

## “I WILL BE WITH YOU”

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Ruth 1:1-13

On December 23, 1776 Thomas Paine wrote: “These are the times that try men’s souls.” Well, I don’t know about you, but lately it seems to me that **these** are the times that try our souls. It’s very easy to get discouraged these days, and get together in a group of other people and talk, and it’s very, very easy to get discouraged these days. It seems like everywhere you look, everything you hear, everything you read is troubling. Huge problems envelop us – rampant drug use resulting in rampant crime, major dysfunction in government, nations threatening other nations, nations threatening their own people. These are the times that try our souls. All too often lately I’ve heard people wonder, “what’s going to happen to us?”

Well, that’s exactly what one of the main characters in this morning’s lesson from the Hebrew scriptures was thinking – and her name was Naomi. Things were bad in her life – really, really bad. Let me tell you her story.

Naomi was a woman married to a man named Elimelech. They were Israelites, and lived in the time when the judges ruled – which was a very bad time in history. And, as if things weren’t bad enough, a famine struck, and the people were starving for food. So Naomi and Elimelech and their sons Mahlon and Chilion had no choice but to up and move in search of a better life – and they moved to a place called Moab.

They left everything behind – family, friends, everything – and left for the foreign land of Moab. That was dangerous in and of itself – because Israel and Moab were enemies - which tells you how bad the situation was. As one writer put it, “Moab was a place an Israelite would go only if no other reasonable possibility existed.” (Ellsworth Kalas, *Grace in a Tree Stump*, “Grace and Love for God’s Future,” p. 70)

But go to Moab they did, and after they got established there, though they hoped life would have been better, tragedy struck – for Elimelech died. Now, Naomi was a widow, but she still had her two sons to take care of her.

And, as time went on, her sons married. They married Moabite women, which had to have troubled Naomi a little since in the eyes of an Israelite, they were

“foreigners.” Nevertheless, they married – and for a little while, life went along okay.

Then tragedy struck again. One of Naomi’s sons died, and then the other. Now, there are three widows – Naomi and her two daughters-in-law and they are struggling with no one to look after them. Back in those days, when a woman was widowed, her family had to take care of her – but Naomi’s family was back in Israel.

So she decided to go back home, and she told her daughters-in-law to go back home as well – meaning they should return to their parents’ homes right there in Moab. At first, both Orpah and Ruth refused. They would stay by Naomi’s side.

Naomi tried to reason with them. “Look, you have no future with me. I’m too old to have any more children, and even if I found a husband and did have sons, it would take years for them to be grown so you could take them as your husbands. Go. Go on your way back to your mothers.”

Naomi was bitter. Nothing had worked out for her. It was like she was being kicked to the curb. Everything that mattered to her, everyone that mattered to her was dead and gone, and in her mind, she was all alone. She was as low as she could go.

And if that’s where her story ended, it would be a terrible tragedy. But it didn’t end there, because, just when she thought all hope was lost, grace appeared. The wonderful preacher Ellsworth Kalas says that “At the moment when it seems proper to write ‘Finished,’ grace announces that there is a future. When circumstances say that night has fallen, grace replies, ‘Morning has broken!’ Grace gives reason to hope; it insists that there is a future.” (Ibid.)

Grace, for Naomi, came from her daughter-in-law Ruth. After Naomi gave her impassioned plea for her daughters-in-law to leave her, Orpah did in fact leave and go back to her mother. But Ruth remained – and as she did, she spoke lovely, lovely words that have been recited for generations as words of loyalty and commitment and love.

In the King James Version, which I think is so lovely, they go like this:

“Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God. Where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.” (Ruth 1:126-17)

Friends, make no mistake about it, what Ruth did was huge. First of all, she was under absolutely no obligation to stick with Naomi – society would have understood if she had left her. Secondly, it would be dangerous for Ruth, for she would be a foreigner in Israel – a Moabite, at that – an enemy. She would not be welcomed there with open arms.

Yet, out of love for Naomi, she did it. She stayed with her. She did it out of love.

I read a story not long ago that Tony Campolo told about a father and son. It seems that one Saturday night, totally out of the blue, a little boy took his father's dress shoes without him knowing, and polished them. When the father discovered them the next morning, he was thrilled and so touched by what his son had done, that the next night he wrote him a note thanking him and he put that and a silver dollar on the boy's dresser while he slept. The next morning, when the father got up he found the silver dollar and a note from his boy on his own dresser. The note said, "I did it for love!" (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 93.)

