

THE STORY OF RUTH AND NAOMI
Adapted from the NRSV Biblical Story by
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As performed with dancer, actress and voice at the
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Ecumenical Women Opening Worship
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Tillman Chapel, Church Center for the United Nations

Story telling:

They say—those “Theys” who write books and tell us how to think about things—
They say this: (*sarcastically*) “The quiet, idyllic mood of the book of Ruth and the charm
of its gentle heroine has given it a special appeal to many generations of readers.”¹

But we know better. Having been schooled in the life of strong women, we know the
true story; amended in wedding chapels, churches and cathedrals, told to children as bible
story, is NOT idyllic, quiet, charming or gentle. This story is a tale of desperate grief. A
story of survival in an unjust world. This is a story of a woman who, according to the
law of the day, is a non-person. She, women, we are possessions. Objects. Burdens.
Birthing, Sexing, Accessories. This story is a story of land being Mans’ and food being
Mans’ and Blessings belonging to Man. A story where a woman breaks her back to birth,
to bake, to sweep, to plant, to harvest, and without a man, she can buy neither land, food,
shelter, nor safety. It is a story of a woman bereft. Her deprivation of NO interest to the
ways things are.

This is what WE know.
We know this not only from this story,
But, we know it today.

So, let’s listen.

NAOMI GRIEVES:

Naomi GRIEVED. It was the grief of losing a husband in a foreign land, of then losing,
not one, but two sons. With her birthing and wifely rights lost, the door was shut. No
current currency for worn bodies and wrinkled eyes. Too old to woo a man’s family. In a
foreign land without brothers, an old wombweakened lady, she had no means to food or
shelter. No means to safety. No means to live.

¹ Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Bible: Introduction to the Book of Ruth

Tears stung her eyes for days. Her nose red, her throat dry, thirsty and hungry. Her soul churning with the bitter taste of new poverty. No way up. No way out. No way. She did nothing to deserve such an end.

“I am BITTER”, she cried.
God has done this horror to me.”

Another voice: Has God done this to her? Or is it. . . the laws of the land? The laws of Man?

NAOMI FALLS FROM GRACE:

“For sake of life I left Israel. Full. Full of beauty, hope, and life. Full of risk. Full of courage. Attached to the man I married, I worked hard to make a life that was good. I held a husband and two sons in my arms; living all those years in Moab. My husband worked. My sons grew. They took wives from Moabite women. And I loved them.

And now? I have been left to die. Shrinking from shrugs of shoulders, and ‘What’re you going to do’s?’ I am dead.
I am BITTER”

WALK or DIE.

Not knowing what else to do, in the foreign land of Moab without brothers to marry widows, Naomi recalled that God had given food to the Israelites. Perhaps they would have enough left over for her. For her sorry tragic life. She took the hands of the wives of her dead sons and walked towards the land of her father: Judah.

Three women in the desert. Walked. Weak with hunger, they walked. Rain storm, they walked. Dry hot horrid heat, they walked. Racked with grief, down for the count, they walked. Walk or DIE.

In her bitterness, Naomi longed for death.

EASIER TO DIE:

Naomi longed, nearly lived to die.

She turned to her daughters, struggling to walk, and said, “Go, return to your mother’s house. I do NOT have a life to share with you. I do NOT want you to live the life I live. And may the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead of your husbands and my husband and with me. The Lord grant that you may find a home, each of you in the house of your fathers!”

Another voice: In the Father's House. . . And what does that Father's house say to little girls, grown girls, wombweakened women???

And she kissed them. Knowing.

And they wept. "No! We will return with you and your people."

"Turn back, my daughters, why would you go with me? Of what purpose is such a journey for you? I have no sons left in my womb that you might marry. Turn back, my daughters, go your way. I am too old to have a husband. If I say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown so that you might marry them? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me—the hand of the Lord has gone against me."

Another voice: Has Lord's Hand gone against her? Or is it. . . . the laws of the land? The laws of Man?

And they wept again; each knowing the probability of Naomi's death.

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye.

THE GRACE OF GOD: DONA NOBIS PACEM

But Ruth, standing at the border of Moab with the brook Zered at her back, glanced one last time at the beckoning mountains of home that begged her to return to a life that might yet be a life.

She...could not.

Ruth clung to her.

Naomi knew not what to do. Her plan to die alone in the desert destroyed. She looked down at Ruth, "Don't you see, Ruth? Orpah has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return with her!!!!"

But Ruth said, "Oh do not ask me to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you."

Naomi said no more for she saw Ruth would have no other answer. Ruth, whether Naomi wanted it or not, would make sure that Naomi lived. Naomi grieved, Oh how welcome would Death be! But, she pictured Ruth alone in the desert, and she loved Ruth.

CONGREGATIONAL SONG OF DONA NOBIS PACEM

ARRIVAL IN BETHLEHEM:

When they arrived in Bethlehem the town stirred.

The village women gossiped, “Is that Naomi?” The grieving widow looked nothing like the young maiden who had left so many years ago.

Naomi answered, to the air, herself, to her heart & the despair she felt. To whomever would listen, “No. I am not Naomi. I am Mara. Mara, as The Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full and now I am empty. Why would you call me Naomi when the Lord has afflicted me and brought down such pain upon me?”

Another voice: Has the Almighty dealt bitterly with her? Or is it . . . the laws of the land? The laws of Man?

RUTH HUSTLES: NAOMI WANTS TO DIE

Now, in Bethlehem, Ruth scrapped for hope. A man named Boaz, from the clan of Naomi’s patriarch had land, money, food. Boaz had life. Ruth looked up to the heavens, and falling to her knees sought the strength of a lionesses.

