, director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins since 1984. He’s African American, and

grew up in the ghetto. His autobiography is dedicated to his mother, to whom he attributes his success – and his escape. In fact, some studies indicate that the single greatest difference between those who grow up in the ghetto and stay there, and those who grow up in the ghetto and manage to leave, the single biggest difference is a person, usually a mother or a grandmother, who will not quit on a child, who refuses to quit on a child and whose impact on that life is simply enormous.

Well, Naomi thought she had nothing, but the truth was that she had everything she needed: she had Ruth. And once they arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth set to work to care for Naomi. Ruth, *a foreigner* in a strange land; Ruth, far from anything she had ever know; Ruth, *grieving* for her own husband; Ruth, *childless*, with no prospect of marrying any of the local people at all, -- and here she was now, the bread-winner, and the only thing that she could do to earn a living for herself and her mother-in-law was to work outdoors in the blistering heat of the Judean sun in the fields around Bethlehem, picking up grain.

There was a law of the land, which was, in fact, the “social security law” of ancient Israel. The law stated that when the farmers were reaping their harvest, they were not to reap to the very edges of the field, but they were to leave a portion of their harvest for the widows and for orphans and for immigrants; what grain was left lying, they were not to go back and pick up (Lev. 23:22; Deut 24:19-21): they were to leave it for people in need. It was the social security law of the land at that time.

And so, Ruth went to work in the fields in the blistering heat, picking up the grain, the leftovers as it were, to provide for herself and for her mother-in-law. And she did this without complaining. There was no complaint in her life at all, even though as she went, she knew that this might be her way of life from that moment on and forever, that this might be as far as she would come in life, day after day after day. There was no complaining in Ruth. She had made her promise. She had made her commitment. She loved the person for whom she was doing this, and she did it with all of her heart.

I don't know if any of you saw some years (1996) ago a movie called “Marvin's Room.” It is one of my favorite movies. If you want to see Leonardo Dicaprio as a teenager, this is the movie to go back to (it also stars Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, and Robert DeNiro). It's a movie about two sisters, one of whom, Bessie, has no husband or children, but who spends her life caring for her father in Florida. His name is Marvin, and he is confined to his room; and she also cares for an aunt, who is slightly strange(!), and her name just happens to be Ruth. Bessie spends her life caring for her father, while her sister, whose name is Lee, has gone to New York to “find herself,” and finds,

instead, all kinds of chaos and confusion. Nothing works out for her. She gets married. She has two boys who are now unruly teenagers. She gets divorced. Everything is going wrong. She is all caught up in herself and cannot escape.

Well, in this story, Bessie, the one caring for her father, discovers that she has leukemia, and it seems as if what little life of her own that she has had will soon be taken away: as if she has no life at all. The only people who might provide a match in blood are her sister and her sons in New York. She begs them to come back to have a blood test to see if there is a match, but her sister, Lee, doesn't want to do that at first – though she finally agrees, and brings her boys down to Florida. Much of the movie concerns these two sisters, poles apart in personality and life-experience, discussing their different lives; and part of the movie is about the effect of the experience of changing environment on the lives of the boys.

In time, their blood is tested, and they find along the way that there is no match. It looks as if Bessie, who has spent her life caring for her father and her Aunt Ruth, is going to die. It's a poignant moment in the movie. The two sisters are in the kitchen together. There are lots of pills on the counter and as they are talking a hand moves over and knocks over some of the pills so that they fall to the ground. The two sisters go down to pick up the pills together and their eyes meet. Bessie, the one whose life has been "stuck," caring for her father, Marvin, and her Aunt Ruth, turns and she looks at this sister who has left home to find her life in the big city. And she says this: "I have been so lucky. I have been so lucky," says Bessie who has leukemia "to have had Dad and Ruth in my life. I have had such love within my life. I look back. I have had such love within my life." And Lee doesn't know what to say. Any emotional relationship is hard for her, and she blurts out these words. She says, "Well, they have loved you very much."

