

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine. Naomi, they went to Moab and lived there.

Naomi's husband died. Both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." They wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me" It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against Me!" Ruth clung to her.

Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

KIDS LESSON Chain and being part of a family, having a place of your own, trusting in God.

Have any of you lived your entire adult life in Kingman? Has anyone lived in another country like Mexico or Canada for more than a year? Have any of you moved because of economic hardship? If you have, you can relate to the people in our Bible reading today. Our story begins with a family of four, the husband, Elimelech; the wife, Naomi; and their two sons. Like many families today this family was experiencing some economic difficulties. Much of that was due to a famine which had spread throughout their land. Food was scarce. Fear wasn't. So Elimelech and Naomi packed up their version of a U-Haul and moved to Moab, where there was more food and opportunities. They went looking for a farm, but what they ended up was a family and a new faith for some. A renewed faith for others.

At first, things went well. They found their farm. Both sons found wives. And Naomi loved them both like daughters. But the smile that formed on their faces quickly turned into tears. First Elimelech was called to heaven. Then both boys also died. The sisterhood soon became the widowhood. Naomi was devastated. Opportunities for women in that day and time were practically non-existent. Social security was thousands of years away. How would she survive? What would her DILs do? She felt responsible for them. They were as good as flesh and blood, but they were Moabites. Moabites and Israelites, despite being distantly related, were not on the best of terms. In fact, it bordered on disgrace to associate with them. So, if Naomi hoped for a parade if and when she returned 'home', she knew that was a pipe-dream.

Still, the only viable option was for her to return to her hometown and hope there would be a place for her somewhere among her relatives. And so, hoping against hope, she and her two daughters-in-law set out for the land of Judah. As the three widows began their journey, it occurred to Naomi that it might be better for her daughters-in-law to remain in their own country. So she encouraged them to go back to their mothers' house. They were still young; they could find new husbands and have the security she could not give them. Naomi loved her daughters-in-law, and she wanted to see them happy.

However, Ruth and Orpah, her daughters-in-law, wanted to stay with Naomi. They had found a family in more ways than one. They had not only married into the Elimelech clan; they had come to know love in ways they had never experienced before. That love came from coming to know Jehovah, the true God of Israel. They came to know not just an earthly family, but a spiritual one as well. We call that Faith. That faith made the loss of her husband bearable cuz she knew he was in Heaven by that same faith. God is reliable, and the way the story unfolds shows that they're right.

Isn't that the same comfort we share with Ruth? Our comfort, our encouragement, our hope, our faith is based in the same God Ruth came to know. We have the same confidence cuz we know God never fails. His promises are certain, his love boundless, his grace great.

Although it is not stated, we can definitely say Ruth, and the rest of her family were not perfect. Why can I say that? Human nature. That ugly inheritance afflicts, affects affirms our prognosis: Without God, there is no hope. Sin is a terminal diagnosis. We are doomed. So I know that Ruth and the rest were just like us: lost and

condemned creatures. But God changed that with what was known then as 'The Messiah'. More on that in a minute. Let's get back to N-O-R, that's Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth.

Naomi knew that these women would likely not be accepted by her relatives in her home country. So Naomi once again encouraged them to stay in their homeland. She told them that it was absurd for them to follow her, "Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?" she asked them. Finally, Orpah decided that her mother-in-law was right. It would be best for her to remain in her own country. I am disappointed in Orpah, but not critical. She was young. She was pressured. She was looking out for her future. She tried to go along, but for misguided reasons, Naomi was insistent.

Could anyone or anything separate you from your faith? In the book of Romans, St. Paul asks about trial, famine, sword, and other disasters. "Who can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus? He asks. Then, he makes this bold statement: And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his good purpose. I hope you believe that!

Ruth, however, was not easily dissuaded. Ruth loved Naomi deeply. It was in this context that Ruth spoke some of the most famous words in all of literature: "Where you go, I will go," she told Naomi, "your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

The story of Ruth & Naomi is about love. It is about loyalty and faithfulness and mutual devotion. It's not, "I love you for what you can do for me." Or "I'll love you as long as it is convenient." No. It's, "I'll love you no matter what. I'll always be there."

