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## Never The Less

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Ruth 1:1-22

### [Elimelech's Family Goes to Moab]

*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.*

### [Naomi and Her Moabite Daughters-in-Law]

*<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.*

Three things are important to know for us to read the story of Ruth and Naomi honestly:

1. Theirs is the only conversation, in the entire Bible, between women talking about themselves, their own lives, their own security, their own future.
2. In this story's time and place, women were regarded as no more valuable than animals.
3. Except for continued speech between Naomi and Ruth, except for the defiance, the courage and the ingenuity conceived by this speech, the Old Testament narrative would end at the last verse of Judges, which reads, *“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”*

Never. The. Less. – thanks to two widowed, refugee, traumatized, sharecropping farmers, such an end was not to be. And thus, here we are.

Would you pray with me? *Mother God who knows the names, the sins and the heartbreak of all her children, help us find our way through our own history, help us to tell the truth about what we've done and what has happened to us, that we might gain the full measure of your grace. Amen.*

The book of Ruth picks up the thread left at the end of Judges, *in the days when the judges ruled*. The same days in which everyone did what was right in **his** own eyes. The male pronoun which I'm usually good to de-gender – it has to stay here. Food wasn't the only scarcity in those days. Human decency was also hard to find. My NRSV translation titles the last chapter of Judges "The tribe of Benjamin is saved from extinction." A better title might be "Israel uses religion to justify horrific misogyny, genocide, and human trafficking."

Elimelech, Naomi's husband, was from Bethlehem, which means *house of bread*. Only lately, it wasn't. And he had the means, apparently, to move his kids and wife to Moab, where food could be bought.

Now there was ancient bad blood between Moabites and the Ephrathites which you can look up on your own; but, generally, "hungry kids" trumps politics so to Moab they went. Then Elimelech dies and Naomi is a single mom of two boys old enough to marry. And the scriptures say, at least the more truthful translations, *that Chilion and Mahlon took for themselves Moabite wives*.

And to read that truthfully, we have to know the last two chapters of Judges. Read it yourself before you let your kids read it, because it is the stuff of nightmares. A gang rape so violent the victim dies. The gang is never caught or punished, but a war is fought over who gets to control whose women. 50,000 + soldiers are killed without actually settling the question. Such is war.

The tribe of Benjamin is condemned to extinction. The other tribes regret the decision but won't rescind it. Instead, they kill another town full of people and abduct 400 of their unmarried girls – which can only mean children – and give them to the Benjaminites. Turns out, 400 wasn't enough. They send Benjaminite soldiers to Shiloh, where there's a festival – a festival with lots of dancers. Young virgin dancers, they say. They give the soldiers a detailed plan for how and where to abduct the girls and promise to deal with the fathers and brothers afterward.

And I quote, <sup>22</sup> "Then if their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, 'Be generous and allow us to have your girls; because we did not capture in battle a wife for each man. But neither did you incur guilt by giving your daughters to them.'

<sup>23</sup> "The Benjaminites did so; they took wives for themselves from the dancers whom they abducted. Then they went and returned to their territory, and rebuilt the towns, and lived in them. <sup>24</sup> So the Israelites departed from there at that time by tribes and families, and they went out from there to their own territories.

<sup>25</sup> "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

The fathers and brothers *were generous, and incurred no guilt* in giving away their girls. “Our bad,” said the Israelites, for failing to capture enough girls at Jabesh-gilead. But here’s what I want you to really hear: “And the Benjaminites took wives for themselves from the dancers whom they abducted.” Mahlon and Chilion *took for themselves Moabite wives*. When it happens in Nigeria we call it human trafficking. When it happens in the Bible, we call it “saved from extinction.” I will not skim this, Friends. I hate the Bible – on some of the pages – and then along comes a redemptive verse like verse 5. “*When they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup>both Mahlon and Chilion also died.*” As if the storyteller cannot wait to get this generation of men off the page.

Then there were these three: Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. No sons between them. Yet. And not enough privilege simply to grieve their losses – assuming they were even sad. Afraid, maybe. Empty wombs plus empty bellies leaves them an economic burden. Their world has no reason NOT to let them starve. Naomi imagines her chances are better in Judah. Ruth and Orpah follow at first.

Who can say what's in Naomi's heart and mind when she tries to send them back? Umm, Naomi actually. “*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?*” I’d call that a pretty good summary of the condition of women in her time and place. And many times and places since. The Bible tells the truth about what God lets people get away with, if we have the courage to listen.

That same bitterness is in Naomi when she tries to send Ruth and Orpah home. Have you read what happens to trafficked women who try to go home? Not usually a yellow-ribbons-around-the-oak-tree kind of reunion. Orpah does go, and we never know her fate. To my mind she represents the millions and millions of women who have disappeared from the planet, whose names and selves are known only to God. The FBI does not even keep the numbers on Native American women who have disappeared. (Read [Killers of the Flower Moon](#) by David Ginn.) Ruth, however, will not disappear. There may be no kings on the throne in Israel, but she carries them inside herself. A teensy, tiny ovum that will become the son of her grandson, God's own favorite king of Israel.

Of course, on this day she doesn't know that. On this day, all she knows is that she can starve to death in Moab or starve to death in Bethlehem. Starve to death with people she used to know or starve to death with Naomi. For whatever reason, in spite of what has happened to her, in spite of what the world has deemed to be her place and her destiny, within the very narrow choices available to her, Ruth chooses to take control of her own future. If she and Naomi must die, they will die together.

Solidarity with those who have no hope – that is her choice. But it will not be her fate.

There is no more Godly a choice available to one who claims to know God. What follows is the favorite passage in the book of Ruth: *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* – which is ironic, since the context isn't marriage; it's death.

In a world that has made it clear that she and Naomi are worth nothing, she chooses to live as if their lives matter. The world will let Naomi starve and not think twice about it. But Ruth won't. She can't save Naomi's life, but she will not allow her to die alone. Ruth's life doesn't matter much to anyone now, but it matters to Naomi. And whatever else the world might say about it – if it bothered to speak at all – *Never. The. Less.*, Ruth's life is still hers to do with as she pleases.

God is hardly named in the story, and yet God is everywhere. In the solidarity and sacrifice we see in Ruth, the one who casts her lot with the very least of these – all the way to death, should it come to that, and all the way to all the abuse and terror and humiliation from here to there. The world can do nothing to Ruth against her will, not if she surrenders herself to it all. Willingly. There is so much story in what the Bible doesn't tell, so much truth left out because of who didn't get a voice in the telling. We must learn to read with eyes and ears tipped to the truth those quieter characters have to tell.

At the end of chapter 1, Ruth and Naomi have arrived in a little no-place village called Bethlehem, hoping against hope not to starve to death in the “house of bread.” And all the while, they guard the seeds of the very kingdom that has saved us all.

Would you pray with me?