

The Shape of Belonging: Naomi's Story
From Ruth 1 and 3

This feels to me like a tender time. As we come out of the isolated spaces where we've spent the last fifteen months, our own little cocoons, we're a little less confident and resilient than we were when we last walked confidently through the world. Our skin is a little thinner; our shock absorbers need replacement. As I've talked with friends and colleagues, with some of you over the last weeks, I keep hearing what I'm feeling too: that mixed in with excitement and relief about the lifting of pandemic restrictions, there's also some tentativeness in us, an uncertainty that *we* are fully ready to come back to whatever 'normal' is going to look like in a post-pandemic world. Now I know who I am when I'm alone, or with the very few people I've spent the last year with; but who will I be when I'm part of a larger group again? Where will I feel comfortable? Who will I belong to?

Belonging is what we're talking about for these few weeks as we re-enter in-person community. We're mining the Old Testament story of Ruth, which is also about people leaving and re-entering old and new communities, crossing borders of comfort and familiarity, finding the relationships they can depend on, where they belong.

Last week we set the stage for this story. We met the characters: Naomi, the Israelite whose family immigrated in search of food and security, and Ruth, her daughter-in-law. In ten years she spent as an immigrant in Moab, Naomi lost everything that mattered to her: her husband, her two sons, her home. Now she has decided to return to Bethlehem, the place of her people, her family. Against Naomi's best advice, Ruth goes with her. Naomi is returning to the place of her belonging; Ruth will take her place as the foreigner in the story. This is where we pick up the story today.

I want to step back from the story itself for a minute to notice that there are no instructions from God in this narrative. No meaningful dreams in the night, no angels with divine messages. Only everyday people who live, like we do, inside a fabric of traditions. Traditions of their community, their people; familiar patterns they've developed as individuals. Sometimes they know how to act because there are rules, and sometimes it's because this is just how things have always been; no one even has to say it out loud. What happens when something changes and the rules don't apply? Or when the familiar ways stop working? They have to figure it out for themselves, just like we do. They do the best they can. They reach for the values that have silently formed deep inside of them, the loves that steer them in one direction or another. They take a step forward—sometimes with confidence that they're doing the right thing, sometimes with hesitation, while they're not sure at all. This has always been true, even for people of faith. It is true for us now.

Naomi leaves Moab and goes back to the land of her people. She arrives home not like a triumphant explorer, but defeated. In the ten years she's been gone, she's lost not only the people she loved, but her security system, the husband who'd provided for her, sons who would have cared for her into old age. In Jewish culture of that time, a family was responsible for the

financial security of the wives its sons brought home. In fact, if a son died, another son was supposed to be provided to marry his widow. In a society where women had no independent means of support, this was the way their place was secured. So now, Naomi is responsible not only for her own future, but for Ruth's. And she could not meet this most basic family obligation; she had no more sons, not even a husband by whom she could conceive another. The people she loves, and her ability to meet the responsibilities that had given her life identity and purpose, are gone.

An old saying, that might be Buddhist or might be Christian, says, *Wherever you go, there you are*. I wonder if when Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem, she's surprised to find that her sadness has come with her. The people in her hometown are happy to see her again, but the heaviness of her heart pulls her head down, so she can't see their welcome. Grief and worry live deep inside Naomi, so consuming that she sees nothing but loss when she looks in the mirror. What good could there possibly be in her future? How is she even supposed to feed herself, and Ruth?

The Bible rarely tells us characters' emotions, but I wonder if Naomi resented her husband for having made the decision to go to Moab in the first place, her friends for having survived in Bethlehem. I wonder because the story tells us that Naomi changes her name—to *Mara*, which means 'bitter' in Hebrew.

For one whole chapter of this short, four-chapter book, Naomi stays closeted in her grief, her bitterness. She watches as Ruth goes out and finds a job to support them both. It's not until Ruth comes back and reports that her first day at a new job actually went pretty well, that Naomi lifts her head up. 'Tell me about it,' Naomi says. And Ruth tells her about the fields she gleaned from, picking up the stalks of grain the first wave of harvesters had left behind. She talks about the owner of the field who had treated her kindly; who had noticed Ruth was foreign, but who had not held it against her or counted her as less than the other workers. In fact, he had taken extra steps to watch out for her, to protect her from the dangers in this work.

'Tell me that owner's name again?' Naomi asks. Boaz. His name is Boaz, and he too is an Israelite. There's a thing that Middle Eastern people like my family still do. They search out some endless memory bank of connections every time they meet someone from the same ethnic background. My father can tell you in the first five minutes of meeting another Armenian how her family was connected to his family in Detroit, how her brother married the daughter of my dad's godmother's sister. Turns out we're cousins! Westerners don't do this so much, but in cultures that are bound together by family structures, finding a connection like that is gold. 'I know Boaz,' Naomi says; 'in fact, he's a relative of mine.'

And suddenly, something inside of Naomi wakes up. Her mind that had felt like mush for months begins to whirl with possibilities, energy, creativity. What a coincidence—Ruth meeting Boaz! What if this unexpected connection—very small, but still, a connection to hang onto—turned into something? How might a distant kinship help them out of a pretty hopeless future?

That's where we're going to leave the story today. But I want to tell you what this story reminded me of this week.

Many years ago, I went to Guatemala on a mission trip with other people from the church I was serving at the time. (Stole) For a week, we staffed a medical and dental clinic in a rural area outside of Quetzaltenango. One of the people who went with us had gone to Guatemala many times before. Brad's business, here in California, was to manufacture prosthetic devices—artificial arms and legs—that he provided to doctors in the U.S., orthopedists mostly. But he had also turned his profession into his volunteer work. And it turns out that there are a lot of people in Guatemala who have lost limbs, because of diabetes, or accidents, or just because the medical care in that country is not good enough to save a whole body if something goes wrong.

On that trip, Brad was taking a new artificial leg to an 18-year-old young man named Uziel. Uziel had lost his leg when he was just a little boy; this was not his first prosthetic device. Now that he was an adult, Brad was bringing him the leg that would fit his adult body. But for all the years before that, as Uziel grew, every time Brad went back to Guatemala, he would extend the length of Uziel's child-size leg by putting a block of wood into it at the ankle. First just a small piece to extend it by an inch or so; then, as Uziel got taller, a larger piece; until, when Uziel reached his adult height and he traded that old prosthetic in, it had, in between the plastic foot and calf, a four-inch piece of wood at the ankle.

Brad gave me Uziel's old artificial leg, and I kept it with me for years afterward, because it always reminded me that this is the way God works. Often, miracles don't come as full-blown solutions to our problems. They come in small increments, one little bit at a time. Our answers, what we need to keep going, gets cobbled together, almost without our noticing.

Like one more inch of height inserted at the ankle.

Like a kindness from Boaz, the first hint that Ruth the Moabite could find a home among Israelites.

Like a first, tiny connection with someone you didn't ever imagine could be a friend.

Like a community that invites you to tiptoe in, even if you're not sure yet that this is the place where you belong.

Lift your eyes, and you'll see that God has been at work, quietly, while you weren't even looking. And now, here it is: just enough. Just the next step on the way to your wholeness.