

“Spiritual Security”

Ruth 1:1-18

“The land of opportunity.” That’s where they were bound. Times were tough. Money was short. Work was hard to come by. A famine was devastating the land. And so, the four of them — husband, wife and two sons — pulled up stakes and journeyed to a far country.

They came to stay. They did what they had to do to fit in. Difficult as it was, they learned the language. They mastered mystifying social customs. That immigrant family labored hard, and, in time, their new neighbors accepted them. The new land treated them well. In return, they became model citizens.

The two boys grew fast. It wasn’t long before they began talking and dressing and acting like any other children of that land. To their mother and father — their own flesh and blood — the two sons sometimes seemed like strangers. It was hard to watch them grow up without the traditions of the old country. But the parents were proud of their two boys, and they were equally pleased with their new country. The old country had been left behind. There was no turning back now.

Then, tragedy struck. The husband died suddenly, leaving his wife with two late-teenage sons and no savings. Times were hard, but the little family scraped by. Soon, the boys met and married local girls.

It was not long after the second son’s wedding that the unspeakable happened. First, one son died, then the other.

For their mother — whose name was Naomi — this news was devastating. It rocked her life to its very foundations. In the space of a short time, this immigrant woman had lost the three people she held most dear in all the world.

Naomi takes stock of her situation. She's an Israelite woman living in Moab. She's worked hard every day of her life. But in that place and time, neither she nor her daughters are permitted to inherit property.

In that society, a woman belongs wholly and completely to her husband. Should she be widowed, her sons — who do have the right to inherit — are duty-bound to take some of those resources and use them to care for her. If there are no sons, her husband's brother is required to take her in.

But Naomi is an immigrant. She has no husband. She has no sons. She has no brother-in-law. The only family she has — her two daughters-in-law — are Moabites. They have their own families in the area. They will be taken care of.

As for Naomi, it's hard to imagine a greater calamity. She's too old to marry again. The best she can hope for is the charity of strangers — who may (if she's lucky) hire her as a household servant. Her life will be dawn-to-dusk labor: hauling water or pounding laundry on the rocks by the stream. When the day is done, her only place to curl up at night is in the straw of the stable.

For the first time in 10 years, Naomi's thoughts turn to the old country, to Israel — to the snug house in Bethlehem she and her husband Elimelech left behind. "I wonder who's living there now?" she asks herself. The famine is over, they say. Israel is prosperous again.

“Surely there are still some kinfolk in Israel who will take me in,” Naomi says to her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. “I’ve made up my mind. I’m going home.”

“We will come with you,” they reply.

Naomi looks back at them in astonishment. “Stop this foolishness!” she snaps. “I can offer you no future. You know that. Your place is with your own families.”

But the two young women are persuasive. They love their mother-in-law very deeply. They convince Naomi to allow them to come with her.

The three of them are not even out of Moab before Naomi has second thoughts. She stops in the middle of the road, turns to Ruth and Orpah, and *commands* them to go home to their own mothers. They are still marriageable, she tells them. “The Lord grant that you may find security, each in the house of your husband.”

“Orpah kissed her mother-in-law,” the Scriptures say — a respectful kiss, a kiss of blessing, a good-bye kiss. But Ruth “clung to her.”

The verb “to cling” is the very same word used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the relationship of Adam and Eve: “a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife.” Ruth holds fast to Naomi, who tries one more time to convince Ruth to go. But Naomi’s resolve is weakening. Ruth responds with some of the most famous lines in all literature:

“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.

Where you die, I will die,

and 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!”

—Ruth 1:17

It’s nothing less than an oath of faithfulness, a truly extraordinary thing for a young Moabite widow to say to her widowed Israelite mother-in-law! Ruth has absolutely no reason to go with Naomi — to risk a journey of many days on foot, to a foreign land and a murky future. No reason, that is, but love.

It’s love that alters the equation, that redistributes the weights on the scales. It’s love that impels Ruth to turn aside from the only home she has ever known and continue down the dusty road with everything she owns bundled on her back.

Today let’s linger on that phrase of Naomi’s, that blessing to her daughters-in-law: “The Lord grant that you may find security ...”

