

“Emptiness” | Ruth 1  
December 7, 2025

This is the story of a destitute woman.

Really and truly, this opening chapter of the book of Ruth is a bleak one. On first read, we might miss a lot of it because the author of the book tells us massive life events in just half a sentence.

In the days when the judges ruled. We don’t know what judge – that doesn’t seem to be important. But this book starts where the last one leaves off, with the line Pastor Carel talked about last week: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” This is perhaps the most depressing line in the Bible. Everything has gone horribly wrong for the people of Israel. They have no leader, no guidance, and apparently no moral compass. It is in this context that we must read the book of Ruth.

Interestingly enough, the Hebrew Bible places Ruth between Song of Songs and Lamentations. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, is where we find Ruth first placed after the book of Judges as we have it today. There’s a point being made there that we shouldn’t miss. The book of Ruth stands in dialogue with the book of Judges. The Godlessness of the last chapters of Judges is answered in Ruth.

In this time of the judges, the land has been ravaged by a famine. Throughout the Old Testament, famine is seen as a direct punishment from God in response to the people’s disobedience. And just as God’s favor lands on the godly and the ungodly, so too does his displeasure. We have no reason to believe Elimelech and his family weren’t good, faithful believers, but they fall victim to this famine the same as

everyone else. Most ironically, they fall victim to famine in Bethlehem, which means “the House of Bread.”

And so Elimelech picks up his family – his wife and two sons – and moves them to Moab. This is a big move. According to Genesis 19 the Moabites descended from Lot and his eldest daughter and are therefore the result of an incestuous relationship. So they’re scorned by the people of Israel, and seen as completely inferior. To pick up and move to Moab would be frowned upon by all Elimelech’s acquaintances. And once in Moab, this family would be outsiders, foreigners, immigrants. No connections, no reputation, nothing to secure their place in a community. Not a move you make unless you have to.

And then, at some point, Elimelech dies and Naomi becomes a widow. And her sons do what no good Israelite mother would want for her children – they marry Moabite women. Then after ten years of living in Moab, Mahlon and Kilion die. Naomi has lost her home, she’s lost her status, she’s lost her husband, she’s lost her beloved children, she has lost everything.

This book of Ruth, which we often think of as a lovely little love story, is really the story of Naomi, the story of a woman who has seemingly been abandoned by God. Carolyn Custis James, in her book *The Gospel of Ruth*, claims that Naomi is a female version of Job. And James argues that Naomi out-Jobs Job. Job was not an immigrant – he’s still surrounded by his community - nor was Job a woman in a time of patriarchy. Naomi is completely destitute. She has no source of income, no hope of remarriage, and no hope of grandsons to carry on her family line or provide for her. She’s done. It very much looks like God has left her.

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In his memoir *Night*, Elie Wiesel recounts his experience of being a Jew during the holocaust. He emerges at the end still believing in God's existence, but with no hope left of God's goodness. "Never shall I forget," he writes, "those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never."

This is the ground-shifting, life-altering, hope-destroying characteristic of loss. Loss of job, loss of health, loss of loved one, loss of community, loss of identity. "Who am I now that I am no longer who I was in relation to this person, this place? How do I keep going when my normal is now so fractured and confused? And how do I make sense of my God in all of this?"

As Pastor Carel said last week, it's not hard to drum up examples of such loss in our world. In the 26 months of war in Gaza, 20,000 Palestinian children have been killed. That's almost one child killed every hour of that war. That is ground-shifting, life-altering, hope-destroying loss.

A few weeks ago, 300 students were kidnapped from their boarding school in Nigeria and herded away on foot by armed men on motorcycles, right past their helpless parents. That is ground-shifting, life-altering, hope-destroying loss.

In the United States ordinary men, women, and children are being taken from their places of work, their homes, and the courthouses where they're showing up for their immigration hearings, and are being deported to undisclosed locations, wrenched from their families and the communities they have lived in for decades. This is ground-shifting, life-altering, hope-destroying loss.

For some of us, the news reports of such unimaginable loss dredge up within us the residual twinges of pain and grief from our own stories. We remember the night on which we kissed our son on the forehead for the last time before the casket was closed. We hold the picture of our long-deceased spouse a little tighter to our chest. We walk past the locker of our friend who took her own life when she had so much more life yet to live.

We sit by the window of our room in the nursing home and wish we could live life the way we used to. We drive to the hospital for the third time in a month, wondering if this treatment will be the successful one. We think we should be married by now, or pregnant by now, or employed by now, and grieve a thing we do not have.

Loss comes in every shape and every form, and is always poignant. It always hurts.

And then, to top it all off, we have to try and defend God in all of it. We have to rationalize how our God could let something like this happen. Our friends and family question our faith – “So much for your God.” And, embarrassed, we try to smooth things over for God and do our best damage-control.

