

### **Ruth 1:1-5**

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. 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.

### **Ruth 1:6-22**

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." but Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 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. Where 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!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I 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?" 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.

## Sermon

How many times did the word Moab or Moabite appear in this first chapter of Ruth? Did you count them: 7. This is the beginning of the case for why the Book of Ruth is scandalous. Let us begin with what we know about the country of Moab at this time. In Genesis 19: 30-38 we find the origin story of Moab and Ammon. Born out of an act of incest between Lot and his daughters, these sons of Lot become the founders of these two people. Then in Numbers 25:1, we have an encounter between the children of Israel who are just about to make their way into the promise land after wondering in the wilderness, and the women of Moab. The NRSV translates that verse “While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab.” But the more literal translation of the Hebrew would be that the “people prostituted themselves with the women of Moab.” After that time, there was consistent tension between the Hebrew people and Moab. And you can imagine the preconceived notion about those Moabite women.

You can imagine fathers telling sons, “Don’t go over to the other side of the dead sea, that is where the Moabites live, their women seduce helpless men and then turn them away from God. It is a den of sex and sin.” And so for many years the land of Moab was outside the land of the Hebrews, a nation of people to either be avoided or subdued. There was a number of conflicts, back and forth, but even up to the story of Ruth, there had been no solution to the reputation or the conflicts.

And so now we see the scandal of Naomi and Elimelech, the desperation to leave behind the safety of Bethlehem, driven out by famine, to settle in Moab, a land of food yet ill reputation. And then for Naomi’s sons to take Moabite wives, more scandal in the ears of the Hebrew’s listen to their story. And so when finally, Naomi feels compelled to return home, to return to Bethlehem, we might hear more about her concern for bringing her daughters-in-law with her. How would her friends and neighbors treat her? How would they treat her daughters-in-law? You could imagine the stir, the words of hate, the unwanted glances of boys, the angry stares of wives or mothers. Orpah and Ruth would not just struggle to find care with Naomi, but these women were Moabite women, not to be trusted, not to be accepted, not to be welcomed.

And so Naomi attempts to send them back home, for their protection, for her own protection, for the good of all involved. And Orpah goes back to her mother’s house, but Ruth clings to Naomi.

The story of an immigrant woman, a woman who comes with a reputation because of the preconceived ideas of who she was based solely on her country of origin, a Moabite Woman. Husbandless, fatherless, sonless, Moabite immigrant coming into Bethlehem. That is who Ruth is.

But why does it matter? What purpose does this story serve in the larger context of the Hebrew Scriptures? What context does it play in the context of the entire Biblical Cannon? Why does this story matter to us today?

Let's begin with the importance of the story in Hebrew Scriptures. You will remember the rest of the story of Ruth, that she eventually marries Boaz, there is the bit about the threshing floor and about picking grain. Then, at the end of the fourth chapter of Ruth, "Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David." It is through Ruth and Boaz that Obed is born. Ruth is the great-grandmother of David, the greatest king of the Hebrew people.

Imagine that for just a moment. From a Moabite woman, flows the lineage of David. And of course that is also the answer for the significance of Ruth in the great Biblical Cannon, because we know that it is out of Bethlehem, out of the lineage of David, that comes Jesus. The lineage of the messiah flows forth from a Moabite woman.

And what does that have to do with us today? What does the story of an immigrant woman with ill-reputation becoming a mother within the lineage of salvation have to do with us today? If God works with those we cast off, then maybe we shouldn't be too quick to cast someone off. Thanks be to God for that Moabite Woman and all those heroes and heroines of the faith. Amen