

## Ruth 1:1-19a

During the days of the judges, a famine occurred in the land. So a man left Bethlehem in Judah to stay awhile in the territory of Moab—he, his wife, and his two sons. <sup>2</sup>The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were from the clan of Ephrath from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and remained there.

<sup>3</sup>But Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, so she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>They then married Moabite wives. The name of the first was Orpah, and the name of the second was Ruth. They lived there for about ten years. <sup>5</sup>But Naomi's sons, Mahlon and Kilion, also died. So the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.

<sup>6</sup>Then Naomi set out with her daughters-in-law to return from the territory of Moab, because while she was in the territory of Moab, she had heard that the LORD had graciously visited his people by providing them with food. <sup>7</sup>So she left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law left with her. They set out on the road to return to the land of Judah.

<sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Both of you return to your mother's house. May the LORD show you kindness as you have shown kindness to the dead and to me. <sup>9</sup>May the LORD grant that each of you finds security in the house of a husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept loudly.

<sup>10</sup>But they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."

<sup>11</sup>Then Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Am I going to give birth to any more sons who could become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters. Go! For I am too old to be married to another husband. Suppose I say, 'I have hope, and I will be married to another husband tonight, and I will even give birth to sons.' <sup>13</sup>Would you wait for them until they grow up? On the basis of that hope would you give up the chance to marry another husband? No, my daughters. It is much more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has reached out against me."

<sup>14</sup>They once again wept loudly. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth would not let her go.

<sup>15</sup>Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods. Go back! Follow your sister-in-law."

<sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Because wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you make your home, I will make my home. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. <sup>17</sup>Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely and double it if anything but death separates me from you."

<sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

<sup>19</sup>Then the two of them traveled until they arrived at Bethlehem.

## Promises

### I.

In contrast to Elimelek and his wife, Naomi, there is no famine in our land. Grocery stores and convenience stores are everywhere. Do you want fruit out of season? Out of season produce might not be quite as nutritious or flavorful, but it can probably be found somewhere. As for food staples; stores are loaded with all the things you need to survive.

In times of hardship or natural disasters in one part of our country, assistance will surge in from other parts of the country to help out.

If you want to relate to Elimelek and Naomi, it isn't going to be about the famine, exactly. They lived in a time called the time of the judges. Dark days, they were. When the people had entered the Promised Land, God had given the directive to completely eradicate the previous inhabitants. Certain promises of God came with his directive. If they followed his directions, God would bless them; if they didn't, problems would result.

They hadn't followed God's directives. Idol worshipers were allowed to remain in the Promised Land, and the the false gods of the Canaanites infected God's people, too.

It had become so bad that the last verse of the book of Judges reports: "Every man did whatever was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25, EHV). Little or no thought was given to God and his will. Instead, the people did whatever they wanted as they lived their lives. In that way, perhaps, we *can* relate to Elimelek and Naomi. These days, most people follow whatever path seems best in their own eyes, giving little or no thought to God and his will. Dark days, indeed.

God's promises were still there, however; they were still active. God's chief promise was that he would send a Savior from this nation of Israel. Repeatedly he caused hardships to arise so the people would see their need for him. When they woke from their spiritual slumber, again and again the people would beg God to send a strong judge to deliver them. That judge would guide them spiritually, as well as lead them against their enemies.

The current call to repent of "doing whatever was right in their own eyes" was that God sent a famine on the land. Total devastation. No help was forthcoming from some charitable organization. No neighboring states or nations were going to pitch in and help out. Believers and unbelievers alike were affected; even the believers had to find a way to get by.

Elimelek and his wife, Naomi, left their home in Bethlehem to see if they couldn't make a better life for themselves elsewhere until the famine was over. Moab wasn't experiencing the same sort of devastation, so off to Moab they went.

Hardship followed them. "Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, so she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>They then married Moabite wives. The name of the first was Orpah, and the name of the second was Ruth. They lived there for about ten years. <sup>5</sup>But Naomi's sons, Mahlon and Kilion, also died. So the woman was left without her two children and without her husband" (Ruth 1:3-5, EHV).

## II.

Life became complicated for Naomi. While her husband was alive, perhaps the situation was liveable. Even when *he* died, her two sons were still around, though no extended family was in Moab with them. Then her sons died, without having any children with their wives. Nothing really remained in Moab for Naomi. Word had it that the famine was over in Israel. Being a widow *there*, even with no Social Security, would be easier for her than in Moab. It was time to go back.

"So she left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law left with her. They set out on the road to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back. Both of you return to your mother's house. May the LORD show you kindness as you have shown kindness to the dead and to me. <sup>9</sup>May the LORD grant that each of you finds security in the house of a husband'" (Ruth 1:7-9, EHV).

