

“FIND US FAITHFUL”**Rev. Becky Stephens****Text: Ruth 4:1-17 NLT****God's Word: Ruth 1 NLT*****Ruth 4:1-17 NLT***

4 Boaz went to the town gate and took a seat there. Just then the family redeemer he had mentioned came by, so Boaz called out to him, “Come over here and sit down, friend. I want to talk to you.” So they sat down together. ² Then Boaz called ten leaders from the town and asked them to sit as witnesses. ³ And Boaz said to the family redeemer, “You know Naomi, who came back from Moab. She is selling the land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. ⁴ I thought I should speak to you about it so that you can redeem it if you wish. If you want the land, then buy it here in the presence of these witnesses. But if you don't want it, let me know right away, because I am next in line to redeem it after you.” The man replied, “All right, I'll redeem it.” ⁵ Then Boaz told him, “Of course, your purchase of the land from Naomi also requires that you marry Ruth, the Moabite widow. That way she can have children who will carry on her husband's name and keep the land in the family.” ⁶ “Then I can't redeem it,” the family redeemer replied, “because this might endanger my own estate. You redeem the land; I cannot do it.”

⁷ Now in those days it was the custom in Israel for anyone transferring a right of purchase to remove his sandal and hand it to the other party. This publicly validated the transaction. ⁸ So the other family redeemer drew off his sandal as he said to Boaz, “You buy the land.” ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and to the crowd standing around, “You are witnesses that today I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion, and Mahlon. ¹⁰ And with the land I have acquired Ruth, the Moabite widow of Mahlon, to be my wife. This way she can have a son to carry on the family name of her dead husband and to inherit the family property here in his hometown. You are all witnesses today.”

¹¹ Then the elders and all the people standing in the gate replied, “We are witnesses! May the LORD make this woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, from whom all the nation of Israel descended! May you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. ¹² And may the LORD give you descendants by this young woman who will be like those of our ancestor Perez, the son of Tamar and Judah.”

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth into his home, and she became his wife. When he slept with her, the LORD enabled her to become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son. 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.

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Many of us are quite familiar with the story of Job. In the Bible, Job is the guy God chooses to prove to Satan the faithfulness of God's followers. The result is that God repeatedly "tests" Job, making his life extremely difficult, in order to show Satan how he remains faithful through it all. Over the course of a year, many hardships unfold for Job; though he is a prosperous man, he loses all of his possessions, including all of his livestock. Then Job's ten children die when his house is crumbled by a mighty wind. Then later, Job is struck by a plague of boils that infects his skin. But through it all, Job remains faithful and never curses God.

In the book of Ruth all of the devastation comes at the beginning of the story; in many ways, this story of Naomi and Ruth reminds us of Job. These women, particularly Naomi, have suffered far more than they deserve. Plagued by famine, Naomi's husband moved his wife and two sons out of their homeland and into the hostile territory of Moab. Without getting into all the details, just suffice it to say that there was no love lost between Moab and Israel. They were age-old enemies, and only the most desperate of Israelites would cross the borders into Moabite territory. So it was that Naomi found herself in not only a foreign, but also hostile, land when her husband died. The widow now has no means, no friends, and two sons to care for. We don't really know how long they were there in this sorry state, but in time, both sons marry Moabite women. Yet they, too, eventually die. Now Naomi is not only a widow in a foreign and hostile land with no means and no friends, she also has no immediate family. All this unfolds right at the beginning of the story, so it is really no surprise that Naomi begins to question the God of Israel.

Like Job, Naomi does not curse God, but she does believe that God has cursed her.

We can only imagine that Naomi must have felt as if there was nothing left to live for. So it's not really a surprise when Naomi decides to head back to Bethlehem and encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their own homes, too. Naomi has lost hope, and you can't really blame her. Where she sees no future at all for herself, she must believe that there is at least some hope for Ruth and Orpah to start life anew. But Ruth will not hear of it. As Orpah heads back to her remaining family, Ruth issues one of the most beautiful declarations of faithfulness in all of Scripture: *"Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you."*

Who could argue with that? Naomi certainly doesn't, she resigns herself to returning to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth. And so begins Naomi's journey out of the black hole of her time in Moab and on to a new life. Even as Naomi continues to stew in her own misery, though; Ruth, in her

extreme faithfulness, gets busy. She is now the foreigner in a hostile land, and she is a widow on top of that. Though she lives in Naomi's household, they have no means of support because they are both widows. They are the poorest of the poor. So Ruth heads to the fields to glean what the harvesters have left behind so that she and Naomi have at least some sort of sustenance.

