

Ruth - October 13

The story of Ruth is a feel-good story...it's one that really does end with and they all lived happily ever after. The beginning of the story takes place in Moab. Because of a famine, Naomi and her husband had gone to Moab for better prospects.

It's fairly remarkable how often in scripture, famine and other hardship drives the story. The story of Israel is a story of repeated famines and wars which force them to migrate outside their own territory.

In Moab, Naomi marries and has sons. But then her husband dies. Then her sons, who had married women from Moab, also died, leaving no heirs. Naomi decides to go back to her family home. Ruth and Orpah are still young enough, they have a chance. Naomi encourages them to stay in Moab, remarry and start a new life.

Orpah does just that and goes off with Naomi's blessing. Ruth, however, insists on sticking with her mother-in-law, no matter what. Although this part of the story isn't about a marriage, one of my favorite wedding scriptures is right here...

“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.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

So off they go. Back in Judah, in Bethlehem, Naomi employs a match-making scheme and Ruth marries one of Naomi's relatives, Boaz and they have a family. The story truly does end happily.

But, unless you know what that little part of the world was like in that time, you miss the surprising jolts of the story. And I think it's in those surprises that the story has something for us.

The very first line of Ruth begins, in the days when the judges ruled. That already tells us a lot.

Last week, the story left us across the River Jordan from Canaan, the land God promised would belong to Israel...the promised land.

Joshua led the people into the land. Through a series of successful battles they were able to carve out a place for themselves there. But they never did take over the whole land.

Israel was divided into twelve tribes, all named after one of Jacob's...or Israel's...twelve sons. The tribes were ruled by what scripture calls judges. The book right before Ruth is called Judges. Judges were basically tribal rulers. The whole of Canaan was a tribal society.

It was not a peaceful time. There was constant war between the tribes of Israel and the surrounding people. There were wars between the tribes of Israel. A recurring phrase in the book of Judges is "everyone did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." All but a handful of the tribal rulers were corrupt.

Subsistence agriculture made people always one drought or one bad crop away from starvation. Violence, lawlessness, starvation...not exactly how most of us would envision the promised land.

It is during one of those famines Naomi and her husband left and traveled to Moab, presumably because there was food there. It would have been about 50 miles over rocky, steep and often inhospitable terrain.

So let's talk about the people from Moab. You might remember the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. These are the cities that according to scripture God destroyed because of their evil.

Lot, Abraham's nephew, was the one good person who was to be saved, along with his family. His sons-in-law refused to leave Sodom. As Lot and his wife and two daughters left, his wife looked back and was turned to a pillar of salt. I'm tellin' ya, Hollywood has nothing on the book of Genesis.

So anyway, that left Lot and his two daughters living in a cave in the hills. Without any other promise of sons, the daughters get their father drunk and have sex with him to get pregnant. The first son born out of one of those unions was named Moab. That's where the Moabites came from.

God actually dealt kindly with the Moabites in some ways, since they were Lot's descendants. But they were a despised people and for most of their history were enemies of the Israelites. By law, they were ritually excluded from the assembly of Israelites. And when there was a war between Israelite people and Moabites, scripture says God sided with Israel.

There is no explanation in the story for why Naomi and Elimelech chose to go to Moab. It hardly seems a place where they would be welcomed. The fact that they did would have been shocking to the Israelites.

But God's story is like that. Just about the time you think the Bible has been clear about who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, who's in and who's out, God switches it up.

Because here, not only have the Moabites apparently welcomed the Israelite family, the Moabite daughters-in-law are held up as faithful women.

And Ruth especially becomes an example as she risks everything and sets out with her mother-in-law towards an unknown future...a future with people who may consider her not only a foreigner, but someone from an inferior and even shameful background.

And it works out well for her. She marries a well-off relative of Naomi's and starts having babies. One of those babies is Obed who became the grandfather of King David...who was one of Jesus' earthly ancestors. Another surprise.

On its own, it's a lovely little story. But the surprises in it have something to say to us.

The big story of the time is the violence and war, the lawlessness, the corrupt tribal, and the ever-present threat of starvation.

But in this little story set in that time, we don't see much of that. There's lots of warmth and love. There's people encountering someone they're supposed to hate, and instead love blooms.

There's generosity. Before Ruth and Boaz got together, Ruth went to one of his fields to glean.

Gleaners, often widows and the poor, followed behind workers who were harvesting the crop. Whatever they missed or dropped was to be left behind for the poor to glean. It was the Israelites method of public assistance for the poor.

When Ruth caught Boaz's eye in the field, he told his workers to leave extra and provided for her safety. He also provided grain for Naomi.

There's a charming but slightly scandalous episode, engineered by Naomi, where Ruth goes in to the threshing room at night and lays down next to Boaz.

Ultimately arrangements are made for the wedding and they establish their lives together.

In the midst of the chaotic bigger story, ordinary life, love, and generosity happen.

And that's kind of where we are now. The big story in our nation can seem equally chaotic...violence, wars, economic struggles, distrust in leaders.

As Christians, I don't think we're to ignore the big story. Political and economic processes affect God's people, and we are called to speak truth to power when that power hurts those people.

But a lot of the time, we're just called to live where we are and love the people we encounter every day. We're called to be generous with neighbors in need. We're called to tend the relationships in our families and in our communities. We're called to reach across lines of ethnicity and race.

We're called into work that creates a strong community...farming and other agricultural related work, teaching, caring for the sick, raising children and tending grandchildren, running a business with honesty and fairness. Children go to school and learn to tend relationships there.

It can be tempting to despair when we look around at the big story. But when we look closer to home, we too will encounter those beautiful little stories of love, risk and beautiful encounters between people who are very different from each other.

God is at work in the big stories. It's worth watching for those times when, suddenly, for a moment, we get a glimpse of good being done to help people on a large scale. And because God is at work in those big stories, sometimes we are called to be as well.

But we are also called to not miss all the little stories and the little opportunities to love – to not miss the little stories God has created us to be a part of.