

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
June 25, 2023  
Ruth 1:1-5, 7-8, 14-22; 4:13-17  
Belonging: Extending Family

### Prayer of Illumination

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As we continue recognizing Refugee Awareness Month and the new neighbors we welcome into our community, we hear a beloved story from scripture – the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. This is a story that resonates deeply with many people, and I have preached on it through the lens of friendship, through the lens of when bad things happen to good people and as the basis for marriage. This morning I want us to consider it through the lens of refugees.

The first verse of Ruth provides the context for our first set of refugees Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons - *in the days when the judges ruled*. This was a stressful and dark time for the Hebrew people. While there were periods of strong political and spiritual leadership in the land under Deborah and Gideon, most of this era was summed up by a refrain that is repeated throughout the book of Judges: “In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.”<sup>1</sup> When famine hit, refugees fled from the chaos in their land to seek a better life and stability, much like many in our world today. Hear now the beginning of the story of this family of refugees from Ruth chapter 1:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. <sup>2</sup> The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. <sup>3</sup> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

<sup>7</sup> So Naomi 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. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “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. ...

<sup>14</sup> Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup> So she said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” <sup>16</sup> But Ruth said,  
“Do not press me to leave you, 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.

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<sup>1</sup>e.g. Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25

<sup>17</sup> 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!”

<sup>18</sup> When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

<sup>19</sup> 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, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” <sup>20</sup> She said to them,

“Call me no longer Naomi; call me Mara,  
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

<sup>21</sup> I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty;  
why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me  
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

<sup>22</sup> 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.

Before we hear the end of the story, I am going to summarize the chapters 2, 3 and 4. As we just heard, Ruth and Naomi arrived at the beginning of the barley harvest. Naomi is bitter about what life has dealt her, and yet she knows that she needs to come up with a plan if she and Ruth are to survive. Naomi shows the resilience of many who are fleeing tough situations. She needs to find a way to make it work. She suggests to Ruth that she go to find work harvesting in the fields of Naomi’s distant relative Boaz. Ruth goes out into the fields and Boaz takes an interest in her, offering advice and protection. Boaz has learned about Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi, leaving her homeland behind to care for her mother-in-law.

Ruth returns home to Naomi with plenty of food, telling Naomi about Boaz’ kindness. Naomi asks for God’s blessing on Boaz, and goes onto give Ruth instructions on how to get closer to Boaz by lying down with him on the threshing floor of the grainery after the wining and dining that closed the daily harvest. Ruth does just that and Boaz pledges to find a husband for Ruth through the extended family in the area, as was the tradition of the time.

You see Boaz was what is known as a kinsman-redeemer. A kinsman-redeemer was responsible for taking care of and protecting the interests of needy members of the extended family; to provide an heir for a brother who died, or redeem land a poor relative had sold outside the family, or to redeem a relative sold into slavery.

In chapter 4, the final chapter, Boaz goes up to the city gate, the location where townspeople meet and, calls a relative of Naomi’s who he knows – a closer kinsman than he Boaz is - and asks whether he would redeem and marry Ruth. This kinsman refuses, and Boaz buys Ruth’s inheritance from him. We conclude our story with these words from Ruth chapter 4:

<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and

became his nurse. <sup>17</sup> The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

We have been celebrating World Refugee month during June, with the last week being recognized as World Refugee Week, and June 20 designated by the United Nations to honor World Refugee Day. This day celebrates the strength and courage of people who have been forced to flee their home country to escape conflict or persecution. It shines a light on the rights, needs and dreams of refugees, helping to mobilize political will and resources so refugees can not only survive but also thrive.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Ruth and Naomi is often shared as part of the church’s call to welcome new neighbors, especially when the geopolitical situation is complicated. Naomi and her husband had left their home in Judah during a famine and resettled in Moab. They lived there about 10 years and her sons had married Moabite women. The lands of Moab and Judah were not on good terms. The history of that tension is a story for another day, but for an Israelite to move to Moab, you know the situation has to be bad. But so is the plight for many in our world who live in regions where drought or floods leave the land barren and the people starving.