Willing to survive, and do what she could to care for grieving Naomi. Ruth would put her body, her mind, and heart at risk. She knew the dangers of men: leering, molesting, violating with no consequences . . .

Another voice: Women carrying the burden of care. ‘Round the world. Unprotected by the laws of Man. . . .

Willing, she said to Naomi, “I will go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after Boaz. I will find favor in his sight.”

Naomi answered, “OH. Go, my daughter.”

And so she did.

RUTH ENDANGERED IN THE FIELDS

Ruth went out and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And yes: men threatened the unprotected woman. Curious at this curiosity, they talked, taunted, laughed, and whistled; doing the things men do when they picture the ungoverned and unpunished possibilities.

But, when Boaz saw her reaping, his heart softened, and he blessed her reaping. He wished that her hunger might be satisfied.

Ruth had caught his eye. Young and beautiful, vulnerable yet strong. Watching her, he said to his servants, “Whose maiden is this?”

“She is from Moab. She is the one who came with Naomi; she had come to me in her weakness with ferocity in her eyes, asking ‘Pray, let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers’ and so she has from early morning until now, without resting even a moment.”

So Boaz went to Ruth, “Now listen, my daughter, stay here. Do not go to glean in any other field or leave this one, and keep close to my maidens. Let your eyes be upon the field which they are reaping and follow after them. I have charged the young men not to molest you. When you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.”

RUTH and BOAZ meet; RUTH’s NOSE to the GROUND

She fell on her face, a small glimmer of compassion in a grey stone world, and bowed to the ground saying, “Oh why have I found favor in your eyes that you should take any notice of me? For I am nothing but a foreigner.”

But Boaz said to her, “All that you have done for Naomi since the death of your husband has been fully told me. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The Lord bless you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Ruth replied, “You are most gracious to me, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to me. You have treated me as a maidservant, though I am not.”

At mealtime, Boaz came to Ruth, “Come, and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.” And she sat beside his reapers, and he passed to her parched grain; and she ate only until she was satisfied leaving some left over.

When she rose to glean again, Boaz instructed his young men, “let her glean even among that which is not yet harvested, and do not reproach her. And pull out some from the bundles for her, and leave it for her to glean and do not rebuke her.”

Another voice: Is this a new law . . . a new governance of structures and systems in the fields . . . for sake of a woman?

Ruth gleaned all day. From sunrise to sunset, she sweated and collected all she could, knowing full well the “blessing of the Lord” might at any time be taken from her.

At nightfall, she went to Naomi in the city carrying a basket of barley.

NAOMI BEGINS TO LIVE:

Naomi looked up, eyes gleaming with tears, shocked that Ruth returned not only alive but with barley. “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Big blessings to the man who has been kind to you.

Another voice: Blessing! Naomi! Is it not an equal right and a equal responsibility that kindness be the rule?

“The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz.”

Naomi rejoiced, “Big blessings to this man by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead: This man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin!”

Ruth then told Naomi how he had protected her by putting her close to his servants.

“It is well, my daughter, that you go out with his maidens, lest in another field you be molested.”

And it went on like this until all the barley had been harvested;

**THE HARVEST IS OVER: NAOMI SURVIVES the BEST WAY SHE CAN . . .
RUTH’S BODY.**

Their survival, again, at stake: The barley had all been harvested.

What would these women do?

“Ruth, we must do something. This is what we must do: Tonight, Boaz is winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes and go into him.”

“Do not make yourself known to him until he has finished eating and he has drunk all that he will drink. But when he lies down, see where he lies down. Then, go and uncover him and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

So she did so.

At midnight, as Ruth lay at his side, he woke up, startled, “Who are you?”

“I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take me as your wife for you are next of kin to me”.

“Blessed be the Lord, my daughter; this kindness is greater than the first. You have not gone after a young man, poor or rich, but after me.”

“But, I am not the next of kin to you.”

“We must find out if he will be the next of kin for you. If he will not, I will. Now, lie down until morning with me.”

And so she did.

Rising before daylight, so that others would not recognize what happened, Ruth went home to Naomi.

“How did you fare, my daughter?” Naomi asked when she returned to her.

“He gave me more barley saying, “Oh, you must not go back empty-handed to Naomi”

BOAZ MAKES A DEAL

Boaz went up to the gate of the city where the business transactions normally took place and sat down. Nearby he beheld the next of kin of whom he had previously spoken.

“Come, sit with me”

And he did.

Finding 10 other male elders of the city, Boaz beckoned, “Come, sit with me”

And so the negotiations began.

“Naomi has a parcel of land which belonged to her husband. Tell me if you will redeem it. There is no one besides you to redeem it.”

“Of course I will redeem it.”

“Then, you must also buy the widow Ruth, the Moabitess, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance.”

The next of Kin cried, “I cannot redeem it for myself, for I will impair my own inheritance. The children I would have by Ruth would take away from my sons. Oh! Take my right of redemption for yourself.”

Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to her husband and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon.”

“Also, Ruth, the Moabitess and widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance. The name of the dead will not be cut

off from among his brethren and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses to this day.”

“We are witnesses of this transaction” they said, and blessed him.

Another voice: “Robbing women, buying womentrading women is blessed by men for the sake of men”

So Ruth and Boaz were married. And soon had a son.

THE WOMEN RESPOND:

The women exclaimed, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a next of kin. May his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, Naomi! For Ruth, who loves you so, who is worth more to you than seven sons, has given him birth”

The women of the village gave him a name saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” And they named him Obed. Obed became the father of Jesse; who was the father of David.

And so, in the grieving days of Naomi, all these things happened.