And Bessie says, "No. No, that's not what I mean, *not that I have been loved*. No, I mean that *I* have been able to love them. I have been so lucky to have someone to love so much as father and Aunt Ruth, day after day, week and week, month after month."

I think that's what Ruth was like! She was that kind of person – who went to Judah, to Bethlehem, that foreign land, and into a place of hard labor, and day after day counted it not a task that she resented but something she could do as an act of love. For all she knew, she would have to do this from that moment on and forever.

What *we* know (we who have read the whole story!) is that in the end she didn't have to do it forever. Just as Ruth was a gift to Naomi, so God brought a gift into Ruth's life and that gift was a person, in this case a man. The

field in which she was reaping the grain happened to belong to this very man, by the name of Boaz, who noticed this stranger at the edge of his field and asked his farm laborers, "Who is that woman?" And replied as if to say,

"Well, don't you know? She is Naomi's daughter-in-law, Naomi who came back from Moab. She is the Moabite woman who came back with her and she has been working here tirelessly from the beginning of the day all the way through now without a single break." (2: 6-7)

And Boaz turns to them and says to them, "Take care of her. Make sure if she steps into the field itself that you do not push her away. Make sure you drop plenty of grain for her to pick up and make sure that she is protected from anyone who would harm her."

And he finds Ruth and he speaks to her and he says, "*May the Lord reward you for your deeds and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.*" (2:11-12)

And God did reward Ruth. When the harvest came to an end, Naomi told Ruth about a second law in the land. Not just the law of gleaning where she could find food to eat, but the law that was called Levirate marriage, an ancient law which said that in order to preserve a family name, if a husband died without a child, then the next of kin needed to marry the widow in order to have a child – so that their name would be preserved for all posterity: the person doing this was called a 'redeemer.' Unknown to Ruth, Boaz was a relative of Naomi and of Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband. So, Naomi told Ruth,

"Boaz is our closest of kin. You need to go to him and propose that he 'redeem you' – effectively propose marriage to him!! At the end of the harvest, on the last day, go and sleep where he is sleeping. Early in the morning, when nobody can see you, tell him who you are and about the kinship. And see if he will not be a husband to you, a redeemer for you, one who will redeem your life and our name from generation to generation."

And Ruth did this, and Boaz said he would fulfill this role as redeemer. But he, like Ruth and Naomi, was a person of integrity. He would not cut corners. He would not take the lives of others cheaply. Just as Naomi had been honest and faithful and true with her daughters-in-law even if it cost her dearly, saying, "Go home. Live your lives"; and just as Ruth had fulfilled her vow and her commitment even though it was painful to take care of her mother-in-law, so Boaz said, "I cannot marry you until I have double-checked, because there is a relative who is closer than I, and if he wants to marry you, then he has that first right, that first choice." And Boaz does his work, shows his faithfulness to God, finds out who this relative is, asks him the question, and affirms that this other relative does not want to marry Ruth. So the door is now open. Everything has been done right. It has been done well, and the door is open for their marriage.

The story ends with Ruth and Boaz marrying and having a child. The final picture is of Naomi with her friends once again, their relationship restored, not in bitterness anymore, but carrying in her arms her grandson, whom we know to be the great grandfather of King David.

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Bless be the Lord who has not left you this day without next of kin and may his name be renowned in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has born him." And Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse. (4:13-16)

And so the storyteller would conclude the story by turning to those who are listening and say to them,

"Do you see what happened? Do you see what happened when people were faithful to God even though they could not see the reward for that faithfulness immediately? Oh, yes, there was some reward there, but the greatest reward came when they were all dead and gone – with the birth of King David as the response to their faithfulness. Do you see what God can do with women as well as men who are faithful to God? These two women are at the heart of this story. Do you see what God did with somebody who is not one of us, a Moabite woman of all people, who came to faith and trust in the living God, who realized that God would care for her?

Well, surely, God has not changed? Surely God still uses and blesses people just like that, to this very day! – Faithful to us whoever we are, just as He was faithful to Ruth and Naomi.

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