

SERMON - 11/02/18
(ST JAMES' Evensong 5pm)

Texts: Ruth 1:1-22
2 Corinthians 11:24-30, 12:9-10
(Psalm 77:1-10)

Theme: God is at work even in times of tragedy
Response: To encourage people to trust that God is at
work, even when they only see difficulties.
Title: A story of faithfulness

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Have you ever felt shattered by a tragic event, or  
overwhelmed by the difficulties you face...?  
What happened to bring you through that challenging  
time...?

Today and in our next 3 Evensong services, we will be  
looking at the Book of Ruth, reading it right through, and  
reflecting on its messages to us, some 3,000 years after this  
story was first composed.

This book tells the story of Naomi - a Jewish woman - and  
her daughter-in-law Ruth, who comes from the land of  
Moab.

The story begins with a series of tragedies - the deaths of 3  
male members of the family - and the rest of the story tells  
how new life comes out of death for Naomi and Ruth.

Ruth is a jewel of a story placed in the Old Testament  
between the book of Judges and the book of 1 Samuel.

It is a masterpiece of the story-teller's art, and very  
probably circulated in oral form before anyone wrote it  
down.

It is set in the very unsettled time before the monarchy in  
Israel, when a succession of leaders known as "judges"  
held power in the land from time to time.

One of the beautiful things about this story is the way that  
we see humans and God working together.

There are no remarkable miracles depicted in the story -  
only ordinary human events that show the hardship of the  
times and how God's blessing was brought into the story  
of Naomi and Ruth.

God's work is conducted through human relationships of  
faithfulness, loyalty and love.

You might like to read the Book of Ruth for yourself in the  
next few days.

It is only four chapters long.

Today we are looking at the first chapter of Ruth, so let's  
focus now on the opening 5 verses.

The first two verses very sparingly set the scene for the  
story.

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. 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.

Because of famine an Israelite family from Judah moved from its own land to a foreign land - the land of Moab in what we now know as Jordan.

There must have been sufficient food there because the family settled there, and we will soon hear that the sons Mahlon and Chilion took Moabite wives.

While moving to avoid famine was perfectly reasonable, this mixing of Jew with Gentile, Israelite with foreigner, would no doubt have struck some of the first hearers of this story as questionable or even wrong.

From their perspective the Israelite way of life with its loyalty to their God Yahweh should have been kept pure.

We should bear this in mind when later the story surprises us with the amazing faithfulness of the Moabite woman Ruth.

So the story goes on:

But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 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, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Naomi has experienced disaster.

In the space of 10 years her husband and her two sons have all died in the land of Moab.

In the patriarchal society of the day that didn't just mean grief and loss for Naomi.

It meant that her very life was at risk, because she was living in a foreign land away from her extended family and had no one to provide for her.

So Naomi decides to return from the country of Moab to her home town of Bethlehem in Judah.

Naomi's daughters-in-law have been good and faithful wives to her sons, and they care for their mother-in-law. They start to go with her as a reduced family unit returning to a place where they can be provided for together.

But Naomi realises that her daughters-in-law, who are childless, have more chance of happiness by remaining in their own country of Moab, where they have family to support them.

There they could find a new husband, have children and experience joy and security again.

She tells them to return to their own country and not to go with her.

There's a powerful tension in these next verses, because *shub*, the Hebrew word for return, also means to turn back or repent.

Naomi is returning to Bethlehem, maybe she is repenting of having come to Moab, but she urges her daughters in law to turn back to their own country, to repent of their desire to follow her to Judah.

Naomi states the obvious in the culture of that time - that ties of blood are the most supportive ones for women without defence.

Common sense says that each of them will be better off at home - and that means that they need to split up.

At first they refuse, but after Naomi repeats her instruction, one of her daughters-in-law, Orpah, does what Naomi tells her.

She kisses Naomi goodbye and returns to her own people.

But the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, clings to Naomi and refuses to be parted from her.

