

From famine to feast

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Ruth 1:1-22; Psalm 116

Rev Christine Colliar (OLM)

The book of Ruth begins with irony. Bethlehem means *house of bread*, yet there is famine, not only of bread, but a famine of faithfulness, peace, and hope. Elimelech's name means *My God is King*, yet this is a time when everyone does what is right in their own eyes, as the book of Judges says. There is no ruler, and no clear guidance in society.

Naomi's family are called Ephrathites, which means fruitful people, yet death will soon visit every man among them.

Her sons' names, Mahlon and Chilion, have roots in words that mean sickness and perishing. Even before the story unfolds, the names tell us that this will not be a happy beginning.

There are no miracles in the book of Ruth. No parting seas, no angelic voices, no burning bushes. Only ordinary people trying to survive in a hard world.

The story opens with famine, it must be bad, or why else would the family go to *Moab*? - that's just how their disbelieving neighbours would relate the news, 'Can you believe it, Elimelech has taken the family to *Moab*!'

Things do improve for them, the boys marry local women, they stay there ten years, but then things take a turn and the story continues with loss, with leaving. Naomi's husband is gone. Her sons are gone. Her home, her security, her hope, all gone.

The name 'Naomi' means 'pleasant', but she says, 'Call me Mara,' - bitter. It is the response of someone who can no longer make sense of her life.

There is a kind of truth-telling in Naomi's grief that faith communities can easily forget. She doesn't pretend she is fine. She names her loss and her anger before God, and God lets her speak.

We might easily think of faith as certainty or triumph, but the first chapter of Ruth shows us faith as lament. It is what Psalm 116, which we've just sung in paraphrase, calls 'faith amid affliction', the faith that still says, 'I love the Lord, because he heard my voice and earnest plea' - that is verse 1 of the hymn we have just sung.

This psalm does not deny the darkness, it speaks trust from within it. And that is where Ruth's story begins, in the midst of emptiness, where it seems that God has gone silent. Faith isn't pretending that everything is well, faith is bringing the emptiness to God and trusting God can still fill it.

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And then Ruth speaks words that echo across centuries:

*'Where you go, I will go;
where you stay, I will stay;
your people will be my people,
and your God, my God.'*

Ruth's vow is more than affection. It is *hesed*, a Hebrew word meaning covenant love, faithful love, love that acts.

It is love that costs something, love that moves its feet.
It is faithfulness that keeps showing up when nothing is guaranteed.
It is choosing presence over safety, loyalty over ease.

Ruth doesn't stand at a distance and say, 'I'll pray for you.'
She ties her future to Naomi's future.
She walks beside Naomi, step by step, from Moab's dry hills back to Bethlehem.

This kind of love is embedded throughout the book of Ruth, and throughout all of Scripture, the love that keeps faith when the world breaks faith.

And through Ruth, we begin to see that God's providence often walks on human feet. No thunder, no miracle, just the steady, faithful companionship of one who refuses to leave.

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When Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem, the text gives us one simple line of hope:

'They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.'

Something is stirring again. The famine is ending. New life is beginning, though neither woman can yet see it.

That's the rhythm of God's hidden grace, quiet, patient, and often unnoticed until much later.

Ruth doesn't know she will one day become the great-grandmother of David, and through his line, the ancestor of Christ himself. But her small acts of faithfulness open the door to redemption.

We meet no voice from heaven in Ruth, yet the hand of God moves gently through her compassion.

It is the same hand that will later reach out in Christ, to heal, to bless, to break bread, and to feed us when we face a famine of faithfulness, a famine of peace, a famine of hope.

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That hidden hand of providence still moves among us.

And that brings us to the table, where we will feast together in a few minutes.
Here we meet the same faithful love Ruth lived, only in its fullness.

Here is Christ, who also walked the long road of love -
who left heaven's abundance to share our famine,
who gave his body as bread for the hungry,
and poured out his life like the cup of salvation in Psalm 116.

At this table, Christ says to us what Ruth once said to Naomi -

'Where you go, I will go.'

In our emptiness, he gives us himself.
In our brokenness, he binds us together in covenant love.
Here, love is not sentiment, but sustenance.
Here, God fills our famine with grace.

This is the love that feeds, the love that endures,
the love that moves its feet from famine to feast,
from sorrow to song,
until the whole world is gathered at the table of God's steadfast love.