

Ruth 1:1-5; 4:13-17 (NRSV)

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. ²The 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. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These 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, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

[After the death of their husbands, Ruth insists upon leaving her home and following Naomi to Bethlehem, telling her, "Where you go, I will go . . . your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God." In Bethlehem, Ruth, with some pushing from Naomi, eventually marries Boaz.]

¹³So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Today, we continue our series on some of the great comeback stories in the Bible. This is the story of two women who seemingly have lost everything except each other.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a comeback story. Two women knocked flat by life who found their way back to the life they sought. It is a dramatic and touching story. If you aren't familiar with the story, I've summarized it in the page three textbox. You might also take a little time and read the book of Ruth; it is only four chapters long.

Even your first exposure to their story will enable you to see drama in their comeback, but you will probably not appreciate the magnitude of the turnaround. We have little real sense of what it was like to be a woman in the ancient world.

Sure, we all know that the ancient world was comprised of patriarchal cultures; i.e., the men were in charge. But we don't understand how women were seen by the men and perhaps by themselves. For a biblical example, read Exodus 20:17, where in the last of the Ten Commandments, women and slaves are lumped in with the house, the ox, the donkey, and anything that "belongs to your neighbor," i.e., property that is not to be coveted.¹

I recently heard a lecture from a professor of ancient history on the role of women and slaves

When did Ruth and Naomi live?

Ruth and Naomi lived more than 3,000 years ago during the period in Israel's history known as the time of the judges. It was a violent age, as Israel sought to complete its conquest of Canaan, the land promised them by God. The Israelites had no king, for God was to be their king. Instead, the chief administrators were known as judges, and their stories are told in the Old Testament book of Judges. Samson, Gideon, Deborah and others were judges during this time.

The time of the judges was also marked by great faithlessness, as the Israelites descended down a spiral that would lead them further and further from God. The last verse of Judges is a biting indictment of the Israelites: "In those days there was no king of Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

The faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi, to God and to each other, is in stark contrast with the faithlessness of Israel. Perhaps this is partly why the story of their friendship was cherished and passed on.

¹Interestingly, Deuteronomy 5:21, a later restatement of the Ten Commandments, pulls women out of the "property" category, though, of course, slaves remain lumped in with the farm animals.

in Greco-Roman society. The title of the lecture was, “Less Than Human.” An inspired title that drives home the truth about the status of women in the ancient world, even the supposedly “enlightened” world of the Greek philosophers. In the first centuries AD, many of the pseudo-Christian gnostics believed that women were an incomplete human, needing to pass upward through manhood on their way to heaven.²

All this stands in stark contrast to Paul who wrote to the Galatians that, “There is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). And Paul put this unity to work in the many important responsibilities he gave women in the course of his ministry. You can look at Romans 16 to get a sense for this, including his naming of Junia as an apostle.

Redemption

The words “redeem” or “redeemer” are used more 20 times in this brief story. Indeed, redemption is a key biblical theme. Yet, we don’t have any real experience with the redemption practices of the ancient world.

Redemption refers to the process of restoring what has been lost or stolen or captured. In the ancient world, a kinsman-redeemer was one who recovered property or prestige that the family had lost.

One important portrait of God woven throughout the Bible is that of Holy Redeemer. The focus here is on *freedom*. God was Israel’s strong Redeemer, who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. In the story of Ruth and Naomi, Boaz is the kinsman-redeemer of Ruth. Ruth’s child will be the redeemer of Naomi. But we need to see God at work in this story. Ruth, and her friendship with Naomi, is God’s instrument used to accomplish Naomi’s redemption. For Israel, what God had done for Naomi, he would do for his people.

Desperate

When the men die (Naomi’s husband and her sons, who are the husbands of Ruth and Orpah), the women are in a bad fix, particularly Naomi, who has been away from family for many years. Though Ruth and Orpah are around family, their dead husbands left no surviving brothers for them to marry.³

The depth of the women’s plight enables us to grasp that this is a story of redemption, particularly for Naomi, who will return home and take on the name “bitterness” for herself. In the eighty-five verses in the book, “redeem” or “redemption” is used twenty-three times. Reversal is the essence of redemption. It is slavery reversed into freedom. Death into life. Bitterness and fear into sweetness⁴ and courage.

Naomi desperately needs redemption. She finds it through her daughter-in-law, Ruth, who leaves her own people and gods and heads for Bethlehem to a new home and a new God. After Ruth marries Boaz and gives birth to a son, it is Naomi to whom the women in the village come, saying, “Blessed be the LORD,

who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him” (4:14-15). It is not Ruth who has redeemed Naomi, who reversed her life and provided the kinsman she desperately needs. It is God who is the redeemer.

