

*The Whole Story*

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 8, 2015

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>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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. <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>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." <sup>11</sup>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? <sup>12</sup>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, <sup>13</sup>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." <sup>14</sup>Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup>So she said, "See, 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 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. <sup>17</sup>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!" <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.

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. <sup>2</sup>And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter." <sup>3</sup>So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

<sup>4</sup>Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The LORD be with you." They answered, "The LORD bless you." <sup>5</sup>Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "To whom does this young woman belong?" <sup>6</sup>The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab." <sup>7</sup>She said, 'Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment." <sup>8</sup>Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. <sup>9</sup>Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." <sup>10</sup>Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" <sup>11</sup>But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. <sup>12</sup>May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" <sup>13</sup>Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants." <sup>14</sup>At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. <sup>15</sup>When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. <sup>16</sup>You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

<sup>17</sup>So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. <sup>18</sup>She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. <sup>19</sup>Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." <sup>20</sup>Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin." <sup>21</sup>Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.'" <sup>22</sup>Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field." <sup>23</sup>So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. <sup>2</sup>Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. <sup>3</sup>Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. <sup>4</sup>When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." <sup>5</sup>She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

<sup>6</sup>So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. <sup>7</sup>When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. <sup>8</sup>At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! <sup>9</sup>He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over

your servant, for you are next-of-kin.”<sup>10</sup> He said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.”<sup>11</sup> And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.<sup>12</sup> But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I.<sup>13</sup> Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the LORD lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”

<sup>14</sup>So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.”<sup>15</sup> Then he said, “Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city.<sup>16</sup> She came to her mother-in-law, who said, “How did things go with you, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her,<sup>17</sup> saying, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, ‘Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”<sup>18</sup> She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.”

No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, “Come over, friend; sit down here.” And he went over and sat down.<sup>2</sup> Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, “Sit down here”; so they sat down.<sup>3</sup> He then said to the next-of-kin, “Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech.”<sup>4</sup> So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.” So he said, “I will redeem it.”<sup>5</sup> Then Boaz said, “The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.”<sup>6</sup> At this, the next-of-kin said, “I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.”<sup>7</sup> Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel.<sup>8</sup> So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, “Acquire it for yourself,” he took off his sandal.

<sup>9</sup>Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.<sup>10</sup> I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.”<sup>11</sup> Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem;<sup>12</sup> and, through the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

<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.<sup>18</sup> Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron,<sup>19</sup> Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab,<sup>20</sup> Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon,<sup>21</sup> Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed,<sup>22</sup> Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. (The Book of Ruth)

This week, we read the entire book of Ruth as part of our message in service. Rarely do we get to read an entire book, and rarely do we have an entire book that focuses on one story, just one story from beginning to end. The five books of Torah tell of the law but they deal with the lives and stories of many people and God reaches out to God’s people. The four gospels tell the story of Jesus, but each story interweaves the stories of many lives from Joseph and Mary, to disciples to the sick, lame, hungry and poor so that to tell the story of Jesus from the perspective of even one gospel writer becomes very bulky. The stories of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Kings, and Samuel are long and involve hundreds of people with different outcomes intended to indicate the choices God hopes we will make. Ruth, however invites us to look at the whole story, the choices and consequences of a life and consider the outcomes, not only of Her life but also of other lives she touches.

To look at the whole story invites us to remember the words of Nehemiah the king, who, when rebuilding the walls of Israel after exile to Babylon suffered the insults of his enemies, his detractors and his countrymen. Night after night, Nehemiah would go out to the walls and work. He worked at night so the armies of other nations could not see what he was doing. He worked with piles of rock and rubble; organizing and moving and trying to make it into something! Night after night, his detractors would come out to him and tell him what a mess the project was. They would continue to denigrate his work and mock his cause. “What a mess!” they would say! Nehemiah’s response was simple and direct. “It always looks like a mess when you are in the middle!” he said!

Today, we have the opportunity to look at the whole story. It is good that we do because when we only look at parts, we sometimes forget that it always looks like a mess when we are in the middle. To look at Ruth’s whole story gives us the chance to look at the parts in the middle and realize the messes and the choices. To look at the whole story gives us the chance to challenge Ruth’s choices and our own! To look at the whole story gives us the opportunity to see what God sees, to experience what God experiences as God leads us through our choices and into a fullness. Paul said it this way in 1Cor. 13. “Now we see through a mirror lit dimly but then we will see face to face. Now we see only in part but then we will see fully, even as we have been fully seen!” Today, You will be invited to see fully.