Security. That’s what life’s all about, some will tell you. It’s the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the IRA coming due, the pension waiting to fund our retirement. The world is a fierce and hostile place, many will tell you. The life-task of each one of us is to somehow keep the chaos at bay, to gain some measure of this thing called “security,” to take care of our own, and to “*look out for number one.*”

Security is a good thing — no doubt about it. A certain group of steelworkers discovered just how good a thing it is back in the 1930s as they were building San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge.

The construction company didn’t install safety devices during the first part of the project. Twenty-three workers fell to their deaths. For the last phase of the project, a huge net was deployed for the staggering cost (at the time) of \$100,000.

At least 10 men fell into the safety net and were saved. That was a marvel in itself. But the most remarkable thing of all is this: from the day the net was hung, the steelworkers accomplished 25 percent more work. That’s how important it was to be assured of their security!

Can security also become an obsession? We’ve all heard tales of misers who scrimped, saved and did without necessities, all to protect themselves from poverty, but who died leaving millions behind. We’ve all known people who’ve felt so personally *insecure* that they would do almost anything to earn affection from others.

Then there’s that oft-quoted phrase, “national security.” It was national security that the Nixon White House so frequently invoked. But history has revealed that it was a smoke screen, as our politicians have invoked smoke screens ever since.

There are times when security is still a good thing, *but not the best thing*. Listen to these words, from a great political leader of our country: “The things that will destroy America are prosperity-at-any-price, peace-at-any-price, safety-first instead of duty-first, the love of soft living, and the get-rich-quick theory of life.”

Now who do you suppose said that? Some 1960s radical? Some austere belt-tightener of the 1990s?

Guess again. It was Teddy Roosevelt, one of the most determined, full-speed-ahead promoters of this country — and particularly its business — to occupy the White House. Roosevelt lived in an era when speaking of morality in politics had not yet gone out of fashion. He believed that financial prosperity — and the security it represented — should never become an end in itself. There were higher values, Roosevelt believed, than mere survival.

Sometimes nations, as well as individuals, need to live with a certain degree of risk if that's what it takes to uphold those values.

Ruth sets aside her craving for security and follows her mother-in-law, Naomi. She does so for one reason, and one reason alone. She does it for love.

In taking those first steps down the winding, dusty road to Bethlehem, Ruth declares her decision to live on the razor edge of risk. In so doing, she trades her physical security for spiritual security. As she makes that fateful decision, she puts all her trust in God. As it turns out, the road she and Naomi travel will lead to Bethlehem, in more ways than one.

“In more ways than one.” What does that mean? You have to turn to the first chapter of Matthew to find out. There, as you scan through the cascade of Hebrew names that is the genealogy of Jesus, you come to the words, “Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.” (Matthew 1:5-6).

This very same Ruth — the Moabite widow who impulsively left her homeland on a journey everyone (even Naomi) thought was crazy — becomes, by the sheer grace of God, ancestor not only to King David, but also to Jesus himself.

Ruth's personal journey leads her to Bethlehem. But in a spiritual sense, her journey leads also to a certain Bethlehem night, centuries in the future. A star hangs high in the sky. Shepherds stand astonished at angel-song. A certain descendant of Ruth named Joseph smiles at his wife, Mary, who's holding their newborn baby in her arms.

What if *Joseph* had been obsessed with security? What if he had carried through on his original plan — once he'd learned of Mary's pregnancy — to “dismiss her quietly,” as Matthew coldly puts it? Instead, Joseph has a dream and follows it, defying the conventions of his society and standing faithfully beside a woman everyone tells him he should abandon.

The difference — as with Ruth and Naomi — is love. Joseph loves his wife and will not leave her, even if it means giving up some of his cherished security. Ruth loves Naomi even as they journey toward the unknown land of Israel, leaving behind her homeland of Moab. In so doing, she embarks on the greatest adventure of her life: one that her Lord will bless when she becomes the great-grandmother of David and the ancestor of Jesus.

When we learn from the story of Ruth as we are in our January-February Bible Study, we put spiritual security as our priority – secure through our faith in Jesus Christ.

May the peace of God . . .

#419 – For All the Faithful Women (verses, 1, 2, 5, 12)