When Naomi told her daughters-in-law to return to their homes rather than accompany her to Bethlehem, she says, “may the LORD show kindness to you . . .” The Hebrew word here is *hesed*, a much richer word than simply “kindness.” Rather, *hesed* conveys an essential part of God’s character, his kind mercy and abundant grace. To extend *hesed* was to extend a lovingkindness and mercy far beyond anything that could be expected.⁵ This was God’s response to the women’s crisis and it is God’s response to each of us. God is our redeemer as well.

²Here is the last verse of the Gospel of Thomas: “114. Simon Peter said to them, ‘Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.’” FF Bruce sees this as a statement re the restoration of some sort of primal unity, in which woman is reabsorbed into man – sort of an undoing of the whole business about Adam’s rib and the making of Eve. Some scholars look to the metaphorical use of such images in other ancient texts that point to the transformation of the earthly (here, “woman”) into the heavenly (Here, “man.”). It isn’t hard to see why texts such as Thomas were rejected by the Christians.

³It was the practice of a surviving brother to take the widow in marriage, even if it was as a second or third wife. This was the way that widows survived.

⁴“Naomi” means “sweet” or “pleasant.” When she gets back to Bethlehem, she wants to be called “Mara,” which means “bitter.”

⁵From Kathleen Robertson Farmers’ commentary on Ruth in the New Interpreters Bible.

The Story of Ruth and Naomi

The story of Naomi (and it is really Naomi's story despite the name of the book) is about the power of God, working through Ruth's faithful friendship, to redeem Naomi from bitterness and despair.

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel during the time of the judges (1100-1200BC) when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi's husband died. Yet even after Elimelech's death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Her sons married local women, Orpah¹ and Ruth.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Naomi's sons died and the three women, now widows, were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman.² Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab, among their own families. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi's god as her own. But this was not the end of their story; it was only the beginning.

Upon their arrival in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, these two unlikely friends set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty," she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant "sweetness," even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for "bitter." Naomi was in great need of restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Despite Naomi's despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their union comes about is a touching and somewhat complicated story that consumes much of the book.

After the marriage, we are told that "when they came together, the LORD made her conceive and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth's son, would be Naomi's redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We understand this when we are told that "Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse." This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God's people, making them (us!) whole.

1. Oprah Winfrey tells the story that she was named after Orpah in the book of Ruth, but that her parents misspelled the name. (Isn't it amazing the things you learn in these studies.)

2. In ancient cultures, widowhood was greatly feared. Women simply had to be under the protection of men; a woman's social standing was derived entirely from her husband's. One of the remarkable features of ancient Judaism was God's insistence that his people care for widows and orphans. Even in Jesus' day, widows didn't have a much better lot; e.g., we meet Tabitha whose life was devoted to caring for widows (Acts 9:36-43). When Tabitha dies, the widows are devastated and terrified. Who will care for them? God, acting through Peter, restores life to Tabitha.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAY 25 – MAY 31

Kathleen Robertson Farmer's outline of Ruth follows the book's four chapters. Samson is our comeback story for next week. These two chapters introduce his story. His whole story is told in Judges 13-16.

Monday, Ruth 1 Turn, turn, turn

Tuesday, Ruth 2 Known and unknown

Wednesday, Ruth 3 Uncovering and recovering

Thursday, Ruth 4 The roots of Israel's redemption

Friday, Judges 13 The story of Samson's birth

Saturday, Judges 14 Samson gets married

Sermon Notes

Get the Monkey Off Your Back: Making Sense of Creation and Evolution

The current *Something Else* series

The debate around issues of creation and evolution isn't going away. Instead, it seems to get more and more heated, with a lot more talk than understanding. In this series, we'll try to make sense of the debate and see that Christian truth claims are not at odds with scientific claims.

Today: Faith, Science and Philosophy

Reading The Good Book Better

A new *Something Else* series begins next week, June 1

Our series on creation and evolution revealed that the way we read the Bible shapes our understanding of evolution and other topics. Indeed, it shapes the way we see the world.

In this series, we'll look at various interpretational issues, as well as some keys to understanding the many translations that are available now.

Next week: Is the Bible True?

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today's story is one of redemption, salvation, and reversal. It is the story of God working through the friendship of two desperate women. In what ways might our friends be the means of our own redemption – whether in the sense of helping us reverse life's difficulties or even to come to trust Jesus Christ? You might share some stories of how your friends have helped you through difficult times or how you might have done that for a close friend of yours.
2. You might reflect upon and talking about friendships that you've formed in your own life. How many times have you been surprised by the people with whom you've developed friendships? If you look back over your own life, what friend was most different from yourself? Who has been your most "unlikely friend"? What do you think led to those friendships? Did they arise out of crisis or difficulty? How might tragedy or crisis lead to the development of deep bonds?
3. So . . . do you see God at work in your own life? How? When? What are some specific examples of how God has brought good out of difficulty and pain? Could you see it at the time or only later? Did others help you to see God at work in your life? How does this understanding of God's work in our lives help to shape and strengthen our extreme makeovers? Does it give us more confidence? Perhaps perseverance through difficulties? Perhaps hope?