

ON BEING NAOMI

Karoline M. Lewis, April 24, 2012^[1]

Ruth 1:6–22

Naomi (to Ruth): “You can’t be hanging out with me. Seriously. You need to get a life. You need to find a husband. You need to have children. You need to have a family. And living with your mother-in-law is going to make all of those things difficult, to say the least. Don’t you know where your worth lies? Not with where we are. Not with what we had. And certainly, not with me.”

I know this book is called Ruth. I know that her loyalty gives us a glimpse into the heart of God, that her love lets us see and name where we have felt, experienced, and perhaps, even been able to express this kind of love. But this time around, just for a moment, for a few minutes, for one sermon, what if it could be about Naomi? What if you are Naomi—what would that be like? When you just need to say, “I really got the short end of the stick. This is not how I had planned my life. Things can’t be any more desperate. Look at what has happened to me. I have lost my husband, my sons. Why would you want to be with me? Who would want to be with me? I am not meant to receive love and grace and blessing. What am I worth? Certainly not worthy of loyalty—or of love.” Maybe it’s the only place she can be at this point, when your reality is defined by another (for Naomi, by her husband) or your self-worth is determined by an ability to have children. Maybe the only thing she knows is “playing small . . . shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around [her].”² Maybe she was never given an opportunity to imagine more. Naomi helps us see that so much of where we locate our worth is in expectation. So much of where we allocate dedication is only in obedience. So much of where we find acceptance is when others determine that we are acceptable. How often we go there, defining ourselves through the lens of another. Constructing our identity on the basis of what is expected of us. Believing that our worth can be decided by those who think they know us.

Naomi puts us face to face with those moments when any sort of living out of your heart is immediately shut down by those who have told you how to feel. Those times when your truth has been determined by a so-called truth from the outside. Those times when emptiness is the only thing you feel and when you are really and truly convinced that you are not enough. Naomi gives us a voice: To name when we have lost everything that mattered, or everything we thought mattered, and can’t figure out how to make the switch. To name the unbearable minutes and seconds when you sense that who you are and who you could be is slipping through your fingers. To name when you are being pulled apart and when you can see pieces of you drifting away.³

So today, it’s about Naomi, who is able to name her emptiness, her bitterness, her abandonment. At the very least, she calls it what it is. This is no pathetic figure. No “woe is me, that’s too bad” kind of character. No foil for Ruth. She has the courage to say, “This really . . . [insert expletive]! I’m in a new land. My husband has died. My sons have died. Now what? What do you expect me to do? Rally? Make it all better? Pontificate on the silver lining? Perpetuate the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? How dare you ask that of me?” And as much as Ruth loves Naomi, as much as Ruth shows her dedication to Naomi, as much as Ruth gives up what her life could be and should be for Naomi, that does not make it any easier, any more possible, for Naomi to see herself as worthy of that kind of “hesed” (*Hebrew: unconditional love and faithfulness*).

What if today—and if it’s not today, the day will come—is that place and time when the only thing you can say about love is how you are not worthy of it? So, today—and for the sake of your tomorrow—just for a few minutes, just for now, maybe you can hear God saying, every so softly and maybe just barely, “Do not push me away. Do not deem yourself unworthy. Do not think that I do not want to be with you. Wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; you are mine. Who you are, who you have been, and who you will and can be, I love, with my whole heart, forever and always.” Then maybe today, even if it’s only for a moment, maybe all of us Naomis out there might hear, know, and feel hesed.

¹ *A New Look at Sermon Series: Preaching through Ruth, Word & World, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2013*

² *Marianne Williamson, A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) 165.*

³ *Emilie Townes, “We Are Not Raising the Dead,” Women in Leadership Seminar: Emerging Leadership Development Institute, The Association of Theological Schools, October 22–24, 2010, Pittsburgh, PA.*

RUTH: ACT I (*Loosely based on NRSVue*)

NARRATOR: ¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem [*House of Bread*], and a certain man went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech [*My God is King*] and the name of his wife Naomi [*Pleasant*], and the names of his two sons were Mahlon [*Sickly*] and Chilion [*Frail*]. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah [*Back of the Neck*] and the name of the other Ruth [*Faithful Friend*]. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both “Sickly” and “Frail” also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

NAOMI: ⁸ “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. ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of a new husband.”

NARRATOR: Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.