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. 17Where 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!” 18When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

This beautiful speech of Ruth’s is sometimes chosen to be read at weddings, when two people not of the same blood decide to cleave to one another and become one. It is a statement of the deepest loyalty and love, but in this case it’s expressed by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. An expression of faithfulness of this sort is perhaps not unusual for lovers. But I would almost guarantee that none of us has ever heard a daughter-in-law speaking like this to her mother-in-law. Something unique is happening here.

To the Israelite audience who would have first heard this story, the words Ruth says would have suggested that she was undertaking a covenant - a formal declaration of loyalty and faithfulness, just as God had done with the people of Israel.

To us it is reminiscent of God’s promises in Deuteronomy and Hebrews that God will never fail us or forsake us, or Jesus’ promise that he will be with us always, to the end of the age.

In effect, with these words Ruth is both promising herself to Naomi and to her God, Yahweh, for good or for bad, for richer or poorer, in sickness or in health. She is turning from her old life to a new life with Naomi.

We might not at first realise it as the human events unfold, but this unexpected and deeply beautiful expression of love is a sign that God is at work through Ruth in Naomi’s life. Deep down we know that this type of love is a gift from God, and this is what we are told in the first letter of John: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.”

So Naomi and Ruth continue their journey to Bethlehem until they arrive and Naomi is recognised by the women there. They call her by her name but she gives vent to her grief and bitterness at her experience of tragedy and loss in a speech that blames God for her troubles.

The women said, “Is this Naomi?” 20She said to them, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. 21I 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?”

There are just a couple of things that need to be said here. Naomi makes 2 false claims. She says, “I went away full,” meaning that she went away with a husband and two sons. But actually she went away in a time of famine, and in her grief and bitterness she has forgotten that.

Another thing she says is that “the Lord has brought me back empty”.

That might be true physically - she might be hungry, although we haven't actually been told it.

But she is accompanied by Ruth who loves her deeply - a person who will be named later in the story as “more to Naomi than seven sons”.

Naomi is not empty of love, even if she is empty of food. Overwhelmed by her own personal tragedy, Naomi either cannot or will not see things in perspective, and we are meant to pick that up from the story.

Naomi is stuck in her bitterness and can see no real hope. But as we come to the end of chapter 1, hope very subtly enters into the story.

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.

These two women in need of provision return to Bethlehem “at the beginning of the barley harvest” - just when there is an abundance of food.

At the end of the first part of this story, as the scene has been set for the action in the rest of the story, a glimmer of hope can be found - hope for the future of Naomi and Ruth, and so we are drawn to hope for a good outcome for them both.

This story is told most beautifully and with great artistry. There is a sign of God at work in Ruth's love for Naomi, and a glimmer of hope at the end of this first chapter.

But this chapter focuses mainly on the human experience of tragedy and suffering - an experience that is sadly not far from any one of us.

And in our suffering it has some things to tell us.

Firstly, it asks questions of God's justice - which, like the Book of Job, it doesn't really answer head on.

We are never told why it is Naomi's lot to suffer so terribly. Certainly the story doesn't say that it is because she disobeyed God in some way or did anything wrong. She just suffers inexplicable calamity.

But what the story does say is that she has help.

Help from her daughter-in-law who, despite being a person of a different culture, gives her an amazing gift of loyalty and love.

And then there is help from circumstances - or from God - in arriving back in Bethlehem right at the time of the barley harvest.

God is at work in her life, if only she could see it.

She has every right to be distraught, and to suffer grievous distress at the loss of the men she loves most.

But the story isn't over, and in fact the story, carefully read, already gives signs of hope, signs of the possibility of new life.

Someone once said to me that the question to ask when we are suffering or in difficulty is not “why?” but “what now?” What will happen now that Naomi and Ruth have returned to Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest.

What can Naomi do, what can Ruth do now?

For Naomi and Ruth, as for us, there are choices that can be made in suffering - choices that will lead to life, by the grace of God.

And the rest of this story, the rest of our lives, will reveal what can be done as partners with God to move beyond suffering to the new life that God wants to bring.

And so to God be all honour and praise, now and forever.  
Amen.