Naomi had spoken of the Lord, the true God, with her daughters-in-law. As she urged them to return to Moab, she asked that God would bless them in their future endeavors.

"They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people'" (Ruth 1:10, EHV). Naomi

must have had an impact on these two young women. *They* still had extended family, and presumably friends, in Moab, but they were willing to go to Israel with her.

The prospects for marriage in Israel for these young women were slim to none, since Israelites weren't supposed to marry the people of Moab. Naomi urges them again to go back. Then she says: "It is much more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has reached out against me" (Ruth 1:13, EHV).

Sometimes when everything in life seems to be working against you, a person can dive headfirst into self-pity and despair. Woe is me. Nothing ever goes my way. Even God is against me. You can tell by everything that has happened to me in my life. Even believers fall into despair. Maybe you have, too, sometimes.

At Naomi's insistence, "They once again wept loudly. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth would not let her go. <sup>15</sup>Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods. Go back! Follow your sister-in-law" (Ruth 1:14-15, EHV).

It reminds you of what the end of the book of Judges said, doesn't it? Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. The gods of the world are so much easier to follow. If it feels good, do it. Just live and let live. Life is so much easier when you just go with the flow.

Orpah chose what most people would—she turned back to the familiar, the easy, the gods of the world she had known.

### III.

"But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Because wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you make your home, I will make my home. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. <sup>17</sup>Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely and double it if anything but death separates me from you'" (Ruth 1:16-17, EHV).

Naomi had said that her life was nothing but a bitter pill she had to swallow. It seemed obvious to her that, despite her trust in the true God of her people, the hand of the Lord had been against her.

Promises. Naomi must have talked a lot with her daughters-in-law about God's promises. She *must* have, for Ruth to have developed such a great trust in God's promises.

Naomi's emotions hit highs and lows, like any believer's do. All the challenges she faced day after day sometimes clouded her view of God's promises. But strong faith had overridden the dejected moments. Ruth saw past the wavering moments and dejected moments and understood from her mother-in-law that's God's promises were so much greater than simply a life of ease. God's promises last for an eternity.

So it was that Ruth traveled back to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi.

### IV.

That's as far as the history goes in today's First Reading. This is the only time the book of Ruth comes up in the three-year cycle of readings in our Church Year. Do you know the rest of the story?

In Bethlehem, as widows were forced to do to survive in those days, Ruth goes to the local fields to pick up the leftovers after the reapers pass by. After a time, she meets Boaz, who is a relative of Mahlon and Kilion, one of whom had been Ruth's husband.

Boaz learns that Ruth had been married to his relative and decides to become her "family redeemer," as the EHV translates it. God had commanded his people that if a man died childless, his brother or close relative should marry the widow to provide an heir for him. This Boaz did for Ruth; he married her, so that the family land and property of Mahlon and Kilion could be properly passed on.

But there's still more to the story. Boaz and Ruth were the parents of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. From the line of King David came Jesus. The Savior, the Son of God, was born in Bethlehem, because he was from the house and family line of David.

The book of Ruth is not just some throw-away story. Among the ancestors of Jesus, only four women are listed. Ruth is one of them. God selects who he will. God's choices seem unusual sometimes. Others might reject those whom God chooses according to his plans and purposes—his promises—but God's grace extends to them, anyway.

Sometimes God's promises are hard to see, especially when you're caught up in the moment.

Naomi surely couldn't see all God's promises, or understand how they would all come to pass, and how she, herself, would factor in to God's promises. She went where life took her; first to Moab, then back to Israel. She even became bitter, at least for a time, about how life had treated her; she even felt abandoned by God. But God's promises never left her. Even during dark days, maybe even while dealing with bitterness in her own heart, she spoke about God's promises with her daughters-in-law.

Ruth couldn't see all God's promises when she married Naomi's son in Moab. She surely couldn't understand his promises when her husband died. But she had learned enough from Naomi about the true God that she wanted nothing to do with the gods of her homeland; she willingly went where she had no family of her own to follow the promises of God.

You and I can't see how *all* the promises of God will work out, either. Paul reassures us: "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28, EHV). That's true, even when it doesn't *feel* that way in the moment—even when it seems life has given us a bitter pill to swallow.

Most of all we rest on the final and ultimate promise of God—the promise that he would send a Savior. Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world. That means that Jesus paid for your sins and mine. With sins forgiven by Jesus, you and I can stand before God righteous and holy in his sight—we are given the sure and certain promise of eternal life in heaven with Naomi and Ruth and Boaz and all the other heroes of the faith. God keeps all his promises. Amen.