

**Hebrew Scripture****Ruth 1:1-19a**

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. 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. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 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, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

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. 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.] 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. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said,

"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.

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

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.

*One of the Family*

Elimelech and his family have a tragic story. They have one of those family stories that you share with your friends and everyone sighs and says, "That's awful." First there is a famine in their own town of Bethlehem. So they move to Moab where, presumably life will be easier with more food. But then Elimelech dies suddenly. He leaves his wife, Naomi, with two grown sons. The boys get married to Moabite women and all seems well until the two sons both die. Now Naomi and both of her daughter-in-laws are widows and pretty much destitute in a society that did not allow women to have any standing unless she stood next to a man. Naomi must decide what to do since she is living in Moab and has no extended family to help her out. In order to have any hope, she must move back to Bethlehem where the men of her family will take her in and keep her from being destitute. This inevitable move means that the women will have to part ways. The men that connected them to one another have all died and Naomi can see no alternative but to send Orpah and Ruth back to their own

Moabite families and hope that they will find new husbands and get married again. It is an emotional scene, the women weep that they will no longer share a household together.

Orpah and Ruth protest Naomi's decision and cry that they will come with her to Bethlehem and live there with Naomi's people. Naomi explains the hopelessness of the situation and Orpah returns home to her Moabite family of origin. But Ruth clings to her mother-in-law and makes a profound covenant with her, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!" she says, "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. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

Ruth doesn't care if she ever finds another husband. Ruth does care that she has inextricably become a part of Naomi's family. Naomi's people and Naomi's land and Naomi's God have become Ruth's people, land and God. Ruth cannot imagine belonging to any other family, even if it means that she will remain a widow the rest of her life. She doesn't see herself as a daughter-in-law. Ruth vows to Naomi that she will be her own flesh and blood, *'till death do us part*. Ruth is basically converting to become an Israelite. She is leaving her Moabite life behind, and risking it all to become a child of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Ruth is asking Naomi to adopt her as her own daughter.

How many of us have relationships like this with our in-laws? How many of us would make a covenant with our Mother or Father-in-law like the one that Ruth made with Naomi? Some people come close when they marry into a family of another faith tradition and decide to convert to Judaism or Islam before the wedding takes place. But this commitment is to a living spouse as well as the family of the spouse. Ruth converts and makes a covenant with Naomi after her husband has died. She has no reason to become an Israelite besides her love for Naomi and the promise of belonging to Naomi's people, land, and God. Something has happened to bond these two women beyond all expectation. We don't know exactly what has transpired, but I suspect that their shared experience of losing a man they both loved, a son and a husband, has created a profound bond between them.

I remember the moment that my mother-in-law accepted me as a member of the Dawson clan. Sean's mother, Jan, is not exceptionally extroverted or warm and fuzzy person. She tends to keep her distance from people. So, one Sunday night we are all gathered at her house for dinner. Sean and I have been dating for about 3 or 4 months and we are in the kitchen preparing dinner. Jan lived on a small farm in Pasadena with a few animals: horses, goats, and chickens. The sun had set and the chickens had gone up a tree to roost for the night.

Jan comes into the kitchen, frustrated and upset that the chickens are up the tree, out of reach, and will probably be food for foxes in the night.

"Someone needs to help me get the chickens out of the tree," She says to no one in particular. Sean puts down his kitchen utensils and says, "Okay, I'll go help you." Jan looks past Sean and pins me with her eyes. "Not you. You," she points at me, "come and help me get the chickens." Dutifully, I follow her out of the house and into the darkness. She walks ahead of me with a flashlight and I stumble through the pasture trying to keep up. At the chicken coop, she points her flashlight up into a tree that bent over the fence and sure enough, every chicken sat sleeping on a branch about ten feet in the air.

I shook the tree and the chickens barely moved. I found a very long stick and poked the chickens, but they merely scooted around on the branch to avoid being bothered. Finally, I said, "Well, I'm going to have to climb up there." Jan aimed the flash light at the tree and I worked my way up to the branch where the chickens sat. As soon as I put my weight on the branch, every beady chicken eye popped out from under their wings and they looked at me with surprise, "What are you

doing up here?” I scooted out the branch, and they scooted further out the branch. I lunged and grabbed the first chicken, feathers flying, and I called out, “How am I going to get this chicken down?” From the darkness, Jan answered, “Just drop it down.” Ten feet!? I thought, “Chickens don’t fly real well.” So, I leaned down and released the chicken into the darkness and seconds later I heard a thump as it hit the dirt below. Then I could see Jan’s flashlight chase the stunned chicken across the ground and into the chicken coop. The other chickens in the tree had watched the entire procedure and they were not happy. 5 more times, I grabbed a chicken and let gravity take them down to the earth. The chickens were all safely locked up in the chicken coop and as I climbed down from the tree. I knew that I was now a member of the Dawson family. I had passed the test, rescued animals, risked my life, and Jan trusted me with her chickens and her son.

When we live through something challenging together, it creates a bond of trust that is not just hypothetical. Jan needed to know that I was the kind of person who would risk her own neck for a chicken. Ruth knew that her mother-in-law was the kind of person who loved deeply even in the face of death, and believed in a God who loved people even more deeply. When deep trust is born between us, we become members of one family, adopting each other into the clan. This is why so many people experience a deepening of their faith through times of difficulty or crisis. When we face a difficult life situation and recognize that God is present with us, it deepens the relationship we share with God and we trust God to never abandon us. This is what makes the incarnation of Jesus such a profound way for God to reach out to us. Jesus’ life story, *Emmanuel – God with us*, is meant to accompany us on our life journey so that we know that Jesus is with us, always. He personally knows what we are living through and he is willing to walk with us every step of the way, even to the grave. When we learn Jesus’ story, we learn the good news that God loves us so much that God will send his only son to lead us to make a home with God. God wants to adopt us into God’s family. God wants to bring us home to the kingdom of heaven so that God’s people will be our people, and God’s land will be our land, and God will be our God. God is simply waiting for us to cling to God, the same way the Ruth clung to Naomi, and make our covenant to stay with God forever and ever, Amen. Not even death can separate us from the love of God.

I notice that I am beginning to become part of the family here at St. Mark’s on the Hill. You all have graciously extended your hospitality to me and my family. We are beginning to know each other, sharing stories and asking questions. Just the other day I was speaking to a friend on the phone and I said, “Well, at my church...” After I hung up the phone I thought, St. Mark’s has become *my* church. As the weeks go by, I feel at home here and I feel attached to this community of faith. Granted, we haven’t rescued any chickens together, or buried a loved one together, or (thank God) had to endure a crisis in the last four weeks. Rest assured those times will come, whether we want them or not. But as people who cling to a loving God, we will risk it all to remain together as members of God’s family. I know that our relationships and our faith will deepen with trust and love as we journey together through light and dark places. Where you go, I will go, your people will be my people, your land will be my land, because your God is my God. Amen.