

RUTH AND NAOMI



The Book of Ruth 1:16 "But Ruth said (to Naomi), '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. . . .' When Naomi saw that (Ruth) was determined to go with her, she said no more"

These words to Naomi from today's first Reading are among the best known and most beloved from the Hebrew Scriptures, though most of us probably don't really remember the rest of the story of Ruth, or its implications for later generations. Still Ruth's profound sense of loyalty here, her willingness to endure any trials or tribulations to remain with her friend, even unto

death, stirs something deep within many of us. Her personal devotion inspires us. This reading reawakens within many a powerful longing in our heart to feel a similar heroic sense of commitment, and then to act upon it.

Sadly, this is the only time in our three-year lectionary cycle that we have readings from the Book of Ruth. In many ways though, there was nothing really extraordinary about the lives of the women in this story from the Hebrew Scriptures. What we are told is simply that there was a famine in the land of Judah, not an uncommon occurrence. The famine was such that a certain man from Bethlehem in Judea named Elimelech gathered up his family, his wife and their two sons, and traveled to a more favorable locale, to a foreign land as it were, to become a climate refugee there in the country of Moab, a traditional enemy of the people of Israel. Elimelech, we are told, later died in the country of Moab, a reminder that life is hard and uncertain. Elimelech's wife, Naomi, however, was fortunate, for when her husband died, she had two sons to look after her. In a patriarchal society like this, women were powerless and destitute, without sons, or husbands, or family to provide for them. Naomi and her two sons continued to dwell in this foreign land as refugees and the sons grew up and took foreign wives from the land where they lived; that is, they married Moabite women. Then tragedy struck again, for after about ten years both

the sons had also died, and these three women were now widows, without sons or husbands to care for them.

Meanwhile, Naomi had heard that the famine was over in Judea, that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So, Naomi set out from the place where she had been living, sending her two daughters-in-law back to their own mothers' homes. There were no grandchildren to look after the wives of Naomi's sons; but since they were natives to that region, they both had families to return to, who could care for them. Naomi, however, had no family left in that country. She was a stranger in a strange land, a foreigner, so she decided to return to her people back in Judea; she decided to go home. The parting of these three women was bitter-sweet. They kissed each other and wept aloud; such was their love for each other. It is an emotional and moving scene. "Go, return each of you to your mothers' house," Naomi says. But the daughters-in-law would not leave her. "No," they said, "we will return with you to your people." However, Naomi reasoned with them and told them not to be foolish. Then they wept aloud again. One of the daughters-in-law, named Orpah, returned to her own family, but the other, the one named Ruth, clung to Naomi and would not go away. "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. . ."

It is this decision of Ruth's that made her life heroic. She decided not to abandon her Judean mother-in-law by returning to her own Moabite family where she would be comfortable and safe. Instead, she was determined to stay with her friend and move with her to a land foreign to her and live among a stranger people and make someone else's God her God. It was Ruth's action that her life extraordinary. And in time, with Naomi's help, Ruth married again in the land of Judea, to a Jewish man, and her new husband and she had a son together, whose name was Jesse. And their son Jesse grew up and married and had two daughters and eight sons, the youngest of which was named David, who in time became the beloved King of Israel. So that good King David's great grandmother was a foreigner, the courageous Moabite refugee named Ruth. Oh, to imagine what might have happened to the Jewish nation had Ruth gone home to her own people and not stayed with Naomi?

We do not generally have the courage to be as daring as Ruth was. Instead, we are more like the daughter-in-law Orpah, choosing the reasonable way out and making the less costly and demanding choices in our lives. Staying where it was safe and comfortable. Orpah could easily explain her decision to others. Her husband had died, and her husband's mother, a foreigner, was returning home to her own people. Orpah had dutifully *started* to return with her mother-in-law, but Naomi reasoned with her and

sent her back to her own home and her own people. That was best for Naomi, that was what *she* wanted, and that was best for Orpah. No one would accuse of Orpah of weakness or fear or anything for that matter. She loved her mother-in-law. She did what was asked of her and what appeared prudent. Orpah was not a coward. She was just not heroic like Ruth. She lived an ordinary life.

I suspect that most of us are more like Orpah than Ruth. That we rationalize our decisions and actions and see that they are wise and good for all concerned. That we avoid the risk of being extraordinary, of being heroines, and live instead lives of mediocrity. Can we be as devoted to someone or something as Ruth was? Can we speak the words that Ruth did, the language of fidelity, of trust, of commitment, even unto death? The language of love, of unconditional love? It is a daring prospect.

For in the end, I imagine, we are less like Jesus bravely standing trial before the Sanhedrin and more like Peter standing in the courtyard of the high priest thrice denying even knowing Jesus. We identify less with Jesus hanging on the cross and more with the disciples fleeing arrest and hiding behind closed doors, for fear of the Jewish authorities. We might cling to the skirts of Naomi and weep aloud, but in the end, I suspect that we are most likely to return home to our mothers. The great tragedy of our lives is our own apparent weakness and fear.

And I suspect that it is isolation that we fear most. Heroes live lonely lives. They are often strangers even among their own family and friends. They are distant and distinct from those around them. I suppose that we are too afraid of the notoriety, of being separated from *our own* people, our family, and friends, our community. We want more to be loved and accepted as we are, by those we are with. We do not want to be buried among strangers, in a foreign land. We are too afraid to be heroes.

So, week after week I stand up in this church and seek ways to inspire us all to do great things, to be heroes, to enlist us in good causes, to sacrifice some portion of our time and energy for others, to involve us in the longings of our hearts and the care of our neighbors, that together we might be able to do something great as the people of God in this place. That together we might take our ordinary lives and accomplish something extraordinary, like feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, attending to the sick, welcoming the refugee --- working with our local Food Bank, organizing support of our local hospitals with Blood Drives, supporting the Literary Volunteers or the Community Culinary School, or gathering support at our Farmers' Market, or resettling a refugee family in our community.

Is not that in the end what the Church is all about? Living our lives within a community of faith, where we are accepted and loved, and not among strangers. And yet within that community of faith are inspired to achieve great things, to love God with all our heart, and with all our understanding, and with all our strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Such that these heroic actions or opportunities which we might have turned away from as individuals, we might now accomplish together, rising above our earthly cares, to that which is greater, and which is to the glory of God our Father. AMEN