Indeed, Ruth could have created an entirely different life for herself. She could have remarried and fostered a posse of offspring in her homeland of Moab. But, instead she devoted her life to Naomi, and now she is having to do the back-breaking labor necessary to keep them both alive. She was just doing what she had to do because she was a committed and faithful woman. She obviously cared about her elderly mother-in-law immensely. Who could know that her efforts would pay dividends for her, too? This is the life of faith, really. Sometimes our faithfulness means we suffer through extreme trials. And sometimes our faithfulness means that God blesses us richly. The most important thing, though, is that we always remain faithful.

Now, despite all their suffering and sadness, Ruth and Naomi are on the road to blessing because Boaz takes notice of Ruth as she gleans his field. It seems that with her pledge and commitment to Naomi, Ruth has been incorporated into the Israelite community. We can discern this because, though Boaz is told that Ruth is a Moabite, that doesn't seem to matter to him. He doesn't view her as less of a person, quite the opposite, actually. He makes special arrangements for Ruth. She is not only to be allowed to glean his field in peace, without any threat from the male harvesters, but the harvesters are also to give her water if she needs it, and even some of the harvest itself.

Needless to say, this is a huge blessing for Ruth. She returns home with her arms full of grain, and we sense that perhaps this lifts Naomi's spirits after so many months of despair and hopelessness. Boaz's blessing of Ruth, his acceptance of her into the Israelite community, is enough to turn Naomi around. She can pray and praise again. It turns out that after all, God has not given up on a commitment to them. So Naomi decides to initiate something. Perhaps as a widow with no means, Naomi was trying to get positioned for a better future. Or maybe she was not so concerned for herself, but rather was trying to improve Ruth's life. We don't really know. But whatever the case, Naomi gives Ruth very clear instructions for approaching Boaz in what could, at best, be called a "risqué" way. Like so often in the Bible, we see the human scheming, at times even manipulation, that God somehow uses to continue his purposes in the world. Naomi instructs Ruth to dress and make herself up and to go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be that night. She is to wait until he is good and drunk and settled in, then Naomi tells Ruth that she must uncover his feet and then lay there at his feet.

Now, "uncovering the feet" of someone could mean a lot of different things. And suffice it to say, that only one meaning of that Biblical phrase literally means "uncovering the feet." This is a way of talking about nakedness or even intimate activity, and Naomi is telling Ruth to go and do these rather questionable things. I mean, how many of us would instruct any young woman to behave in such a way?!? It seems preposterous. Yet, without question, Ruth does exactly as Naomi has instructed her. Ruth has once again shown the depth of her faithfulness and character.

Certainly, Ruth's approach of Boaz at the threshing floor is quite brash. One could easily look at her actions and assume that she is nothing better than a prostitute propositioning a wealthy man. But I think there is another possibility here. I think Naomi knew it, and I think Ruth knew it. But in order to make it happen, these women had to work beyond the normal patriarchal social structure. Because I think that rather than propositioning Boaz, Ruth was doing something more along the lines of proposing to him. Simply offering him a one-night stand would be risking a future with any other man. And what we do know about both Ruth and Boaz tells us that it is unlikely that either of them would have any interest in a one-night stand anyway. Indeed, Ruth makes it clear that she is proposing. She is taking the initiative not merely in approaching him, but in talking about marriage. Ruth is appealing to Boaz to become her protector, but she also wants to be someone he is attracted to.

And the scheme works! And what follows is another element of the unknown as Boaz goes out to find the next of kin and the village elders to verify that his plan to farm Naomi's land and take Naomi's daughter-in-law as his wife will work. We don't know if he is doing this because he is simply attracted to Ruth, or because he is in love with her, or just because he feels a sense of obligation to his relative Naomi. But whatever the case, we do get the sense that this is something Boaz genuinely wants, just as much as Naomi and Ruth. And we can even imagine that perhaps, in the background, God is at work, too, making sure everything happens just as he plans.

Because, indeed, life does begin anew for both Naomi and Ruth. Ruth and Boaz marry and Ruth gives birth to a son, Obed, though the Bible says that "a son [was] born to Naomi." The idea here, I think, is that this is God's blessing for both of them. Life goes on even when it seems as if all life has ended and all hope is lost.

Ruth committed herself to Naomi, and more importantly to Naomi's people and Naomi's God. The result was that, after losing her husband and two sons, Naomi "had" a son again, even in her old age. And Ruth became the great-grandmother of the greatest king in all of Israelite history.

That, I think, is the very best part of this story. Because here's what it says to me: God has a plan for his people. It doesn't matter if we are Israelite, or Moabite, or Northerners, or Southerners, or black, or brown, or blue. It doesn't matter if we've messed up in the past, or even if we try and take matters into our own hands sometimes. If we are faithful to God, then God will be faithful to us. It may not always be easy, and it may not always be pretty, but somehow God will work with us, and because God is God, amazing things will happen!