RUTH & ORPAH: ¹⁰ “No, we will return with you to your people.”

NAOMI: ¹¹ “Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband or sons. No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” ¹

NARRATOR: ⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

NAOMI: ¹⁵ “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ But Ruth said,

RUTH: Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!

NARRATOR: ¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. ¹⁹ 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,

WOMEN of Bethlehem: “Is this Naomi?”

NAOMI: ²⁰ “Call me no longer ‘Pleasant,’ call me Mara [*Bitter*],
for the El Shaddai [the 2-breasted God] has dealt bitterly with me.

²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty;
why call me ‘Pleasant’ when the LORD has dealt harshly with me and
El Shaddai [the 2-breasted God] has brought calamity upon me?”

NARRATOR: ²² 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.

RUTH: ACT II

NARRATOR: ² Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a pillar of the community of the family of Elimelech whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi,

RUTH: "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain behind someone in whose sight I may find favor."

NAOMI: "Go, my daughter."

NARRATOR: ³ So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz. ⁴ Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers,

BOAZ: "The LORD be with you."

REAPERS: "And also with you."

BOAZ: ⁵ "To whom does this young woman belong?"

MANAGER: ⁶ "She is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi. ⁷ She said, 'Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now without resting even for a moment."

BOAZ (to Ruth): ⁸ "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, drink from what the young men have drawn."

NARRATOR: ¹⁰ Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him,

RUTH: "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?"

BOAZ: ¹¹ "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, **under whose wings** you have come for refuge!"

RUTH: ¹³ "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants."

NARRATOR: ¹⁴ At mealtime Boaz said to her,

BOAZ: "Come here and eat some of this bread and dip your morsel in the sour wine."

NARRATOR: So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. ¹⁵ When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men,

BOAZ: "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶ You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

NARRATOR: ¹⁷ So she gleaned in the field until evening. She had about 30 pounds of barley! ¹⁸ She picked it up and brought it to her mother-in-law, who saw how much she had gleaned.

NAOMI: ¹⁹ Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you."

RUTH: "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."

NAOMI: ²⁰ "Blessed be Boaz, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! The man is a relative of ours, one of our kinsman redeemer."

RUTH: ²¹ "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.' "

NAOMI: ²² "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise someone might bother you in another field."

NARRATOR: ²³ So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests, and she lived with her mother-in-law.

RUTH: ACT III

NAOMI: ³ “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ² See, Boaz is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.”

RUTH: ⁵ She said to her, “All that you say I will do.”

NARRATOR: ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. ⁷ When Boaz had eaten and drunk and was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman!

BOAZ: ⁹ “Who are you?”

RUTH: “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are my Kinsman Redeemer.”

BOAZ: ¹⁰ “May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. ¹² But now, though it is true that I am a near Kinsman Redeemer, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. ¹³ Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as Kinsman Redeemer for you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as Redeemer for you. Lie down until the morning.”

NARRATOR: ¹⁴ So she lay at his feet until morning but got up before one person could recognize another, for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.”

BOAZ: ¹⁵ “Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.”

NARRATOR: So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her back; then he went into the town. ¹⁶ She came to her mother-in-law,

NAOMI: “How did things go with you, my daughter?”

NARRATOR: Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷ saying, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, ‘Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”

NAOMI: ¹⁸ “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”

RUTH: ACT IV

NARRATOR: ⁴ No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin [*Kinsman Redeemer*] of whom Boaz had spoken came passing by.

BOAZ: “Come over “So & So” [*Hebrew: Joe Schmo **]; sit down here.”

**(Seriously, this was snarky, and sheds light on what Boaz thought of this kin.)*

NARRATOR: ² Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the town and said, “Sit down here,” so they sat down. ³ He then said to the Kinsman Redeemer,

BOAZ: “Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. ⁴ So I thought I would tell you of it and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.”

NARRATOR: So the man said, “I will redeem it.”

BOAZ: ⁵ “The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.”

NARRATOR: ⁶ At this, the next-of-kin said, “In that case, I don’t want it. Take the Kinsman Redeemer yourself, for I cannot redeem it. Acquire it for yourself.” ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people,

BOAZ: “You are witnesses today that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Sickly and Frail. ¹⁰ I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.”

NARRATOR: ¹¹ Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children and bestow a name in Bethlehem; ¹² and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of **Perez**, whom **Tamar** bore to Judah.”

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son.

