

Today we dive in to the story of a woman named Naomi. It's found in the book of Ruth.

1 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.

Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, are part of God's people living in the town of Bethlehem. (Yes, it's the same town- but this is generations before Jesus.) The land is experiencing a famine and Elimelech decides to lead his family to a place where they can survive. He looks and he sees that the grass is literally greener in Moab. So even though God has promised to provide for His people and to fulfill His promises to them, Elimelech takes matters into his own hands and says, "We've got to get out of here." The family becomes foreigners in a strange land. They leave their community and families behind. They leave the people of God behind to live with the Moabites who do not worship the one true God. The famine was so bad, Elimelech just wanted to get out.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever been through a season where you were starving for something- you were desperate for something- and you didn't have time to wait for God to show up and be faithful? Maybe you're experiencing that right now and you're wondering, "When is He going to show?" Or maybe it's that you don't trust God to show up in that place of famine. That He will meet your needs. So you run to things, or relationships, or to refrigerators, or a substance, just to escape. Just to find something better. Anyone ever been there? I know that I've been there.

This was a big decision that Elimelech made for his family, and I'm not saying that he was a bad guy. I've been there too. But this was a huge deal, to move out of the land where they had community with God and with His people.

The family settles in Moab, and after some time Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. She's left there with her two sons. What we know is that Naomi loved her husband. She describes her life with her husband and her two sons as "full." But now that's gone. He's gone. And here she is in a foreign land with her two sons. The two boys grow up in Moab and they decide to marry Moabite women: one named Orpah (Not "Oprah" or they would have been totally set financially, forever.), and the other named Ruth.

Naomi's sons marry, and ten years go by, and not one, but both of Naomi's sons die. Naomi is left without her two sons and her husband. This is a woman who has experienced deep loss. Real tragedy. Her husband is gone. Her sons are now gone, and she looks around and realizes there is no one to take care of her. She is now a childless widow, living in a foreign land, and no one is going to take care of her there. She's also heard that God has been faithful back home in Israel. She knows that the famine has ended there. So Naomi says to herself, "I'm going to go back. I'm going to make my way back to my hometown of Bethlehem."

Her daughters-in-law, who are obviously grieving, say, "We're going to go back with you." But Naomi tells them, "Don't come with me. You'll be the foreigners in Israel. No one is going to marry you there. You're Moabite women and I'm too old to have any sons and even if I could, you're not going to wait to marry them." She says of all this to them. "This is crazy. It makes no sense. You just stay here. Stay here with your people and your gods and make a new life for yourself. I'm going by myself." And it says they all weep. Can you imagine? I picture them on the road and Naomi has her bags packed and she says, "I've got to go back. This is my only hope."

Her daughters-in-law are so close to her- their lives have all been touched by such tragedy and loss- so

they stand there and they weep together. They cry while Orpah decides to go back. But it says that Ruth clung to Naomi. She told her, "I'm coming with you." "Look," Naomi says, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Just go back with her!"

I don't know about you, but sometimes when I'm hurt or I'm grieving, I don't want to let anybody walk with me either. I just want to go alone. I want to push people away. I don't want to burden anyone or tell them how I really feel. I can relate to Naomi. That's how I've dealt with pain too.

But then these powerful words come from Ruth. (Ruth 1:16-17) *"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!"*

Those are powerful words, right? They're beautiful, really. Sometimes people have them read at weddings- sometimes the bride and groom will speak these words to each other, "Where you go, I will go and your people will be my people." If they were really used in context it would be the bride turning to her future mother-in-law and saying those things, but that's really never caught on. So no one does that.

The text says (1:18) *"When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more."*

So these two women start out on a journey together. It's a journey (from Moab to Bethlehem) that would have taken them, probably about a week. They're walking through some difficult terrain, and they have to cross rivers and go up steep hills, but they finally make it to Bethlehem. It's a small town- probably 200 people at the time. Everyone knows everyone. So, when these two women walk in, they're the talk of the town. "Who's that?" "Is that Naomi?" People start talking and one of the things you need to know is that Naomi's name means "pleasantness." But as these people start talking to her Naomi says, "Don't call me that anymore. Don't call me Naomi. Instead I want you to call me Mara." (Ruth 1:20) **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?"*

Naomi says, "Don't call me 'pleasant.' That's not who I am anymore. I'm bitter. My life used to be full but now it's empty." She's hurt. She's broken. She's honest about how she feels toward God- that He's the one who has afflicted her and abandoned her.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been that honest? Have you ever felt like that thing, that loss, that experience you went through, has actually become your identity? "It's who I am now."

God had not forgotten Naomi. They arrived in town just in time for the barley harvest. So Naomi tells Ruth, who is younger, to go out into the fields and walk behind the servants and pick up all the leftover grain so that they could survive. The grain will sustain them. This was a common practice in that time. It was a way for the poor and the widows in the community to be taken care of. They would walk behind the servants who were harvesting the grain and they were allowed to pick up everything that was left behind.