In the classic Russian novel Crime & Punishment, a young student murders two people for their money. He rationalizes his crime by telling himself, first, that Napoleon killed thousands and became a hero; second, that his victims were unimportant people; and third, that he would use the money to further his career for the good of humanity. Most of the story, however, is taken up not with the crime but with the young student's 'punishment', punishment not from without but from within. Guilt rages inside, and his body, mind, and spirit grind away at each other and wear him down.

There is a young girl, Sonia, who loves this young murderer. Hers is a rare kind of love. It is not cheap sentiment. First of all, her love drives him to confess that he is the murderer. He cries out his confession, is convicted and sent off to Siberia, suffering from tuberculosis and pneumonia. But the story doesn't end there. The girl, Sonia, follows him over the hard miles to Siberia. Throughout his long nine-year sentence, she stays by his side. She keeps them both alive by scrounging whatever food she can find. Her love never quits. Crime & Punishment is about real love.

Here is someone who loves so much that it causes him to face up to his wrongdoing; then it causes her to stick by him through all the subsequent punishment. Hollywood would never buy it. It's out of touch with where we are. It's about faith and values and undying loyalty. But, friends, that is what real love is.

I wonder, if couples young and old understand the kind of love of Ruth displayed? Ruth was committed to her mother-in-law even when there was nothing for her to gain and everything to lose. Love is more than an emotion. It is a commitment, it is continuous, it is consecrated by God. Why do so many do things that separates themselves from each other? Say things that hurt each other? Why do some many take each other for granted? Why do so many think evil of the other? Why do pastors hear so often 'We've fallen out of love'? We cannot be lulled into thinking that's OK, just one of those things. It's not. No one said it better than my six-year old grandson when he was learning to swim: "You don't give up just because it's hard." Amen

Back to Naomi & Ruth. These two women set out for Bethlehem. Naomi's relatives greeted her fondly as they entered the city. But she told them, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara," which means bitter, "for my life has been a bitter one." Do you remember when Naomi made such a wonderful profession of faith? "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband!" All of a sudden, she forgets it. Grief overcomes her faith. How sad. That is why everyone needs to be strong in the promises of God and his plan for us. I think Naomi buckled under pressure.

That climate of expectation is faith. Faith is an attitude more than a belief or a doctrine: It's an assumption we carry through life, that God is trustworthy. God is faithful in the big things, keeping his promises to his people, guiding history toward its proper conclusion, but God is also faithful in the small things, dealing kindly with widows, blessing the poor and the lonely.

This story is about the blessings of faith, farm and family. In 1984 Sally Field won the best actress Oscar for a movie called *Places in the Heart*. That story is also about faith, farm and family. Sally Field's character, Edna Spalding, is like Naomi, a widow struggling to make a living on the land in Texas in the 1930s. The bank tries to take her farm, the cotton gin operator tries to cheat her, a tornado nearly kills her and her family. Just as Naomi was supported by her widowed Moabite daughter-in-law, Edna Spalding survives with the help of a couple of unlikely fellow-outcasts: a blind boarder and a black field hand. At the end of the movie all the characters who've appeared in the story, including Edna's late husband and his murderer, are shown in the little church in the center of town. The scene suggests the heavenly banquet to which God invites us all, and shows that the lives of the characters have been directed by God's love toward a final deliverance.

Now, fate might never deal you the kind of blows it dealt Naomi and Ruth and Edna Spalding, but whatever comes your way in life you can depend on God, as Naomi did, to see you through. God takes care of his people: he blesses us with the things we need to live from day to day. This morning's story reminds us of three of the most important blessings God gives us: a way to make a living, family and friends to love us and support us, and faith to keep us going in expectation that God will continue to bless us.

As the story plays out, Naomi's prayer had created a climate of expectation in which the rest of the story played out: and the rest of the way through the book proved Naomi's prayer was answered. As Ruth and Naomi meet with blessings in Bethlehem and put together their new lives piece by piece, we know that God is fulfilling Naomi's hope. The only food Naomi and Ruth had to eat after that was what was left in the farmers' fields after harvest. This system was known as "gleaning." Farmers were to leave some grain behind for the poor to collect. One day a relative of Naomi's named Boaz noticed Ruth gathering grain. She was different from the other women. After they married, Ruth bore a son in Bethlehem, named Obed, and Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of King David, and David was an ancestor of another baby boy born in Bethlehem many years later. That's the rest of the story.

Ruth found a farm, a family and a faith. Guess which one was most important? Amen.

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