

**The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23C), October 13, 2019**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

**Ruth Turned Inside-Out**[Ruth 1:1–19a](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*

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From the Book of Ruth, our Old Testament reading: SO THE TWO OF THEM—Naomi and Ruth—WENT ON UNTIL THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM (v 19a).

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## 3.

It was bad enough that they lived IN THE DAYS WHEN THE JUDGES RULED (v 1). That's when EVERYONE DID WHAT WAS RIGHT IN HIS OWN EYES because THERE WAS NO KING (Jdg 21:25). Worse still, THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE LAND (v 1). That's why they decided to leave BETHLEHEM IN JUDAH (v 1). Back then the little town wasn't known for being visited by angels. The opposite was true. It had earned a reputation for idolatry, immorality, and violence. Nothing good came from Bethlehem back then.

Still, it was home, and Moab wasn't. Moab was a foreign land. Going there meant leaving family, leaving the land God had promised, leaving their own piece of the inheritance. It meant living with different customs, in a new culture, surrounded by people who practice pagan religions. They would be STRANGERS AND EXILES in Moab (Heb 11:3). And Moab, of all places! Those people had no great love for the people of Israel. There was a history of tension and animosity between them. What kind of welcome would they receive? What kind of life would they have there?

Going to Moab was bad, but they went anyway, the man and HIS WIFE AND TWO SONS (v 1). They went, and they entered Moab, and they remained there. And then it got worse. Elimelech, the husband and father, patriarch of the family, provider and protector, died. They buried him in Moab. Naomi, his wife, was left a widow.

Still, she had her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. She wasn't alone. She could count on them to care for her. When THEY TOOK MOABITE WIVES, ORPAH and RUTH (v 4), the family grew. Sure, her boys had married unbelievers—never a good idea. Marrying outside the faith is spiritually dangerous. But at least the family line would continue.

And then . . . then it got even worse. For BOTH MAHLON AND CHILION DIED. Only THE WOMAN WAS LEFT (v 5). Left without . . . without husband . . . without sons. Without anyone to provide for her or protect her. Just left without. Famine at home. Alone in a foreign land. Too old to remarry. Impoverished. Vulnerable. The family line cut off. Empty. No future. Her name, Naomi, meant “pleasant,” but after all this she told people just to call her Mara, “bitter.” “FOR THE ALMIGHTY HAS DEALT VERY BITTERLY WITH ME and HAS BROUGHT CALAMITY UPON ME” (vv 20, 21).

How bad was it? It was *that* bad. That’s how it looked and felt from the inside, from sitting in Naomi’s seat and walking a mile in her shoes. And there’s no sugar-coating it either. Her husband is still dead. Her sons are still dead. And she’s still got nothing. The Book of Ruth isn’t ever likely to become a Disney movie, not unless they take a ton of liberties. There’s too much sadness and not enough happily-ever-after.

And sometimes that’s exactly what life is like. Viewed from the inside it doesn’t always make sense. You can’t always tell what’s going on. The story doesn’t always have a happy ending. Because sin is really sin and sickness is really sickness and death is really death. All you can see is the view from the inside and how life is far more bitter than pleasant. Whatever you do, don’t judge that view. Don’t deny it. Don’t pretend that it can be explained away. WEEP WITH THOSE WHO WEEP (Rom 12:15). In all circumstances, pray.

That’s the inside view. That’s what it’s like when you breathe the air that Naomi breathed, when you put your feet on the ground beside hers, when you carry the cross with her.

## 2.

But it’s not the only view. . .

There’s also the view from outside. The author’s point-of-view. The characters can’t see what the author sees, the one who writes it. He sees the whole picture. He creates the beginning and the end. He fits the pieces together, even the sad and broken ones. And what is this outside view? The outside view is that God was at work in Israel. God was at work for Naomi. His mercy is for a lifetime, even for a lifetime filled with sadness.

And He was carrying out His plan all around Naomi. A plan to provide for His people. A plan to give them a shepherd. A plan to bring other sheep into the fold. Whatever else can be said, this much is true: God is faithful, even when His people are not, FOR HE CANNOT DENY HIMSELF (2 Tim 2:13). He is faithful to His promises, faithful to His covenant.

There's a hint of it when Naomi HEARD IN THE FIELDS OF MOAB THAT THE LORD HAD VISITED HIS PEOPLE AND GIVEN THEM FOOD (v 6). She believed it, and so she decided to RETURN TO THE LAND OF JUDAH (v 7). The Lord gives daily bread. He remembers His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He keeps His covenant with Israel. He is THE LORD, THE LORD, A GOD MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS, SLOW TO ANGER AND ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS (Ex 34:6).

Despite everything, Naomi never renounced her faith. She may have seen the events in her life as divine judgment. She cried out with a lament to God. She called her life bitter. But she refused to turn away from Him. She believed that He would provide for her again, sad though her life was. She trusted the AUTHOR OF LIFE. She lived by faith. Famine and death could take her husband and her sons, but it couldn't rob her of her God.

And she's not the only one. Ruth also heard. Ruth saw, and she believed. Naomi urged her to go back to Moab, back to the old ways and the old gods. But RUTH said, "DON'T URGE ME TO LEAVE YOU OR TO RETURN FROM FOLLOWING YOU. FOR WHERE YOU GO I'LL GO, AND WHERE YOU LODGE I'LL 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 ANYTHING BUT DEATH PARTS ME FROM YOU" (vv 16–17). Doesn't that catch your breath? Ruth would rather have Naomi's God and nothing than have her Moabite religion and everything. She would rather pick up her cross with the Lord and live as a stranger in a strange land. Ruth was converted to the truth. She trusted the Lord, and that's where her faithfulness came from.

### 1.

SO THE TWO OF THEM WENT ON UNTIL THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM (v 19a). They continued living on the inside, while God was at work on the outside, drawing a bigger picture on a canvas that stretches from the creation to the world's end.

It was all headed to Bethlehem. That's where God's faithfulness shines most brightly. That's where God turns it outside-in, and the outside view becomes the inside view. First comes a son. THEY NAMED HIM OBED. HE WAS THE FATHER OF JESSE, THE FATHER OF DAVID (Ruth 4:17). A ruler from the tribe of Judah. A king to rule God's people. A shepherd to care for the flock.

But there's more. For from this family tree, BY RUTH, another child is born. In the little town of Bethlehem. The Son of David, yet David's Lord. JESUS WAS BORN, THE

CHRIST (Mt 1:16). This was the outside view that God was working toward for Naomi and Ruth: the birth of the Messiah, a Savior. The true bread of life that comes down from heaven to give His flesh for all people. WHOEVER FEEDS ON Him WILL LIVE FOREVER (Jn 6:58).

From the outside,

*GOD WAS PLANNING AND PREPARING TO GET ON THE INSIDE.*

On the inside, so He could bear the sin of the world and take away the covering cast over all nations, the pall of death. He was willing to risk all, to sacrifice everything, to go to a strange land and suffer the inside view.

So behind Naomi's faith and Ruth's faithfulness is the promise of God Himself: "I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU NOR FORSAKE YOU. FOR WHERE I GO YOU'LL FOLLOW. WHERE I LODGE YOU'LL LODGE, FOR I GO TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU. MY PEOPLE SHALL BE YOUR PEOPLE, AND MY FATHER YOUR FATHER. I died and was buried, but, behold, I am alive forevermore, and you live in Me.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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