That's why Ruth did what she did as well – she did it for love. She did it so that her mother-in-law would not be alone. Her actions said to Naomi, "I will be there. I will be with you. It's going to be okay. Don't be afraid. I am with you."

It is a wonderful story – this story of Ruth and Naomi. It's a story for the ages, because it's not just a story about those two women from long ago, it's our story as well. It's the story of us and God.

It's the story of how, when things were at their worst, when humanity had sunk to its lowest and gone as far away from God as they could get, still God stayed. God did not walk away, and give up. Instead, God sent His Son Jesus to save us. With Jesus, God said in the most perfect way, "Do not be afraid. I am with you. I am there, and I will always be there, and it's going to be okay."

With Jesus, darkness turns to light. With Jesus, night becomes day. With Jesus, despair gives way to hope. With Jesus, all things are possible. With Jesus, we are never alone, we are never so low that He cannot lift us up. With Jesus, grace abounds.

So, you might be wondering, how did Ruth and Naomi's story end? Well, they indeed went back to Israel, and there began to glean in the fields. You know, women didn't work outside the home then, but they could become gleaners – which meant that they went and gathered the leftovers from the fields after the harvest workers left for the day. It was sort of a welfare system if you will – the harvest workers always left some behind knowing others would need to glean in those fields to keep from going hungry.

So Naomi and Ruth were gleaners for a while, and it was while she was doing that that Ruth met a man named Boaz, who owned the field in which she was working. He was an older man, and she caught his eye, and he began to take special care of her, ensuring that she would find plenty of food in the field.

When Ruth returns home and tells Naomi about it, Naomi's face lights up because Boaz is a distant relative, and she knows he's a good man, and would be a good match for Ruth. So she instructs Ruth in how to, well, basically, catch Boaz, and the rest, as they say, is history. Ruth and Boaz marry, and live happily ever

after. And, they have a son – so Naomi ends up with a family after all. That son was named Obed, who later was the father to Jesse, who (you might remember) was the father of David – who would become the great king of Israel!

You see, God made a way where no one – not Naomi, or Orpah, or Ruth, or anyone else – could probably have imagined in those days when all they knew was death and sadness. God was with them, and carried them through. God's grace flowed through Ruth, and Naomi was never alone.

God's grace still flows, my friends, in a mighty way. His grace poured out in Christ Jesus still abounds through His Holy Spirit, so we have no need to despair. These may be the times that try our souls, these may be the times when the world and its trouble screams "the night has fallen," but instead, as Ellsworth Kalas so wonderfully wrote, "God's grace says 'morning has broken!'"

So we have no need to ultimately fear. We have no need to give up or give in to discouragement and defeat. Because the Lord says to us each and every morning, "Do not be afraid, I am with you. I will be with you always. It's going to be okay."

So I want to close with a beautiful image I read about recently. It's a baseball story which I thought was appropriate given that it's World Series time.

It's a story about Babe Ruth, a story from the very end of his career. If you know his story at all, you know that his career didn't end with a bang, but a whimper. Over time, I've read, his age began to take a toll, his wild living came home to roost, and his popularity began to wane. Finally the Yankees traded him to the Braves. The story is told that in one of his last games in Cincinnati, he was faltering. He struck out and had made several errors that allowed the Reds to score five times in one inning. As he walked back toward the dugout after striking out, frustrated with himself and looking down at the ground, the crowd began to boo him and yell out ugly things. It was pitiful.

And just when it was getting unbearable for the Babe, a little boy jumped over the railing, and with tears coming down his face ran over to the once great athlete. Unashamedly, he flung his arms around Babe's legs and hugged him tightly. Babe Ruth leaned down and scooped him up, hugged him, and then set him down again. Patting him gently on the head, he took his hand and the two of them walked off the field together. (Sermonillustrations.com)

Now, I don't know if that story is absolutely, positively true or not – but what an image that is of grace. When times are toughest, grace comes along and gives us a hug – sometimes with tears! But grace is always there, we are never alone, and with grace, it will always be okay.

No matter what you are going through today, my friends, God and God's grace in Jesus Christ is with you – you are never alone. So if you've come here today discouraged or despairing or disgusted, be at peace. God is with you. If

you've come here with a broken heart, or you're afraid – be at peace. God is with you. If you feel like Naomi – like life has kicked you to the curb – be at peace – God will make a way.

The story of Ruth, my dear friends, is the story of God's love for you and for me. May it always remind you of that love that will not let you go. Thanks be to God.

Amen.