Begin by seeing the geography. Elemilech led his family down to Moab. The family was faced with a choice. They lived in Bethlehem in Judah and they went down to Moab. Now, Moab is a desert! It is dry and desolate without much water and with even less food and they went from Bethlehem to this God forsaken place because there was a famine in Bethlehem. In Hebrew, Beth (Beit) means house and lehem (lecheim) means bread. Elemilech made a choice to leave the house of bread to go to the desert because of a famine. God had instructed God’s people not to go down into that land but this was the choice Elemilech made for his family. He and his wife and children went down to a place where they were not supposed to go and there they remained.

That choice led to the eventual deaths of Elemilech and his two sons. We cannot say that these men would not have died if they remained in Israel but we can know that decisions have consequences. In the middle of life there is death. Scripture tells us this (2 Cor. 15) and we must ask from whom our help comes. The choice made by Elemilech and his family had consequences. Might their choice have turned out differently if they had turned to the Lord? We cannot say for sure but we can use their example to remind us that as we prepare to make decisions, critical decisions in our lives, it

always looks like a mess in the middle. God alone can see the end and if we turn to him and listen to him and follow his direction, we can trust the outcome and continue to walk the path He has placed us on.

Choices are like a chain reaction. Elimelech and his sons died leaving Naomi without support in a male dominated society. She chose to leave Moab and return to Bethlehem because she had received news that there was food there. Elimelech's choice took her to Moab to live through the famine and now the famine was over. Naomi decided to return home. That decision had a profound impact on Orpha and Ruth. These women knew only Moab and the culture and traditions of Moab. Their responsibilities required that they move with Naomi, but doubtless, their hearts were with family and friends in Moab.

Many of us face these choices. We struggle with obligations to work as they are contrasted with and often conflicting with obligations to family. How do we decide? How do we reconcile our own ego and ambition with the covenant promises we make to spouse or church or children? How do we determine our priorities? Jesus tells us, "those who are faithful in little will be given much responsibility." If we rely on God as our guide, we can recognize that our word, our promise is everything. Our promise is an outward and visible sign of our faith which is an inward and virtual seal establishing our relationship with God! The whole story of Ruth bears out the fulfillment of God's promise of blessing. When we are in the middle, we see only the mess but God alone invites us to trust!

Naomi offers Orpha and Ruth the opportunity to recant their promise. She invites them to know that she has appreciated their kindness and faithfulness to their husbands and to their in-laws but that their responsibility is complete; they are free to choose. Scripture would tell us that they have always been free to choose. All of us, created in the image and likeness of God live in this freedom. Society affirms this fact regularly. The Declaration of Independence expressed it saying "we hold these truths to be self evident." The Supreme Court regularly acknowledges these freedoms in decisions in favor of abortion, same sex marriage, money equals votes and many more too numerous to name. These decisions challenge our sensibility but they do affirm the freedom Naomi extended to her daughters-in-law.

What Naomi was saying is that these women could walk away from their circumstance because their situation had changed. Both women considered the opportunity and declined, affirming that their promise went beyond anything they could have anticipated. That's the way it is with promises. They are made in the moment, when we can only see the moment but they extend into a future which we do not know! Orpha and Ruth said to Naomi, "no, our promise is sacred and is an affirmation of who we are!"

Naomi then gave them a peek at the future they were committing themselves to. No children, no family, no customs or traditions with which they would be familiar. Orpha thought, "well, when you put it like that..." She changed her mind. The situation was just too difficult for her to imagine! It always looks like a mess when you are in the middle, and in the middle, Orpha just could not imagine a future. Orpha could not believe.

At this point, we cut Orpha a little slack do we not? After all, she is a Moabite woman. She had lived in a Hebrew household for awhile but her culture, her customs her knowledge came from the customs and traditions of other gods. Her family and upbringing had given her something to believe in, it just wasn't the God of Israel. She turns back because back...behind her is what she knows. She turns back because back...behind her is a place of comfort and familiarity! She

turns back to the hope of less fear, less uncertainty, less difficulty. She turns back to what she knows. It is safe and easy and it is hers. Orpha turns back and we never hear of her again!

We cut her some slack because that is ok. It is ok to be the person not mentioned in the history books. It is ok not to be the person mentioned in the Bible. It is ok to live a life that is ok, that is safe and secure. It is ok. We cut Orpha some slack because Orpha is like so many of us. When confronted with the challenge of pursuing the unknown and dangerous or choosing the safe and secure, she chooses the safe and secure and that is ok...but it is just ok!

