

Angela Pound

Advent / Ruth 1

Book of Ruth

It was almost exactly a year ago that I sat in my Old Testament class when my professor talked about an advent series that he had heard in a church service that he had never heard before, on the Book of Ruth. I too had never heard of an advent series on Ruth, in fact, I had never really heard of many Advent series on books within the Old Testament, mostly, of course, hearing the story of Jesus' birth found in either Matthew or Luke. But the Christmas story has deep roots. It begins in the Old Testament, because the Old Testament points forward to Christ and his coming. So, this year I thought we would venture through the Book of Ruth. A story I absolutely love.

Miles Custis wrote a book called, "Ruth: Hope for the Marginalized" and in it he writes, "Ruth and Naomi were women who had neither power nor position: Both were widows, and one was a foreigner. Although their circumstances were dire and they had little hope for the future, God used the events of their lives to pave the way for the Savior of humanity."

The Book of Ruth is rich with beauty and meaning. In its

pages we encounter Ruth and Naomi—resilient women who shape their own futures. They are genuine and grounded, familiar with both joy and deep sorrow. There is no pretending with them—only the honest truth of who they are. Ruth’s life and story are in steep contrast to one of the darkest times for Israel, living during the period of the judges, characterized by faithlessness and lawlessness. Judges 21:25 says it well for that time, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” God uses Israel’s enemies as vehicles of punishment, and God raises up judges to deliver his penitent people. The covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28:15–68 include famine, sickness, infertility, and death. Given what we know about the period of the judges, it is possible that the famine in Bethlehem and perhaps even the deaths of Elimelek and his sons and their childless marriages were linked to covenant unfaithfulness. Naomi certainly saw the hand of God behind her afflictions.

The book of Ruth focuses on a few main characters, of who played a part in God’s amazing plan to save the world through Jesus. It is no coincidence that the events of Ruth and the events of Christmas both take place in the town of Bethlehem. In fact, the whole reason Jesus was born in Bethlehem is specifically because of what takes place in the book of Ruth. As Ray Fowler put it, “Christmas is the story of a young woman who made a radical commitment

of faith to God and then journeyed to Bethlehem where she gave birth to a child who would change the world. The book of Ruth is the story of—wait for it—a young woman who made a radical commitment of faith to God and then journeyed to Bethlehem where she gave birth to a child who would change the world. Ruth is an unlikely candidate for such a story. She was not even a Jew. She was from Moab, and the Moabites were long-term enemies of Israel. So, how did Ruth come to have faith in God, and how did she come to arrive in Bethlehem?”

Let's look closer at chapter 1:

The book of Ruth starts with Naomi and her family leaving Bethlehem because of the famine, heading to Moab. The Christmas story also has a flight from Bethlehem.

A side funny story: A Sunday School teacher once asked the kids in her class to draw a picture of their favorite Bible story. One little boy drew a picture of four people in an airplane. The teacher was confused, so she asked him, “Which story is that?” He replied, “That's the flight from Bethlehem!” “Okay,” said the teacher, “I guess this must be Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, but who's the fourth person up front?” And the boy replied, “That's Pontius the Pilot!”

Okay, back to Ruth.

Even though they left Bethlehem for Moab for a better life, things didn't get any better for Naomi. This is similar to the

flight from Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph as we read in Matthew 2:13–18 “Now after they [the Magi] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.””

In this part of the book of Ruth, we hear their grief and recognize the tough situation they face. Naomi has lost her husband and both sons. All three women are widows without a man to provide or protect, in their society they are now extremely vulnerable.

As the story unfolds for Ruth and Naomi, their vulnerability becomes something strikingly beautiful. We witness the quiet power and inner strength that emerge as they face

their circumstances head-on. We see the courage that allows them to carve a path forward when no path seems to exist.

Ruth faces a hard decision when her husband and father-in-law die, does she stay in her homeland of Moab, or does she return with her mother-in-law, to Israel. Ruth likely has come to faith in Yahweh because of the family that she married. Defying her time, Ruth chooses to go with Naomi to Bethlehem, while Orpah stays in Moab. It is this radically commitment of faith that changes everything for Naomi, Ruth, and for the world. We hear this commitment in verses Ruth 1:16–17 “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!””

Ruth not only pledges herself to Naomi, but more importantly to God. Similar to what we hear in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 “For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” Ruth makes a radical break from her people and their false gods. She commits herself in faith to the Lord, the God of Israel, a radical, life commitment, that would change the world, similar to the radical commitment of

faith we hear from Mary in Luke 1:30–37 “The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”” With Mary’s words of radical faith, Luke 1:38 “Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.”

Both Ruth and Mary risked so much in obedience.

As Mandy England Cole wrote that as times change within the church we are not to, “turn away like Orpah, and return to the safety and familiarity of home for fear that we do not measure up to some prototype of leadership. It is in such a time as this that you and I are called to serve God’s church. So, lead as you lead, serve as you serve, and preach as you preach. For God has called you for such a

time as this. Love God and serve God with all your heart, all your soul, all of your you-ness. For there are churches, pulpits, and people that need you—your voice, your creativity, your wisdom—you. Answer God’s call with audacious authenticity and enjoy the crazy, courageous, and magnificent ride among the stars as you pioneer a future unlike anything that has ever been before. Ruth and Naomi teach us how to be so brave.”

As Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem the whole town becomes stirred up; they can’t believe Naomi has returned.

The Christmas story also speaks of a town that is astir. Matthew 2:1–6 “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”” The whole city of Jerusalem is astir from the news of the birth of the Messiah.

But Naomi in returning to Bethlehem is in a dark place. She

tells them not to call her Naomi (which means “pleasant”) but to now call her Mara (which means “bitter”). When she left Bethlehem ten years ago she was so full of hope and now in returning, she has lost her husband and her two sons and feels broken.

As Ray Fowler put it, “Naomi was in a dark place when she returned to Bethlehem. Maybe you’re in a dark place this morning. Maybe you’ve been in a dark place before. Naomi was hurting. She didn’t know God was working to bring good out of her situation. And yet God was there working all the time. She just couldn’t see it.”

Yet, in verse 22, God continues to call her Naomi. God has good plans, continuing to call her by her name. The barley harvest is also just beginning, a sign of the grace of God and new beginnings. After bleak moments in what begins the book of Ruth, we start to see a hint of light. There is hope; a sense that things are going to get better for Ruth and Naomi.

In 1914, Ernest Shackleton and his crew set out on the *Endurance* to cross the Antarctic continent—a dangerous but carefully planned expedition. They had trained, studied, and prepared for harsh conditions. But nothing could have prepared them for what actually happened.

Only weeks into their journey, the ship became trapped in pack ice. The pressure of the ice slowly crushed the

Endurance, forcing the crew to abandon ship and camp on the drifting ice floes. They were stranded at the bottom of the world with no way to call for help, no clear direction to safety, and no guaranteed path home. Their food supply was limited, the temperatures brutal, and rescue was thousands of miles away. There was no manual for survival in these conditions.

And yet, Shackleton and his crew refused to give up. They assessed their situation, harnessed every skill and resource they had, and decided to attempt the impossible. They built makeshift camps, rationed every scrap, navigated treacherous seas in small lifeboats, and ultimately forged a route to safety that no one had ever attempted.

Shackleton's own spiritual assessment of his struggles was:

When I look back at those days, I have no doubt that Providence guided us, not only across those snowfields, but across the storm-strewn sea. I know that during that long and racking march of 36 hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers, it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions on the point, but afterwards Worsley said to me, "Boss, I had a curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us." Crean confessed to the same idea. One feels the dearth of human words, the roughness of mortal speech, in trying to describe things intangible, but a record of our journeys would be incomplete without a reference to a

subject very near to our hearts.

As Michael Obel says about Shackleton's journey, "So the glory is all God's. And that glory shines more brightly in light of the fact that Shackleton never once in any of his voyages attained his primary objective. Vocationally, he was a failure. Each of us fails, too. Yet the same holiness, wisdom, and power that accompanied Shackleton now conduct each of us on our voyages. Through both success and failure, even repeated failure, the same Creator surrounds us with exactly what he surrounded those men. As Christians, we can say that our expedition is led by the most authentic Hero of all. Indeed, the only Hero. His many humiliations guarantee both our present rescue and our future arrival at our celestial home."

Just like Ruth and Naomi, they carved a way forward when the world offered them no clear path. They hung unto hope when it would have been easy to let go.

Someone once wrote, "It's in our victories that we most often see God working. His blessings and gifts are evidence of His love. But when we are in the midst of suffering, can we see God's hand?" As I read this quote, I thought about it for a moment. Maybe a different year I might have had the same outlook but I didn't at that moment. Sure, I see God in my victories, in how God has put things in place but, these last 365 days especially I have seen God in the suffering.

In the loss of my uncle exactly a year ago.
In the loss of my father-in-law in the spring.
In sitting beside my best friend in a hospital room, waiting to see if her husband would survive.
In flying to my sister as we waited to learn how or if she would recover from her medical emergencies.
And now, as I travel across the country with my dad to say goodbye to his brother—another uncle—whose memory still fills me with warmth and joy despite the distance, with a huge smile on my face for the character he is, thankful for the moments I, along with Mark and the kids, got to cherish with him on his many visits back East.

In all of this, I have seen God.
I have seen God in the strength I did not know I had, in the peace that settled when fear should have overwhelmed, in the compassion that drew us as a family closer together, in the small mercies that met us day after day. I have seen God in the love that held me, the presence that never left me, and the quiet hope that rose even in the darkest moments.

I have seen God *in* the suffering—not because the suffering was good, but because God was there with me in it.

Both in Ruth, the Christmas story, our own stories or those of our friends, we hear about people with loss, whether it's a relational loss, financial loss, stability loss, a lost dream, or you name it. Perhaps you are struggling with loss this

Christmas season. Know that God is working in your life, even in the midst of difficult situations. In this Advent season, hang on to hope when giving up might seem simpler. Could you be so brave as to lean into God's promise — that He is near, that He is coming, and that in Him, our hope will not be disappointed?