So Ruth does this and, as it turns out, she begins working in a field that belongs to Boaz who is from the clan of Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband. She just so happens to be working land that belongs to Naomi's extended family!

Have you ever had one of these moments? You're like, "This is crazy... We didn't even know that they were going to be there. I didn't even know who they were." Those words, "as it turns out," those are code words for, "God is up to something."

Boaz is actually a relative of Naomi's husband. He goes out to supervise his field and he notices Ruth, this foreign woman, who is obviously not from around here. He asks about her. "Who is she? What's her story?" And since it's such a small town, the story of Ruth and Naomi has already circulated. It's been the latest gossip at every hair salon in Bethlehem. Everyone is talking about these two women. So Boaz learns their story and he says, "That's so cool!" (I'm paraphrasing...) "That's really cool!"

Boaz goes to everyone else working the fields and he says, "These are my instructions: You leave her alone. Don't mess with her! Let her gather as much as she wants."

Then he goes to Ruth and he tells her, "Listen, you don't need to go to anyone else's field. You just keep coming here. I've spoken to my servants. It's all taken care of. You don't need to walk behind them and wait to take the leftovers. You just walk beside them and take what you need."

The text says, (2:10-12) **10** *"Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. 'What have I done to deserve such kindness?' she asked. 'I am only a foreigner.'* **11** *"Yes, I know," Boaz replied. "But I also know about everything you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. 12* *May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done."*

So Ruth keeps coming home to Naomi, every day, with more than enough. To this point, Naomi hasn't been sure that God even cares about her. She thinks He's forgotten all about her. But now, all of a sudden, they're being provided for with more than enough.

Naomi can't believe it. She starts asking questions. "Ruth, how are you doing this, exactly? Where is all of this grain coming from? Who's field are you working in, anyway?" Ruth answers, "I go to the same field every day. It belongs to this man named Boaz. I've found favor with him. He's the one taking care of us." And Naomi says, "Boaz? I haven't seen Boaz since all those years ago at Elimelech's cousin's wedding... He's related to us! He's one of our family redeemers." (That's going to be something important, and we'll talk about it in a moment.)

At this point in the story, we see that Naomi's hope is becoming renewed. She begins to trust God again. It's starting to grow again. Her emptiness is being filled. We see that she starts to pray again- to give thanks again. She expresses gratitude again and that's what happens when God is up to something.

So Naomi tells Ruth, "Hey, you keep doing what you're doing. Keep working that field and finding favor." And she does. And as time passes, Naomi says to Ruth, "Listen, I think all that's happening here might just result in you finding a husband. I've got a plan. Go ask Boaz if he will be our family redeemer."

This is a big deal. It's a big request. A family redeemer, or guardian redeemer as it says in some versions- kinsman redeemer (in some translations it's referred to as an Avenger- which I think is the coolest! He's an Avenger.), this was a relative who had the option of redeeming someone or something in the family. So, if someone was sold into slavery (which happened in that day), the family redeemer could show up and buy them back. Sometimes they were called upon to provide for the impoverished members of a family or to provide an heir.

In this case, when Elimelech and Naomi left Bethlehem to go to Moab, they forfeited a piece of land that is just sitting there. Naomi has no rights to the property anymore, but a family redeemer could go and buy back that land for her. Just one problem- there are some strings attached. Namely: Ruth.

In order to redeem the land and purchase it back for Naomi, it also meant that the family redeemer would have to marry Ruth and be responsible for her. This meant caring for her for the rest of her life, and not just her, but also her children and her children's kids, and any random family member that might just happen to show up from Moab someday. This was a huge request. This would be a sacrificial decision to redeem the land for these women.

So Ruth goes to Boaz and she humbly asks him to be their family redeemer. And Boaz actually wants to do it. The one obstacle is that there is another family member who is more closely related to Naomi, so he gets first dibs.

Boaz goes to this relative, he gathers a bunch of witnesses so it's public and he says, "Listen, you have first right of refusal. You have the right to be the family redeemer first and to buy back this land. Do you want to do it?" And the relative says, "Yes, I do want to do this." Then Boaz replies, "Well, you'll also have to marry this Moabite woman and take care of her." And the relative responds, "Oh! No. I do not want to do that!"

And Boaz says, "Yes! I get to do it. I get to be the Avenger." So Boaz married Ruth- she became his wife, and later the Lord enabled them to conceive and she gave birth to a son. In chapter four we read that after all this has happened, (4:14-17) **14** *Then the women of the town said to Naomi, "Praise the Lord, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel. 15 May he restore your youth and care for you in your old age. For he is the son of your daughter-in-law who loves you and has been better to you than seven sons!" 16 Naomi took the baby and cuddled him to her breast. And she cared for him as if he were her own. 17 The neighbor women said, "Now at last Naomi has a son again!" And they named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David.*

God redeemed Naomi's empty life. Her arms are now filled with a baby, a future, a hope wrapped in blankets. God has provided for her. There are friends there with her. She's got a daughter-in-law who loves her that they think is greater than seven sons. She's got a grandson, little Obed.