God invites us to make our decisions in the middle where things look like a mess. To follow Him is not to be ok. To follow him is to step into the unknown without benefit of safety and security. To be a person of faith means that we risk our very lives because of that faith! To be a person of faith means we believe in a future that not known or seen and yet is still sure. The author of Hebrews says it this way, "Faith is the essence of things hoped for, the promise of things not seen!" (Heb. 11.1) From the place where our lives look like a mess we look forward to something equally unknown and potentially even more messy! We look forward to the future because God works from the future...encouraging and engaging us in possibilities beyond anything we might have ever imagined!

The unknown future is the future chosen by Ruth! Orpha kisses her mother-in-law but Ruth clings to her! She persists in going forward. She claims Naomi's God as her own and she claims Naomi's people as her own. She embraces that which she does not know and cannot understand! So passionate is she that she overcomes all of Naomi's objections! Ruth makes a choice to change!

From the middle, it is impossible for Ruth to know the ramifications of her decision and yet from faith she makes a commitment. I am often amused at couples who stand before me to marry. Together they promise essentially what Ruth has promised to Naomi and to God! For richer, for poorer; in sickness and health; for better for worse; till death do us part! You all know the words. How long has it been since you considered them? Those couples who come to marry cannot know what will happen in their future and yet they trust one another with their very lives and with their individual fortunes. My hope, my prayer for each one of them, and for each one of you is that you do what Ruth has done. Ruth invites God into her covenant with Naomi. She recognizes a power in the universe greater than herself and she makes a covenant with that power, with God who will do thus and so to her and still more if even death separates her from Naomi. Her love fuels her faith and she is willing to live into both!

From the middle of a mess, Ruth steps forward in faith. Faith is about the whole story. Faith is about understanding that there will be difficult times and there will be easy times. Faith is about understanding that there will be bad times and good! Faith is about understanding that none of that matters! What matters is the willingness to withstand all that comes in order to be held accountable as a person of integrity. Faith is the promise made in the darkness of night that withstands the scrutiny of daylight! Faith is the promise you make alone that becomes obvious in the presence of others!

Ruth moved forward in faith! She entered the village of Naomi and went to work. It would have been easy for Ruth to assume the role of widow, to gain benefits as a result of the tragedy she suffered by losing her husband! There was a mandate in Bethlehem that widows be cared for. In the first chapter of Isaiah, the Lord indicted His people for their failure to care for the widowed. Ruth had a claim but she chose to forsake that claim for the promise of something more.

Many in our own country have a claim to disability. They are as entitled as millions of Americans to help because their situation and circumstances have become too difficult. Many of these choose to stand up and struggle instead of succumbing to the temptation of a helping hand. They are not opposed to Grace. They believe that God provides for them and for all because of God's love for them but they also believe they have entered into a covenant with God that will provide far beyond the little others can provide. They believe with Jesus that He came so they might have life and have it abundantly! (John 10: 10) There are many in our country who cannot pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. We can and should help all of them. There are many others who have the opportunity to look at the mess of their lives and work to clean it up! In them we should recognize Faith!

Ruth moved forward at great danger to herself. It was not unusual in those days (or even in these) for a young woman stepping into a world dominated by men to be bothered (read sexually molested). In face of this reality, Ruth moved forward trusting. Some might say it was by coincidence that she met her relative in this situation. That she was just lucky. I would suggest that Ruth put herself in a position to be lucky. She could have stayed home but she went out. She could have stayed quiet but she spoke up. She had made a covenant with God and I choose to believe this was an act of God's faithfulness rather than coincidence!

How many of us have experienced this same kind of "luck" in our willingness to persevere. I believe God walks just ahead of us, inviting us into a future filled with promise. Those willing to walk after God find in that promise a possibility greater than anything they ever imagined! "Luck" that the world sees is divine providence in the hands of God!

Ruth found the fullness of God's promise by choosing to live out the whole story of her life. She continued through the mess in the middle and when she reached the other side she was able to look back with Naomi and say, "Oh! That's what You had in mind!" Not only did Ruth live into the fullness of a life given to God, but she allowed God to fulfill God's promise to God's people.

This Moabite, this foreigner, this refugee from another country, one who was to be despised and recognized as less than willingly lived into the whole story and unwittingly helped God accomplish the purpose of God's plan for God's chosen people!

Perhaps many of us might read the whole story and wonder about our own story. What does God have in store for us? How might God use us? How might we be the agents of God's coming Kingdom? We will never know if we stay mired in the middle. We will never know if we shrink into the past. We can only know the authentic fullness of our story if we are willing to step into the future...if we are willing to live in a covenant relationship with the One True God!

Amen!