WOMEN of BETHLEHEM: ¹⁴ “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a Redeemer and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ 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.”

NARRATOR: ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his [wet]nurse [*Hebrew: implied*]¹⁷ The **women of the neighborhood gave him a name**, saying,

WOMEN of BETHLEHEM: “A son has been born to Naomi.”

NARRATOR: The **women of Bethlehem named him** “One Who Serves” [Obed]; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. ¹⁸ Now these are the descendants of **Perez**: Perez became the father of Hezron, ¹⁹ Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, ²⁰ Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, ²¹ Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, ²² Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. ...*and they all lived happily ever after...*

NUGGETS:

1. The best way to read scripture is to look for the story behind the story. Its meaning is found behind the literal words. For instance: (1) The book of Ruth has 84 verses, 23 of them reference the word “Redeem.” Therefore this story is about redemption (Jesus’ role). (2) Secondly, this story is written from a woman’s point of view, therefore is in contrast to the violence by men in the preceding books of Joshua, and Judges whose stories illuminate the antithesis of God’s nature, whereas Ruth is the epitome of God’s “hesed” – unfailing love and faithfulness. (3) Ruth becomes a symbol of all that God seeks to uplift: She represents widows, orphans, and foreigners.
2. El Shaddai is mistranslated throughout the Old Testament as “Almighty” however, the literal Hebrew actually says, “Two Breasted One” and means the “All Sufficient One.” Creator and Sustainer, alluding to the One who gives birth and feeds with her own body.
3. “During the time of the Judges” Israel had abandoned God, every man did what they wanted, and the land was filled with violence, especially against women. (See Judges, especially chapter 19).
4. A widow without sons was abandoned to prostitution or to begging.
5. A woman without male protection was fair game for anyone, anything.
6. Levirate Marriage: Carrying on the bloodline is paramount to the Hebrews, therefore if a husband dies, his closest male relative is to marry the woman and give her a son. He is called the “Goel,” the “Kinsman Redeemer”

HINTS of WOMEN Power in ACT I:

1. Ruth 1: 8 “Go back to your **mother**’s house (unheard of, if not rejected, a woman belonged to her father’s house)
2. Ruth 1:19 The whole city of Bethlehem turn out to greet them, but the **women** are the one’s with a voice

HINTS of WOMEN Power in ACT II:

1. Ruth 2:12 “**under whose wings**” same phrase used by Ruth to Boaz in the next chapter. Stay tuned.
2. What protections does Boaz secure for Ruth?

HINTS of WOMEN Power in ACT III:

1. Ruth 3:9 “I am Ruth, your servant; *spread your cloak over your servant*, for you are my Kinsman Redeemer.” Ruth does not wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. Her act of removing his cloak, and her response “*spread your cloak over your servant*,” is a marriage proposal. She is asking him to marry her!

HINTS of WOMEN Power in ACT IV:

1. Ruth 4:12 Tamar’s story is of a daughter-in-law of Judah (the 1st born of Jacob’s 12 sons), who became a widow, and Judah refused a Kinsman Redeemer for her. By trickery, she slept with her father-in-law, Judah, bore him a son, Perez, and for her brave act is remembered in Jesus’ genealogy found in Matthew 1.
2. Ruth 4:14 “for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons” becomes a slap in the face of patriarchy.
3. Ruth 4:16 Naomi, the grandmother, “became his [wet]**nurse**” (Midrash) The literal Hebrew word for “nurse” has loose connections with “The Two Breasted One” from El Shaddai.
4. Ruth 4:17 The Women of Bethlehem give the child his name (not his father)
5. Ruth 4:17 The Women of Bethlehem proclaim that El Shaddai has given Naomi a son, not a grandson.
6. Matthew 1:3,5 One nugget about the man in the story: Boaz. According to Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew 1, Boaz’s mother was none other than Rahab, the “prostitute” from Jericho who hid and helped Israeli spies in order to be welcomed into the Hebrew people. This woman would have raised Boaz from the perspective of a foreigner who desired to be one of God’s daughters.
7. Matthew 1:3 & 5 As Tamar and Ruth, gutsy women, demanded and obtained their Kinsman Redeemer, on their own terms, they are joined by Boaz’s mother, Rahab, in Jesus’ lineage. They become hallowed descendants of our Messiah, Jesus, their names and stories have lasted 3000 years. Thanks be to God.