This is a human tragedy we see unfolding in our own world today. The United Nations World Food Program reported that the world is facing multiple famines of biblical proportions with 18 hunger “Hotspots” throughout the world, including 22 countries where conflict, climate extremes, and economic shocks continue to drive more and more communities into crisis.<sup>3</sup> Earlier this month the UN shared about the dire situation in Sudan, where political conflict has exacerbated the famine. Drought, floods, fighting and economic crises have devastated Sudan, and nearby countries. So far, roughly 425,000 people have fled Sudan to neighboring countries, including South Sudan, Chad and Egypt, according to the International Organization for Migration. The UN predicts the exodus could soar to a million more people over the next six months.<sup>4</sup>

The parallels between Sudan and our story from Ruth are striking. Elimelech and Naomi hail from Bethlehem, which means “house of bread” in Hebrew. It was an area known for food production – a bread basket in ancient Judah. Likewise Sudan has a bread basket region and there were hopes it might replace Ukraine as a source of grain to the Middle East and parts of Africa.<sup>5</sup> Instead, hundreds of thousands are fleeing this area to other countries.

When we hear reports of the Sudanese fleeing from their homeland, think of Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons. They make a life in Moab, with their sons marrying local Moabite women. After the death of her husband and sons, Naomi decides the best option for her as a widow was to return to her homeland. In the ancient near east, along with orphans, widows were vulnerable and often exploited members of society. They needed protection in an economic system that did not provide support outside extended family structures. This is the crux the story told in the book of Ruth. Naomi needed to return to a place where she had

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/world-refugee-day>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fightfoodcrises.net/hunger-hotspots/en/>

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Bryant. Sudan’s crisis sends hunger shockwaves across the region. *World Food Programme*. 5 June 2023. <https://www.wfp.org/stories/sudans-crisis-escalates-fragile-region-feels-fallout>

<sup>5</sup> Baher al-Kady. Can Sudan replace Ukraine as breadbasket for MENA region? *AL Monitor*. June 2, 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/can-sudan-replace-ukraine-breadbasket-mena-region>

extended family, who might help to support her. Because of their vulnerable position, there were ethical obligations toward widows and orphans. Social and religious laws taught that they are to be cared for by providing food through a tithe or permitting gleaning of the fields, orchards, and vineyards<sup>6</sup> as we see our scripture this morning. So Naomi, this now childless widow, becomes a refugee again, fleeing to a place with family connections. But she does not return alone. Despite pleading with her to remain, her daughter-in-law Ruth accompanies her on the journey.

I heard a story on NPR a few years ago that has stuck with me about what people bring with them when they flee a tragic situation. Kurdish refugees were fleeing from their homes in Turkey and crossing the border into Iran. The reporter interviewed a family on one of the buses - a Kurdish schoolteacher, Najah Raso, with her 14-year-old daughter and her 12-year-old son. When asked what they brought with them as they were fleeing, Ms. Raso said that they didn't bring much with them - her daughter's musical instrument and a laptop with DVDs of an English language course. When asked why they brought those items, Najah answered, "We brought our ambitions."<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, by bringing Ruth, Naomi also brought ambitions for a better life. This past week I attended the Samaritas Art Show at Tabooli Mediterranean Restaurant in East Lansing. The show runs through tonight, so if you have a hankering for Mediterranean fare, I encourage you to go check it out. The pieces were created by youth from around the world, now in refugee foster care in Michigan. These youth have been lost or separated from their families while fleeing their home countries, but through connections with local foster homes, volunteers, and Samaritas' support, they are able to pursue a safe and bright future. Through art, they can share their voice with the community –share their hearts, losses, hopes, and dreams.

Accompanying the incredible artistic creations are notes written by the artists. They are all so touching and I found myself tearing up reading them. One that really struck me spoke to the ambitions that refugees bring with them. Safya, from Afghanistan, wrote about the red flowers she painted "My mom told me, "What you spend years creating, other could destroy overnight. Create anyway." I created my dreams, but they were destroyed by the Taliban. Not only my dreams, but all women's dreams. But my journey made me who I am, and in the end it shapes every detail about me. The path of my life brought me to America where I could rebuild my dreams again. One of them is doing my best painting and drawing."<sup>8</sup>

The courage, resilience and spirit displayed by those who flee their homeland in search of a better life is inspiring. And when I say inspiring, I don't mean just a swell of a good feeling inside, but an inspiration to action. An inspiration to make a difference. We here at PCO have a long history of welcoming new neighbors and it is my prayer that this will be an active part of our ministry in the future. I was thinking about what that might look like this week as I was watching the coverage on the news of two very distinct rescue missions.

