

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

This morning, Gloria has read to us nearly the whole first chapter of the Old Testament Book of Ruth, and I'd like to tell you more about that story, hoping that you will find it both delightful and helpful. It's only 4 chapters long, and I hope that you will feel motivated to read it for yourselves, too. The narrator tells us that the story is set in the ancient times, after the days of Moses and Joshua, but before there were human kings in Israel. There are two equally important characters in the story, and neither one is God. In fact, God doesn't speak at all, and only once are we told that God does anything specific to move the story along. No, two women are our primary characters, and as is often the case when there are two protagonists, there is a contrast between them. In this case, it is a contrast of viewpoint. We're first introduced to Naomi, then later her daughter-in-law Ruth. At the beginning of the story, as Gloria has read, Naomi, whose name means "sweetness" is living in her hometown of Bethlehem with her husband Elimelech, whose name means "God is King", and her two grown sons, Mahlon, whose name means "sickness", and Chilion, whose name translates as "spent". So, there in Bethlehem, in the best of all possible worlds, Sweet Naomi is living in the security of a family of 3 loyal men. She is respected by her neighbors and has a good life. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, as we've heard, there was sadly a famine in the land, and Elimelech reluctantly resorts to moving his family to a foreign land where the food is plentiful. He takes his Sweetie and two sons to Moab. Now, Moab is a land to the east of Israelite territory, a land whose people are regularly disrespected by the people of Bethlehem. The Moabites didn't descend from the 12 tribes of Jacob, didn't have that formative exile in Egypt or the wanderings in the desert with Moses, had no particular connection to the Ten Commandments, and even worshiped multiple gods. But to save his family, Elimelech, the man whose "God was King", leads them across the eastern frontier to be refugees in the land of Moab. And, at first, this migration seems to be a worthwhile adventure. Though not giving up their cultural and religious practices, the family begins to settle in and assimilate. There is indeed enough food and shelter, and soon the two sons, Sickly and Spent, each take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. But just as all manner of things seem well, Elimelech dies, leaving Sweet Naomi a widow, and in no place in the ancient world was that a good thing. And soon after, both Sickly and Spent also die, leaving two widows of their own. So now, instead of a secure family of 3 men and a woman, Naomi is left with an insecure group of three grieving women and no men to protect or provide for them.

Naomi's sweetness is evaporating. She blames it all on God. And it's not as if she is being punished for some secret sin, it's just God's lack of concern for her, she thinks. God, who is supposed to be King, has abandoned her. Her sweetness is being replaced by bitterness. Having no available prospects there in Moab, she bitterly decides to retreat to the homeland, to make a-run-for-it back to Bethlehem. And who knows how she will be received there? A widow with no visible means of support, a drain on the community, a woman who couldn't endure the hard times of famine along with her neighbors, but left them and their God behind for greener pastures? How will she be received? Turning to her two new daughters-in-law, she tells them that, for their own good, they should remain behind in Moab, in the land of their birth, where even as widows they will be better off. You don't have to live like a refugee in Bethlehem, she insists, so fare thee well, I'm leaving you here. Orpah, whose name means "back of the neck", turns the back of her neck to Naomi and fades off into the crowd, but Ruth, the second primary character of this story, says she will not stay behind at home, but will travel with Naomi westward across the frontier to Israel.

Naomi says, "No", you stay here where you belong, thinking perhaps to herself 'What?? I should arrive home with this foreign girl in tow? And another mouth to feed? That's just what I need!' But Ruth, whose name means "friend, or companion", is also insistent, and makes the speech we heard this morning: "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 I will even try to make your God my God. Before all this calamity,

you told me that your God, the only God they worship in Bethlehem, was always providential. And even if you have changed your viewpoint and now blame God for everything that has gone terribly wrong, I will still seek his help in this time of need. And that's where the contrast between the two main characters begins. Naomi, feeling abandoned and discredited by God, thinks to herself: 'just leave me be to wallow in my despair', while Ruth is thinking: 'No, old lady, you don't get rid of me that easily; I'm going to find us a way out of this even if it kills me in some strange and foreign land.' And at the end of today's reading, Naomi, probably turning away and shaking her head doesn't bother to say anything more.

So, how does this contrast play out in the rest of the story? This contrast between optimism and pessimism, between cynicism and vitality, between defeat and victory, between death and life, between gloom and glee, between doubt and faith begins here in chapter one. But, spoiler-alert in case you don't remember the Bible story or have yet to read it all, there is a happy ending, and I will give you a quick synopsis of how we get from here to there: When the two widows arrive in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred, and Naomi's former neighbors wondered and whispered "Is this Naomi?" And who is that young woman with her? And where are what's-his-name, her husband, and their two sons? Is that a Moabite woman there? What's she doing here in our territory? Is she an undocumented migrant? Hmmm... When the village women go to greet Naomi, she tells them all the terrible ways God has let her down and how bitter she has become about that. In fact, she tells her old friends not to call her sweet Naomi anymore, but that she has a new name: Mara, which translates as "bitter", for, as she says, 'the Lord Almighty has brought calamity on me', for no good reason!

But Ruth, looking around her new homeland, finds that the famine is over, that it is the season of a plentiful harvest, and gets right to work, taking the initiative to support herself and her mother-in-law. She goes out gleaning, following the harvesters and collecting that which they in their haste have left behind. She does it eagerly day-by-day, not even stopping to rest until she has all she can carry home. Her enthusiasm and determination catch the eye of a local landowner named Boaz, who is a distant relative of Naomi, and, though she is a foreigner, he is impressed and gives her special privileges in his fields. He provides her protection for the young men, and tells his female harvesters to keep a helpful eye on her. He is generous and kind, and his kindness seems to result in a growing chain of good events for Ruth. Now, in Chapter 3, Naomi, who is still bitterly suspicious, devises a cunning plan for Ruth to improve their security and place in the community. It is a bit of a racy plan, and we usually don't read it in church, but let's just say that it involves Ruth seducing innocent old Boaz the landowner in the barn late at night. Anyway, Ruth goes along with the plan in deference to her mother-in-law, and as it turns out, that weird and secretive event sets the stage for the 'happy ending' and a reconciliation of the thematic contrast between the two women. It also finally gives God a role in the story, though not a speaking role BTW.

The story's narrator gives God credit for an act of creation, namely the birth of a baby boy from that overnight union, and they named him Obed. Now, I don't know how that name might be translated, but we are told that his birth brought great joy to the whole family, the whole community. As Naomi, restored to faith and joy, holds her new grandson in their arms, her neighbors swoon that "a son has been born for Naomi" and Ruth is fully accepted among them. By a creative act of God, the disturbing contrasts have been reconciled. And to top it all off, the narrator informs us that little Obed will become the grandfather of the great King David! And a few hundred years later another young mother will give birth to a baby boy there in Bethlehem, and Obed and David will be given recognition as his ancestors. And that boy will have, at least in his human presence, the DNA of the conflicted Naomi, the optimistic Ruth, and the generous Boaz. That boy will grow up with this family history of reconciling the paradox of victim and victor, of sheep and shepherd, of servant and leader, of bitterness and sweet, of death and new life. Meanwhile, it turns out that the saving grace for Naomi and Ruth in their day was the love of family and the gathering of community. To me, that sounds very familiar, a creative act of God, witnessed in the gathering of this beloved St. John's family.

Amen.