

## Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

### Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: July 2, 2023 Year A, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Using "I've been Meaning to Ask" resources from *A Sanctified Art* (Week 4 of 4)

Text: Ruth 1:1-22

Title: "I've been meaning to ask. . . where do we go from here?"

Focus: **From Sanctified Art:** "We believe courageous conversations have the power to change and transform us. We believe God bridges connections in unexpected ways. We commit to continuing the conversation."

### First Reading Ruth 1:1-22

<sup>1</sup>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 the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup>both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

<sup>6</sup>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 considered 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." <sup>14</sup>Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>19</sup>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?"

<sup>22</sup>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.

### **The Story of Naomi and Ruth Reflects each Weekly Theme of I've been meaning to ask. . ."**

<sup>1</sup>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.

**In the first week, we asked ". . . where are you from?"** and we acknowledged that our identity is shaped by our birth family and others who have raised us and by the places we have called home.

- Elimelech and his wife Naomi were from Bethlehem in the region of Judah. They had sons named Mahlon and Chilion.
- They are Ephrathites—People who are from *Ephrath*, another name for Bethlehem. It means *fruitful*, while Bethlehem means *house of bread*. It is ironic that they must leave a place called *fruitful* and *house of bread* because of a famine. These place names indicate the region was typically a place of plenty.
- Because of a famine in the land, they left Bethlehem and Judah for Moab. Moab was east of them in Judah—on the other side of the Dead Sea. Because of a

history of tension between the people of Israel and Moab, the move indicates their desperation; they would not have otherwise been inclined to go.<sup>1</sup>

- To describe their relocation in terms we are accustomed to hearing, we could say that they left because of *food insecurity* or *to seek economic opportunity* or *to provide a future for themselves and their children*. We could even call them *refugees*, for they sought refuge from famine.
- Mahon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpah, who were both from Moab.

In my family story, my Grandma and Grandpa Trevithick did what Elimelech and Naomi did—they relocated to seek refuge from economic hardship.

“In the days when the Great Economic Depression ruled, there was hardship in the land, and a certain man of Egan in Moody County in South Dakota loaded up a car and a beat-up pickup truck and drove to live in Long Beach, California, he and his wife and infant son and father-in-law. The name of the man was Lloyd Merrill Trevithick and the name of his wife Bernice. The son was called Ronnie and father-in-law Webster. They went to the land of Long Beach and remained there.”

**In week two, we asked, “Where does it hurt?”** and we acknowledged that we all have experienced pain and loss in our lives. **What are the losses that Elimelech and Naomi experience?**

- Elimelech and Naomi had to **say goodbye to their family and friends** and the places which were familiar to them.
  - **Being the New Kid in School was Hard:** I talked this week with someone who grew up in a family which relocated every three or so years because of a parent’s career path. Though it was beneficial on the one hand for the parent to progress in one’s field, for this daughter, it was difficult to grow up feeling like she was always the new kid in school.
- They had to brave **unknown and uncertainty** and make their way in a new place—Moab.<sup>2</sup>
- **Elimelech died:** Elimelech, the husband of Naomi died.
- As **Mahlon and Chilion** grew, they took Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. They lived there about 10 years and then both **Mahlon and Chilion also died**.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance comments on Ruth 1:1-22 at *Theology of Work Project*. <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/ruth-and-work/tragedy-strikes-the-family-of-ruth-and-naomi-ruth-11-22/>

<sup>2</sup> **Moab**, kingdom, ancient [Palestine](#). Located east of the [Dead Sea](#) in what is now west-central [Jordan](#), it was bounded by [Edom](#) and the land of the Amorites. The [Moabites](#) were closely related to the Israelites, and the two were frequently in conflict. (Britannica entry: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Moab-kingdom-ancient-Palestine>)

Besides mourning the losses of first her husband and then her two sons, these losses by their deaths meant she experienced other losses as well. Naomi's losses, in addition to the deaths of her husband and son, included **loss of security**. As a widow and now without sons, she was vulnerable and without protection. And Orpah and Ruth, widows themselves, faced the same vulnerability. They were three widows who had to support themselves without the legal and economic rights granted to men in their society. They had no husbands, no clear title to land, and no resources with which to make a living. Naomi was a foreigner living in the land of Moab. And if Orpah and Ruth returned with her to Judah, they would have been outsiders there.