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<sup>6</sup> e.g. Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 24:19-21

<sup>7</sup> Jane Arraf. Kurdish Syrians Flee To Iraq. *Morning Edition*. October 18, 2019  
<https://www.npr.org/2019/10/18/771219847/kurdish-syrians-flee-to-iraq>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.samaritas.org/Youth-Art-Show>

Like many, I followed the attempts to rescue the five explorers whose Oceangate submersible lost communication with its home base. It was a truly remarkable the breadth and depth of the technology employed from four governments and multiple private companies, sparing no expense to locate this sub. As someone who enjoys reading about quests of discovery, I was saddened by the loss of these explorers to the world.

At the same time, I was following the story of the *Adriana*, the 90-foot fishing boat that set sail from eastern Libya hoping to reach Italy but sank off the coast of Greece. There are many who bear responsibility for this tragedy, and there have been a number of news stories that have contrasted the financial angle – rich explorers who paid large sums for extreme pleasure travel to the migrants with nothing, seeking to find a home where they might survive.

And into this incredible story of tragedy, where an estimated 650 men, women and children perished, we have a Boaz moment – a moment of redemption. In the early morning hours of June 14, a superyacht from Mexico – they Mayan Queen IV - received a call about a migrant ship in distress four nautical miles away. The boat had already sunk when Mayan Queen arrived. All the four-person crew could see were the lights of a Greek Coast Guard vessel scanning the water's surface. But they could hear the screams of survivors. And these modern day Boaz redeemers rescued 100 desperate, dehydrated and sea-soaked Pakistani, Syrian, Palestinian and Egyptian migrants.<sup>9</sup>

In the ancient near east, a kinsman-redeemer was responsible for taking care of and protecting the interests of needy members of the extended family. The crew of this yacht became the extended family of the migrants, offering rescue and an opportunity for a new life. We are called as a community and individually to become extended family for those new to our community. We can do this by learning about the immigration process, a complicated system of specific programs for asylum seekers, refugees, those with family already in the US and those seeking employment in various sectors. We can do this through advocacy for legislation offering protection and pathways to a more secure future. And we can do this by becoming each other's harvest.

In the issue of *Presbyterian Outlook* focused on belonging I mentioned last week, there is a column by the Rev. Marcy Auld Glass who quotes the poet Gwendolyn Brooks: "*We are each other's harvest.*" Glass says, "To be each other's harvest requires us to also help each other in the planting, the cultivating, the weeding and the nurturing. In the COVID-19 aftermath, I think we're out of practice in doing the work of belonging. We feel isolated but don't remember how to be connected. Maybe it started before COVID. Maybe busy schedules and political entrenchment play a part, too." Glass concludes saying, "..., I pray we can be more intentional about doing the work of belonging: tilling the soil of welcome, cultivating tender shoots of friendship, weeding fields of loneliness and helping each other harvest meaning, connection and belonging. ...We are each other's harvest. We are each other's business." <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> By Jason Horowitz and Matina Stevis-Gridneff. A Superyacht Gave a Lifeline to 100 Migrants Thrown Into the Sea. *New York Times*. June 21, 2023. Online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/21/world/europe/yacht-migrant-rescue-greece.html>

<sup>10</sup> Marcella Auld Glass. The harvest of belonging. *Presbyterian Outlook*. April 6, 2023. Online at <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/04/the-harvest-of-belonging/>

For me, that is the take home message from Ruth and Naomi's story. Naomi and Ruth were each other's harvest. In good years and in lean years. They belonged to each other as we heard: "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, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you." Let us make room at our table - the table of our country, our community and our church – for more people to know this belonging, to become part of our extended family.

As part of our call to extend this sense of belonging, I invite to join me in the words of our Affirmation of Faith. We recited a portion of this last week. *The Immigrant's Creed* by José Luis Casa is found in the PC(USA) Book of Common Worship.

I believe in Almighty God, who guided the people in exile and in exodus, the God of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, the God of foreigners and immigrants.

I believe in Jesus Christ, a displaced Galilean, who was born away from his people and his home, who fled his country with his parents when his life was in danger, and returning to his own country suffered the oppression of the tyrant Pontius Pilate, the servant of a foreign power. Jesus was persecuted, beaten, and finally tortured, accused and condemned to death unjustly. But on the third day, this scorned Jesus rose from the dead, not as a foreigner but to offer us citizenship in heaven.