I want to push pause for just a second and draw out some things that really stand out about Naomi and Ruth- these two unlikely leaders. And they *are* leaders- not in the ways that we might obviously associate with leadership- but their support and encouragement for each other constitutes leadership nonetheless.

The first thing I see in these two women is courage. I'm not talking about a warrior cry- I'm unstoppable- kind of courage. That's not Ruth or Naomi. I'm talking about the kind of courage that it takes to make your way back to God in the midst of loss. That journey takes courage. Naomi and Ruth are both clearly grieving. Naomi is bitterly mourning the loss of her husband and her boys, but she still decides to make her way back to God. It's the only place she knows where there might be hope. The journey of making her way back to Him; of wanting to trust Him again; to see if He would be faithful to her again; to be in His presence again; around His people again; to believe Him again- she knew where she needed to go.

Naomi had been gone for a while, and maybe you have been too. It could be that something really difficult- really painful- either a circumstance you faced or a decision you've made is what has motivated you to even step into this building today. Maybe that's what's compelling you to take a step toward God for the first time, or the first time in a long time. That is a courageous step. You keep

walking. He will be there.

The other thing I see in Ruth and Naomi is the power of friendship. They are strong for each other. They help each other. Never underestimate the power of walking with one another through tragedy, or through grief, or through failure, or through relapse, or through confusion. We need people that will journey with us- that will cross those rivers with us- that will climb the steep hills with us- that will go through difficult terrain with us. We need to stop pushing people away to say, "No, I'm going alone. I've got this. I don't want to be a burden to you."

Reach out to a friend, or join one of our Journey Groups today, or stop and talk to one of our pastoral staff, show up at AA or NA for the first time, or the first time in a long time. Just let somebody journey with you. Don't do it alone.

And sometimes God will use what we've been through, or what we're going through right now, to be of support to someone else who is experiencing something similar. We don't have to be perfect to do this, or have it all figured out, we just have to be willing to say, "I'm not where I want to be, but I'm not where I used to be and I want to journey through this with you."

When my wife and I were grieving the loss of our little girl two years ago, just one month after mourning her loss I learned about someone from our church who had two very seriously ill daughters in the hospital- they were just clinging to life. There was a choice to be made at that time. Avoid contact at all costs- it's too close to home. It's too hard. Or step in- draw close, because they're walking through something that I've experienced too. God lead me to step in, in spite of my own hesitation. He ministered through me- even though I only wanted to run and hide. And when those two little girls went to be with God, He allowed me to be a support for that family in the midst of their grieving. My own experience with loss allowed me to relate to that family in a very powerful way.

You never know how God might use your life and your story to bring hope to someone else. That's the kind of unlikely leadership that we in the lives of Ruth and Naomi. That's my story. We need each other on this journey of life. We sometimes mistakenly separate ourselves into two categories: those who need help and those who give help- when in reality we are meant to be both. All of us can be a support, and each of us needs support. God wired us up to be both.

Grace is another thing I see in this story. When I look at Boaz, I mean from the moment he notices this foreign woman (out of place, no history with God), he just gives her grace. Undeserved kindness. He protects Ruth. He provides for her. He honors her. He respects her- which is so cool because he doesn't have to. He could have said, "Go find another field," but he doesn't.

I think one of the reasons that Boaz extends grace to her is because he has experienced something similar. You can read about the story of Boaz's mother, her name was Rahab, in the book of Joshua. Rahab had no history with God. She was a foreigner- a prostitute- and she is welcomed into and embraced by the family of God. And I'm guessing when your mother is welcomed and embraced into the family of God like that would mark you- and it would make you want to extend that type of grace any chance you get.

If you're walking in here for the first time today and all of this seems foreign to you- you don't really have history with God, or one that you'd like to talk about- if you think church people are weird, or have secret codes, or whatever it is- WELCOME! No secret handshakes here. No ceilings caving in on you. Here's the deal- everyone of us that would consider ourselves a follower of Christ has experienced a crazy, undeserved kindness from God- an acceptance that we did not earn- and we want to be a people that give that away any chance we get, right? Any chance we get!

And just to remind us all, that because we desperately need the grace of God every day, we don't get to say, "No, not you! Not that one! Not with that criminal record. Not with that reputation." NO! Instead we say, "Welcome to the family of God!" Just like Boaz did.

Psalm 68:6 says, "God places the lonely in families." I believe that He does that when we see people- and when we treat people- the way Boaz does with this lonely woman who showed up in his field. Like Mother Theresa once said, "The problem with the world is that we've drawn our family circle too small." We need to say, "Welcome!" There is grace for all of us here. There is family- there is room- for all of us here.

God used Naomi's courage to take those steps, and Ruth's friendship, and the grace of Boaz to bring restoration. They were each unlikely leaders. And the same God who was with them all those years ago, is our God today, and He is more than capable of turning our lives around and bringing hope where there was only fear- bringing joy where there was only mourning- bringing mercy where there was only condemnation. God can bring that about in us and through us, if only we'll trust Him. Won't you trust Him?