

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Finding Hope in Unlikely Place

Lesson: Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

3 One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. **2** Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. **3** Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. **4** When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." **5** "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered.

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. **14** The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! **15** He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." **16** Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. **17** The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

(Slide 1) The painting you see on the screen is *The Gleaners* by Jean-François Millet. In this artwork, three women are bending over, gathering something from the ground on a harvested field. In one hand, they hold what they have already collected. Looking at the ground where they reach, there seems to be barely any grain left. Despite this, they are carefully combing the field to gather any remnants left by the farmers after the harvest.

If you look at their hands, faces, and necks, their skin is deeply tanned. Today, sun-tanned skin can sometimes be seen as a sign of health or wealth, representing frequent travel. However, these women do not seem to represent leisure or prosperity. Instead, they are desperately bending over to pick up even the slightest grains left behind in the field, simply to sustain their lives. Watching them, you can feel an intense sense of urgency in their movements.

In the era when this painting was created, those who gathered the leftover grain in the fields were often poor widows. Today, there are social programs to support the poor, but back then, such systems did not exist. Therefore, the

weak and poor had no choice but to go out to the fields after the harvest, hoping to find any small bit of grain left behind.

In today's scripture, we meet a woman who is gleaning like those in the painting. Her name is Ruth. She was a woman from Moab, a neighboring country of Israel, and had married a man from Bethlehem. However, she didn't get to enjoy married life for very long, as her husband passed away about ten years into their marriage. Sadly, her husband's younger brother, who was also married, soon passed away as well.

Thus, Ruth, her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-law all found themselves suddenly widowed. While today there are many opportunities for women to work, it was not the same back then, as most labor was done by men. Even if the region had been prosperous, they might have had neighbors able to offer support, but there was no abundance where they lived. After many days of worry and concern, Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, heard that her homeland, Bethlehem, had been blessed with a good harvest.

They began to prepare to leave that hopeless place and journey to Bethlehem. Naomi thought about Ruth and her other daughter-in-law's situation. Since they were Moabite women, she reasoned that it might be better for them to return to their own families in Moab, where they could possibly find stability. There was no guarantee that their lives would improve in Bethlehem.

So, Naomi suggested that they return to their families and start over. It was a logical and reasonable suggestion. Since both daughters-in-law were still young, they could likely depend on the support of their parents or siblings if they returned home. However, life in Bethlehem offered no such assurances. The two daughters-in-law considered the choice between life in Bethlehem and returning to their familiar homes. Eventually, the younger daughter-in-law, feeling a slight guilt for leaving Naomi but prioritizing the security of her own life, chose to go back to her family.

Ruth, however, chose to stay with Naomi. Ruth likely felt compassion and sympathy for her mother-in-law, but her decision seemed based on more than just pity. Perhaps Naomi had been a kind, warm person to her daughters-in-law, and Ruth herself was likely a good-hearted person. While living in

Moab, Naomi had kept her faith in her God and traditions, and Ruth, through her influence, had also come to believe in those values. Despite being a foreigner, Ruth had chosen to follow Naomi's God.

For Ruth, the choice between following Naomi to Bethlehem or returning to her own family was not merely a question of where to live. It was a choice between continuing her new life of faith in God or returning to her old ways. For Ruth, going to Bethlehem was not only about living in a new place but also about holding fast to her faith in God, regardless of circumstances.

Ruth's story reveals much to us. When we face hardships in life, it's easy to lose our grounding and feel shaken. We search for ways out, feeling uncertain about which path to take. We may find ourselves thinking that one person's advice sounds right one moment, and another person's advice seems correct the next. We feel torn among various plans, confused and lost. At times, we make hasty choices that lead to unfortunate outcomes.

I believe these emotions and struggles we feel in hardship are not so different from what Ruth, her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-law experienced. Naomi's suggestion that her daughters-in-law return to their families came from a sincere concern for them and was likely a more secure path.

But, friends, that was human reasoning. Our thoughts, our plans—these are limited. God's plans, however, extend beyond us, working in ways beyond what we could ever imagine. Without God, nothing in our lives is truly secure. We may be used to the rhythm of morning, afternoon, and night, but none of us can guarantee that we'll open our eyes tomorrow. In this world, there is no absolute certainty—only God alone provides that assurance.

Ruth understood this. This was the difference between her and her sister-in-law. Ruth likely couldn't envision what her life in Bethlehem would be like. She had no idea how her life would unfold. Yet, she believed that wherever she went, as long as she trusted in God, He would lead her and work in her life. So, even though she knew nothing of Bethlehem, she followed Naomi, believing in her God.

When Ruth and Naomi arrived in Bethlehem, no miraculous welcome awaited them. With the help of some of Naomi's relatives, they managed to

secure a small room to stay in. But Ruth didn't lose heart. She believed in God and worked hard. She went to the fields to gather leftover grain to sustain them, just like the women in the painting we saw earlier. There, she met Boaz, a relative of Naomi's, whom God had prepared in advance, and Boaz showed her kindness.

In that culture, when an older brother passed away, the younger brother was expected to marry the widow to support her. Since Boaz was related to Naomi's family, he married Ruth, resolving Ruth and Naomi's worries.

Friends, when we are in difficult situations and our hearts feel shaken, it's all the more crucial to stay grounded and strong. It may not be easy. Relying solely on God may seem unwise when other options look more practical. However, God has always worked in our lives in ways we cannot foresee. Sometimes, things we thought were certain turn out not to be. What I can tell you for certain is that only God is the answer, only God provides assurance, and only God is 100%.

When life is shaking, when we face hardship, when we feel despair or confusion about which path to choose, when our emotions feel overwhelming—may we all hold on to God alone. Amen.