**For Naomi**, her loss of security as a widow also brought another loss; Naomi determined that she would go back to Judah—that may have been okay, but the hard part was that she would have to **say goodbye to her two daughters-in-law**. The three traveled together for a time (v. 7), but then Naomi urges them to go back to their own families (v. 8). She seeks God's **blessing for them**, that they would find security through a new husband from among their own people in Moab (v. 8).

She kisses them as a sign of this blessing and deep affection (she calls them *daughters* (vv. 10, 12)). Saying goodbye was painful for all of them and they wept aloud (2 times, see vv. 9, 14).

### **In week three of this series, we asked, “What do you need?”**

In week two, we acknowledged that we all experience loss and pain. We also recognized that sometimes people say or do things that aren't that helpful when we are in pain. The theme of **Week 3 urged us to hone in on that by engaging in honest conversations**.

- How do we respond to others during times of loss?
- Are others able to express what they need?
- Are we able to listen well or do we sometimes struggle—sometimes wanting to “fix things” or sometimes do we avoid even asking “What do you need?” because we're uncomfortable and we just avoid the direct conversation.

In this story, what do Naomi and Ruth need? Or Orpah, too—what does she need?

As we just talked about, **Naomi initiates this difficult conversation**. She determines that she needs to return to Judah. She recognizes that however painful it is to say goodbye to these beloved daughters-in-law, she gives them her blessing to return to their family homes so that they may find their own husbands.

**How does Orpah respond or what does she need?** They all weep together. I am sure she is heartbroken. She kisses her mother-in-law (v. 14) and then presumably returns to her family in Moab.

**And Ruth?** What does she need or how does she respond? I am sure she's torn as the circumstance is a dilemma with painful consequences no matter what you do. But Ruth will not allow Naomi to turn her away so that she can return to her family home.

She is just as determined as Naomi herself as been; "Ruth clung to her" (v. 14).

Here is the most well-known passage in the book of Ruth:

"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" (1:16).

What a beautiful crescendo to the story (or at least this point in the larger story.) It is a beautiful expression of devotion and love. . . of affection and fidelity in spite of the hardship. All three of these widows acknowledge their hardships and their losses—they would not be weeping if they didn't. They recognize their common loss of security.

There is nothing wrong with the choice that Orpah makes—she too recognizes these losses and bears the sadness represented by her tears. By returning home, she does just what Naomi has urged her to do.

**What does Ruth need?** Ruth's resolve is that she will cling to Naomi, that, as she declares,

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.

And then text summarizes Naomi's response: <sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

**Lastly, this week: Where do we go from here?**

In the story of Naomi and Ruth, the text says, "They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest" (v. 22).

Having left because of famine, this brief verse is an indicator of the hope in the story: Naomi has told the women who recognize her that she is bitter and empty (vv. 20, 21), but it is also true that she has faithful Ruth right beside her and the harvest is

coming. There is the fatigue of grief in her voice (**or bitterness**, as she calls it when she names herself Mara, which means bitter).

It sounds as though she blames God, saying “the Lord has brought me back empty” and has “dealt harshly” with her (v. 21), but I think that’s the lament of her fatigue or weariness speaking and that she will discover the hope that is still with her.

### **Where do we go from here?**

I asked the people in the Tuesday Bible Study, “Where’s the Good News in this story?”

- One person heard Naomi renaming herself Mara, which means bitter (v. 20). But she also saw this as a sign of Naomi’s strength, as in her resolve.
- Elaine said the good news of the story is the **mutual expression of love**: Naomi to Ruth and Ruth to Naomi.
- Mary-Claire echoed that, describing the relationship as “We’re in this together” or “We’re not alone.” And she described an event in her own life in which a nurse assured her, “Don’t worry; we will not leave you alone,” which sounds like Ruth’s assurance to Naomi.

### **Where do we go from here? How about these affirmations to guide us:**

- We recognize that we all experience pain and loss.
- Sometimes when we are in pain, people say things that aren’t helpful.
- Sometimes we do the same, despite good intentions by others or by ourselves. Let us respond with grace, extended to ourselves and to others.
- We seek to have courageous conversations: We seek to ask, “What do you need?” and we seek to listen well.
- We are inspired by the determination and devotion of Naomi and Ruth, which ultimately reflects the steadfast love of God (Hebrew: *hesed*)
- We intend to be people of faith and hope, seeking to trust that God is present with us no matter what we face, even when we, like Naomi, feel weary and empty.
- And, in the words of the creative friends from *A Sanctified Art*, “We believe that courageous conversations have the power to change and transform us. We believe God bridges connections in unexpected ways. We commit to continuing the conversation.” Thanks be to God.