

## Clinging to Hope Ruth 1:1-14

The opening scene of Ruth is rather dramatic. The author places this story during the time period of the judges or chieftains. This was a time of chaos within the nation of Israel. This small tribal group had begun to establish itself but it did not have centralized authority, there was no king. Order was maintained by a series of judges. The nation underwent a cycle: a cycle in which the people worshipped God and then they would receive a blessing. The people want to be like their neighbors and they would then start worshiping idols and then neighbors would invade. God would then raise up a judge to kick out the invaders and the people would get right with God again. Many famous stories come from this period. Deborah and Barak who drove off the Canaanite general Sisera who met an untimely end while resting in a tent; or Gideon who was called by God to be a mighty warrior but required reassurance by placing a fleece on the ground; or Samson whose haircut led to his capture at defeat at the hands of Philistines only for God once again to show himself faithful. This is a period marked by intense tribal warfare. Into this period we begin our story. There is a famine in the land. It doesn't say God caused the famine or that there is a reason for the famine just that famine appeared. Famine moves people. In Genesis 12 Abram and Sarai are moved to Egypt by famine, in Genesis 26 we Isaac and Rebekah moved by famine. We see this within our own world; famines and food scarcities have led to the movements of people in South Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria and other places. Famine has caused people to move in South Sudan from their homes to swamps. You read stories of people boiling tree bark just to give their children something.<sup>1</sup> This small family is moved by famine, moved from Bethlehem from the house of bread. The text says they went to reside. To reside is to move to a land temporarily. Again the author is purposely invoking our memories to all those who have done this before, of Abram and Sarai, Isaac and Rebekah, Joseph and his brothers who sojourned in a foreign land.

This family moves to the land of Moab. Moab would be in the south of modern nation Jordan. It is about a journey of 50 miles. Culturally and linguistically the Moabites are related to the Hebrew people although they worshipped a different God. Scripture records that the Moabites are descendants of Lot.

This move seems a little strange, the Moabites were not exactly friendly with the Hebrew people. The King of Moab sought to destroy the people as they wandered in the wilderness. According to the Deuteronomy they would not offer the people food and water as they left Egypt and they attacked them. The text takes this grudge even further saying "No Moabite shall ever be admitted to the congregation of the Lord even until the tenth generation... You shall never concern yourself with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/03/14/520033701/why-the-famine-in-south-sudan-keeps-getting-worse>

their welfare or benefit as long as you live.”<sup>2</sup> Into this strained ethnic tension this family moves into the neighborhood. I am sure this small family received a less than warm welcome.

We have Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion living in an unfriendly village. When Elimelech dies, once again the text does not indicate this is a punishment from God or that he did anything wrong he just suddenly dies. The phrase here is interesting because Elimelech has become Naomi’s husband. The indication here is that primary focus of story is not the action of the men but that of the women. Naomi is the grieving spouse. Fortunately for Naomi she has a retirement plan. Her two sons would have been expected to care for her for the rest of her life. Her sons do something strange they marry Moabite women. The text does not indicate why they did this. This was a marriage that would have been frowned upon. Deuteronomy 7 specifically tells the Hebrew people not to intermarry with outsiders. But these sons for some reason marry Moabite women anyway. After about 10 years the sons whose names roughly translate to “annihilation” and “illness” surprisingly die.

Naomi is left in a foreign hostile land. With two daughters-in-law she probably did not want and was probably unhappy with her son’s for marrying them in the first place. And Naomi has to figure out what to do. Naomi at this point reminds me a little of Job that other biblical character that has calamity after calamity strike him for no apparent reason. Naomi does that only thing she can do she starts out with her daughters-in-law back to Bethlehem for she has heard that the Lord has been favorable to that land and given them food. One has to wonder what Naomi was thinking. Was she proud to return with her Orpah and Ruth? Was she embarrassed? Was she worried they would face a similar sense of unwelcome as her husband when they moved to Moab?

We finally hear Naomi speak. Her first words are “Turn back, each of you to her Mother’s house.” Naomi is imploring them to make their own situation better. Turn your life around and return to your own people. She then proceeds to bless them, and encourages them to find security with their own people and with new husbands. At the crossroads these women weep. Naomi implores them to turn away. She asks a rhetorical question, Why should you stay? Have I more sons in my body to give you? Will you wait till they are old enough to marry? Leave me; my lot is bitter, God’s hand is against me. Again they weep Orpah whose name means a cloud that passes without giving water departs, but Ruth whose name translates to a well watered garden stays. Orpah kisses her mother and law and departs. Ruth stays clings to Naomi. The image in Hebrew is that Ruth is stuck to Naomi, this is a permanent bonding, this a super glue of relationships.

This story lifts up so many questions we wrestle with today. How do you find center in the midst chaos? In the face of death, have you ever felt uncertain and not sure what to do? As a parent have you ever questioned why your child has made the decisions they have made? As a child have you ever wondered why your parents think or believe something? Have you ever struggled to be accepted by others? Have you ever felt like an outsider in your own community or home? Have you ever felt or

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 23:4-7

seen someone excluded because of the people they belong to, the God they worship, or the person they love?

But Ruth clings to Naomi, why? Why does she stay with Naomi? Naomi has laid out an excellent plan for her go back to your people you will have a future. You can return to your own village, hopefully get remarried, have children, have a future you will be able to look back on this in your old age and know you made the right decision. But Ruth... But Ruth clings to Naomi.

Why does Ruth to Naomi cling? I think it hinges on a word back in verse 8, *hesed*. Lovingkindness: Lovingkindness is an act that is done out of kindness not out of any obligation. Naomi said that Ruth has dealt kindly to her that she has acted with lovingkindness. We don't know what Naomi's and Ruth's relationship was like. But we do know what the cultural forces of racism and exclusion could potential do to this this relationship. But this idea of hesed of lovingkindness persists. There is an old Hebrew that hesed begets hesed, that lovingkindness begets loving kindness. That lovingkindness becomes a cumulative force one good deed provokes another and another.<sup>3</sup> This idea is woven throughout the book of Ruth, in the coming weeks we will see these acts of lovingkindness this story isn't so a story "of good people doing good things, but rather of ordinary people with mixed motives becoming extraordinary through the cultivation of hesed"<sup>4</sup>.

In her book *Waking up White: Finding myself in the story of Race* Debby Irving writes the following; "Self-examination and the courage to admit to bias and unhelpful inherited behaviors may be our greatest tools for change. The most loving thing a person can do is to examine the ways in which their insecurities and assumptions interfere with others' ability to thrive."<sup>5</sup> Our world is in need of self-examination and lovingkindness. Self-examination to bravely look at how we have excluded others and lovingkindness to help others cling to hope.

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<sup>3</sup> The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth, pg xlix.

<sup>4</sup> The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth, pg l.

<sup>5</sup> Irving, Debbie. *Waking up White*, pg 249.