But the story of Naomi - like the story of Job – these stories allow our relationship with God to be messy. These stories allow us to yell at God, and to ask our questions and to be honest about how much we’re hurting and just how painful these losses are.

Eugene Peterson once said, “No literature is more realistic and honest in facing the harsh facts of life than the Bible. At no time is there the faintest suggestion that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties...on every page of the Bible there is recognition that faith encounters troubles.”

And so, what is perhaps most surprising about this chapter isn't just how horrible things have become for Naomi. What is most surprising is Ruth's response.

Naomi hears that the Lord has come to the aid of his people – that the storehouses in the House of Bread are once again full. So she returns to her home, daughters-in-law in tow. But at some point, she decides there is no future for those daughters in Bethlehem. They, now, will be the foreigners in a strange land. Those good Israelite boys, surrounded by good Israelite girls, won't give them a second glance. Naomi can't have more sons for them to marry. There is nothing for them in Bethlehem. "Go home," she says to them, "and may the Lord bless you for your kindness to me."

Orpah turns around and does go home. She's sensible. She knows that she has a better chance of being protected and cared for at home than in a strange place. She knows it, Naomi knows it, Ruth knows it. Orpah turns around.

But Ruth stays. And this is a life-altering, ground-shifting decision. There is no sense in it. We should read this and think, "What are you thinking, woman?! Even Naomi, completely alone in the world, wants you to go back."

But Ruth stays. In the face of Naomi's despairing accusation, "the Lord's hand has gone out against me," Ruth says, "Your God will be my God."

We don't know why she claims this God. Maybe she saw how Naomi and her sons grieved together in hope after Elimelech died. Maybe she saw enough good and hope and faith in this family of believers to say, "I want to be part of that." Maybe it was enough for her that God had restored the fields of Bethlehem.

Whatever it was, she had seen a glimmer of goodness. And, as Carolyn Custis James says, “When you’re living in darkness, even a little light can make a powerful difference.”

This little bit of light gave Ruth something to hold onto. And as we’ll see, this light will also give Naomi something to hold onto. Naomi does not in fact return to Bethlehem alone. She has a daughter.

One of my classmates in my PhD cohort is Marcos Canales, a pastor of La Fuente Ministries, a bilingual and intercultural church in Pasadena, California. He told us a few weeks ago that his community is living in a time of Fire and Ice – devastated by the wildfires in January, and now experiencing the terror and heartbreak of friends and family members being taken by ICE agents.

I found an interview Marcos gave in August, about what it means to be a faithful witness in these times. In that interview, he talked about lament services his community has held, one last November after the election, and one in January, after the fires. He didn’t know what to tell people...how to give them any hope in these services. But then a woman named Nina, a spiritual director, asked for the candle used in their children’s ministry.

La Fuente’s children’s ministry uses the Godly Play program, and each week the Christ candle is lit for the children. Nina lit the candle for the congregation, a reminder that God’s people have gathered around the light in periods of darkness for generations.

But it was the language of their children’s program that made the candle even more meaningful. During Godly Play when the candle is extinguished, the leader says that though the light may longer be visible, it is still there, just in changed form. It turns into smoke, which

spreads through the room, clinging to each of us, so we carry it with us as we go.

So, said Nina, in these days, as people gather, bringing meals and clothes to people who have lost everything, standing in solidarity with those who are afraid...they carry the light with them. The light that says, “this is not the end of this.”

Naomi doesn't know yet the end of her story. All she's got to go on are the promises of her faith and the hope of pity from her community. But now she has a daughter. A daughter who has glimpsed the light of hope, and will carry that light with her, even if it's just a wisp of smoke right now. Naomi feels herself to be empty, but even in her trouble, God is beginning to restore her, to fill her up again with life and joy, through the courage and faithfulness of a Moabite woman.

The chapter closes by telling us that Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. In this place that was empty and barren, God is about to do something. There is a light in the darkness.

I'll invite Noah to come forward now, and as he does, I invite you to think about both where you stand in need of fulfillment, of the light of hope, and also how you might be for others that source of light. When the candle is extinguished after this service, how might you carry that light forward for others? Where are you being called to step out in courage and faithfulness?

As the grain is poured, we say together:

Leader: Lord Jesus, we long for you.

All: Fill our hearts with your love.

*Grain is poured*

Let us pray.

Lord of hopefulness,  
fill us with the light of your love,  
that we might carry that light for others.

Fill us who are empty,  
and help us who are fulfilled to bring blessing and fulness to the bitter  
and forlorn.

In this Advent season we wait for the fulfillment of all things, the day of  
peace, when our hearts are truly satisfied. Until that day, may we bear  
witness to your glory in all we say and do.

Amen.

*light christmas tree lights*