

Proper 27 Year B  
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

## Surprise

Hi. My name is Stephen, and I'm a Book of Ruth fanboi. It is an amazing piece of literature; every name, every action, every place has deep layers of meaning. The language straddles prose and poetry. I'm a word guy, and I live for writing like this.

But this is a sermon in an Episcopalian liturgy, not a book club, so we're not going to get into that. If you want to do a book club, let me know. Seriously.

There is one part of the story of Ruth that is absolutely sermon material, and that is a surprise twist ending. We read that today. To appreciate it, let's revisit the story.

Ruth is set in the "Period of the Judges", about 1100 BCE, when the people of Judea were ruled by tribal leaders, shortly before the monarchy was established. (The decision to be ruled by Kings is a central and rich theme in the Hebrew Scriptures, and we should talk about that someday. But back to our story.)

A family from Bethlehem leaves Judea to live in Moab. Naomi and her husband Elimelech, and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion. It's not explicit why they do this, but the story hints at economic hardship, probably famine. Bethlehem at the time was a small farming village; the name *Beit Lechem* means "house of bread". It's a tiny place, nowheresville.

What the family seemed to hope would be a short stay stretched on for years. Elimelech dies, and Naomi's sons take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. Then the sons also die.

Naomi is in an impossible situation. Without a man to provide for her, she will be forced to beg. She's heard that things are better now back in Bethlehem, and she resolves to return.

Naomi intends to return to Bethlehem alone, and insists that Orpah and Ruth find Moabite husbands. Orpah agrees to this; Ruth does not, and insists on going to Judea with Naomi. She makes a beautiful and famous speech, which you may have heard at a wedding:

*For wherever you go, I will go. And wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people is my people, and your god is my god. Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried<sup>1</sup>.*

Surprisingly, this is not great news for Naomi. Despite its frequent use in weddings, this is not a romantic story. It's an economic story. As a widowed woman without sons, Naomi is going to have to live on the charity of her kin. Having a daughter-in-law along probably won't help, and Ruth is not just a widowed woman herself; she is from Moab, and Moab is the eternal enemy of the Judeans. The Mosaic law forbids anyone from Moab being accepted into their community<sup>2</sup>. Two widowed women living together is a precarious existence; one of them a Moabite, an unwelcome alien, is a disaster.

Nevertheless, Naomi and Ruth go to Bethlehem. They make their living by gleaning fields after the harvest; Mosaic law requires farmers to not harvest the edges of their fields and not to pick up grain that is dropped by the harvesters, so the poor will have something to eat.

In Bethlehem there is a relative of Naomi's husband, Boaz, who is an honorable, important man. He notices Ruth, asks about her, and learns how she and Naomi came to be together – including the fact that Ruth is a Moabite. Boaz is won over by Ruth's goodness and faithfulness. He instructs his men to make sure she has enough to eat and to treat her with respect.

Naomi coaches the rather shy and proper Ruth on what to do to spend more time with Boaz; we heard a bit of that in today's reading. Boaz finally decides that he wishes to marry Ruth, which is his right under Mosaic law, but he is not first in line to exercise that right. Boaz engages with the man who is first in line in a scene that's somewhere between Josh Lyman in *The West Wing* and Jedi Mind Tricks in *Star Wars*. The unnamed man first in line to marry Ruth relents, scared off by the fact that she is a Moabite, and Boaz and Ruth are married.

It's a lovely happy ending to a well-told story. But there's a little twist epilogue, which is what we read today. And it's one of the great twists in literature.

Ruth and Boaz have a son Obed, and Obed has a son Jesse, and Jesse has a son David. Yes, David, that David – David the King of Israel; one of the central figures in the Hebrew scriptures. King David's great-grandmother was a Moabite, an unwelcome, forbidden alien.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruth 1:16-17

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 23:4

If I were to write a short story about an undocumented woman from Cuba becoming the next president of the United States, it might be more plausible than this story.

I love this because it says something about God that catechisms and dogma and prayers often don't say, indeed they often seem to run away from saying: God is a surprise.

God is a surprise.

Whatever we think about God, whatever our image of God, whatever our theology – God is more than that. For those of us old enough to remember the comic strip Peanuts, you may remember that Snoopy wrote a theology book, and the title was *Has It Ever Occurred to You That You That You Might Be Wrong?*<sup>3</sup> (I'd buy that book.) The story of Ruth invites that same sort of humility.

I think about what it would be like if we would, just once in a while, instead of praying the Collect for Purity or the Creed, we'd just say: "God will surprise us today". Or "God, today give us the grace to be surprised".

I think that a one-sentence prayer, or creed, "God will surprise us today", is maybe the clearest and truest thing we can say about God.

What would it be like to live our lives, live our faith, eagerly awaiting that surprise?

God is a surprise.

God will surprise us.

God, give us the grace to be surprised.

*Stephen Linam*  
*November, 2024*

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://au.pinterest.com/pin/5840674489991871/>