



## Ruth: Life After Death

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Just outside these windows is a sacred space - our Memorial Garden.

In this space are more than just beautiful plants with special meaning, some of which connect to bible stories and symbols of our faith - more than an angel statue and a bench for those who visit to enter into a time of prayer.

There are saints there too - members of this congregation who gave their blood, sweat, and tears passionately for years to care for this community, to journey together with people who began as strangers. They and their families ultimately decided to have some or all of their ashes scattered in this place, as an act of love and an act of trust that God remains active in this little plot of land at this intersection.

And while it might seem morbid to think of the ashes of those who came before us are just past those windows, that Memorial Garden is a place teeming with life.

This week, Bill Wallace and I walked down the sidewalk that ambles alongside the building to discover our fig tree exploding and heavy-laden with fruit. And tucked in there, a small but mighty vine revealing clusters of grapes, turning from green to purple in the summer light.

Yes, fed by the ashes of so many saints, our Memorial Garden points to this reality about life - sometimes, the places and moments that can remind us of our mortality and frailty can be the spaces where God brings out the most amazing bounty of life.

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This morning, we begin our series on the book of Ruth, a remarkable story about strong women, fierce love, and bold courage, and a remarkable story because it begins in a place of sadness, pain, and loss.

Dr. Kathryn Schifferdecker writes,

"This little domestic tale is a story of God's *hesed*, God's faithfulness, God's covenant love, lived out in the lives of everyday, ordinary human beings, much like you and me."

The first chapter begins by telling us about the life of Naomi, a matriarch of her family, and how their lives are upended by famine, when the fields of the earth could not produce life.

And at the end of the chapter, we are told that as Naomi and Ruth, her daughter-in-law, arrive in Jerusalem, the barley harvest is just beginning.

In between, as choices are made and commitments are forged, we discover a story about a family that could mirror so many other families, stories of death and loss and strange places. Naomi and her husband have moved to Moab, a different country, where there was food and possibility, like so many refugees in our present day reality who cross great distances for a chance at a better life. They have two sons. Their sons get married. It seems like they have the perfect life.

And then everything bad that can happen does happen. Naomi's husband dies. Her two sons die.

In the ancient world, widows were some of the most vulnerable in a society. Family structures were organized by male head of the household, who provided for the entire family which could have multiple generations. So if that man died, the widow's options were limited, even though scripture called for care for these widows. Maybe the widow would move into her husband's brother's house or a son. But what if they lived far away, like in a foreign country? What if her husband had no brother? What if she did not have sons or her sons... died?

How could she survive? How could her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, survive? How could this world be so cruel.

Naomi is convinced that "the hand of the Lord has turned against" her.

Today in our world, there are many in our world who wonder the same. Has God forgotten about us? Have we done something wrong? These are people who have done what they must to survive, including getting on a plane and coming to a country they have never experienced before. These are people who struggle under the weight of grief. These are people who

We have been praying for the family of Fazal, one of the members of our Afghan family that we have been neighboring, because one of Fazal's children is very ill back in Kabul and there is no way for this father to be there by the side of his little one.

The story of Ruth begins in such a place - a place that many of you have experienced, a real family that does not have a Hollywood family life, but a life that is marked by the uncertainty of famines, food insecurity, job insecurity, unexpected loss, and frightening risks.

Dr. Wil Gafney in her womanist midrash spends a lot of time talking about the Hebrew language choices and the meaning, especially for women in the ancient world, who often endured a lower social status and exclusion by power structures of the day.

"Ruth 1:4 says that Ruth and Orpah were "lifted" or "abducted" into marriage."

The verb used is not the same as used for consensual relationships, Dr. Gafney writes.

This again places the beginning of Ruth in a world that is violent, where women are treated as second class citizens, where this is injustice, famine, and suffering. Where women are raped. Where women are forced into marriages. Where women often have few choices for their own self-care and independence. Where women's lives are not valued like men's are.

But even in this moment of deep loss, when Naomi changes her name to Mara because of the bitterness of her life, we find life. We find, just like in our Memorial Garden, fruits of love and courage.

Naomi begs her daughters to go back to their families. Orpah relents, but Ruth changes history by refusing to abandon her mother-in-law. This is someone she is not related to, and since her husband has died, the prudent thing to do would be go and find a new husband, find some stability in this uncertain and harsh world.

Ruth risks everything. She chooses this new family. She chooses her mother-in-law. She chooses her mother-in-law's faith and her mother-in-law's people. Her choice does not seem logical. Will her new people accept her? Will they have food to eat when they return to Jerusalem? Will they be treated as outcasts? Will there be room at the inn?

She risks it all for love - for the care she has for her mother-in-law and for this unlikely family she experiences. Hear Ruth again:

*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!*

Dr. Schifferdecker writes,

"Ruth's loyalty, Ruth's love for her mother-in-law holds the promise of something more, as does the final verse of this chapter: "They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest" (1:22). Naomi is empty (1:21), but faithful Ruth is right beside her, and the harvest is coming."

Even in a world ensnared by such pain and suffering, where one would change their name to mark their own grief, where a daughter-in-law would seek safety with her mother-in-law rather than her own people, Creation is at work. God is at work. Possibilities for life are never out of reach, even for the most desperate of situations, even when we cannot imagine it.

Ruth and Naomi, and even Orpah, act on faith in this story. They act on the love they experience. They act in the midst of uncertainty. It is not clear that they know what God is up to or if God is even on their side. And they choose to act.

Naomi is honest about her grief. She is bitter. She is angry at God. And she makes a bold decision about her future.

Ruth too makes a surprising decision about who she is - about who she feels safe with - about trusting in her mother-in-law - and trusting in the God that Naomi's people worship.

All of these are acts of faith, and too often, history overlooks the choices women make that end up shaping history.

When we look back as Christians at the stories, we are reminded that Ruth is one of Jesus' great grandmothers. Her act of faith, her risk, shapes a story of salvation that we inherit. In Jesus' own acts of risk, of faithfulness, of compassion, of prophetic power, we see that he does have some Ruth's DNA sticking around after all of those years.

And as little Christs, we pick up some of fearless Ruth's DNA too and can trust that even when there is famine, when there is grief, when there is violence, when the world does not make sense, love abounds. A harvest might just be on the way.

Who do you most see yourself in this morning - Ruth or Naomi? Who is it that you are being called to stick close to in love? What is it in your life that you need to be honest about and make a decision of faith about? And what might be holding you back?

The harvest is about to begin.