

**Sunday 5th July 2020**

**The Book of Ruth**

**Part 1: Disorientation, despair and bereavement**

**Call to Worship:**

Praise God  
Praise the God who made the world and all that is  
in it  
Praise the God who cares for all people  
who seeks justice for the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry  
who opens the eyes of the blind  
and loves the righteous  
who lifts up the bowed down  
praise the Lord who calls us to live as God's people  
to show God's love  
to bring God's justice  
to set all free  
to allow all voices to be heard  
and all to breathe deeply in the  
abundant life of God  
Praise the Lord  
Amen

**Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;  
to his feet thy tribute bring  
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
who like thee his praise should sing?  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Praise the everlasting King!**

**Praise him for his grace and favour  
to his people in distress;  
praise him, still the same for ever,  
slow to chide, and swift to bless.  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Glorious in his faithfulness.**

**Father-like, he tends and spares us;  
well our feeble frame he knows;  
in his hands he gently bears us,  
rescues us from all our foes.  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Widely as his mercy flows.**

**Angels in the height, adore him;  
ye behold him face to face;  
sun and moon, bow down before him,  
dwellers all in time and space  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Praise with us the God of grace!**

*Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847)  
Methodist Church. Singing the Faith. Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd.  
Kindle Edition.*

**Psalm 146**

**Prayers**

*Spend a moment noticing all that you have to thank  
and praise God for  
and remembering God's presence with you*  
**Come all you people  
Come praise your maker...  
Come now and worship the Lord**

God of all  
Maker of everything that is  
we praise you  
for your life in us and beyond us  
Seen in all that we can see  
and beyond all that we can see  
we bring you our praise  
our adoration and our thanks  
and so we praise you  
as we sing

God one of us in Jesus  
we praise you for your life  
that is shown in all its fullness  
in how you lived, walked and taught and healed  
and brought abundant life to all  
how you spoke of justice and peace  
and of setting captives free  
how your hand reached out to draw people into  
abundant life  
how you continue to reach out  
to draw us to be your disciples  
to create family and home and community in all its  
abundance  
and so God in Jesus we praise you  
as we sing

God the Holy Spirit  
we praise you  
for your life in us and beyond us  
drawing us into abundant life  
drawing us together as God's people  
in our separate places and as we meet  
we praise you for your challenge  
that calls us to see new ways of being  
that calls us to experience God's love in new ways  
and show it in new ways  
for your comfort that holds us  
and brings us familiarity  
knowing that all is well  
and so God the Holy Spirit we come to praise you  
as we sing

So we bring our praise to God, Father Son and  
Holy Spirit  
who created and restores us  
who brings us new life  
in all its fullness. Amen

## Introduction to the Book of Ruth

Sometimes when I read what has been written on the Book of Ruth or hear what has been preached I get the feeling that those writing and preaching would have preferred it to have been titled the Book of Boaz. The story they tell is a fairy tale, a bedtime story of Boaz riding in to rescue and marry the destitute Cinderella, Ruth. But this book is not titled with Boaz's name but with Ruth's and simplifying it to a fairytale rescue of a woman by a man destroys and flattens its multilayered meaning and removes its relevance and its ability to speak to us all.

In the Christian Bible, the book comes immediately after the harrowing and horrifying final chapters of Judges. These chapters and their tales of violence, oppression, abuse and horrific retribution are hard to read leading many of us to shy away from doing so. In them we see a people who have forgotten the lessons of 40 years of desert wondering, forgotten the justice taught by manna, by only gathering enough for today, everyone receiving in abundance and no one grabbing more than their share or depriving anyone else, forgotten that they live in God's abundance as God's Holy People, in God's Kingdom. These final chapters of Judges show the tribes of Israel fighting between and among themselves with each seeking their own good at the expense of everyone else.

The Book of Ruth comes at a time of great upheaval and harm in the time of Israel. The Book begins with Naomi and her husband fleeing Bethlehem as refugees from a famine. We are meant to hear the irony: Bethlehem, whose name can be translated House of Bread, has become breadless, grainless, a place of famine; the Promised Land, a land of milk and honey, is dry and barren; Naomi and her family find a new and nurturing home in Moab, the place of the enemy and of foreign gods.

In this foreign land and on returning to Bethlehem, Naomi and her family become models of living in God's way, as set out in the lessons of the wilderness, the 10 Commandments and beyond them. Their living in the abundant way of life set out in the Torah contrasts markedly with the way of destruction which has been described to great and harrowing effect at the end of the Book of Judges. In Ruth, Naomi, Boaz and Orpah we see people who live up to Naomi's former husband's name, Elimelech, God is King.

Alongside this focus on living in God's way we also find ourselves drawn into Naomi's struggle as she responds to the great losses in her life. To lose husband and both sons at any time and in any society is a huge loss, provoking searing grief and

many other emotions besides. For Naomi, living in a patriarchal society, it also meant a loss of identity, of family and of the means of living. There was no one to provide food for the table or a roof over her head. Literally all was lost. Her loss and the grief and lament it provokes have caused many to compare her with Job. This short book echoes many of the themes of that long one, exploring ideas of suffering and God's care. The first chapter in particular resounds with Naomi's renaming of herself as 'bitter' and doubting God's 'hesed', Covenant love or deep relational loving kindness. Her lament and anger lead her on to discover God's presence not only for her: the book ends with a genealogy which points forwards to King David and more steps in the redemption and recreation of the world as God's Kingdom.

## Reading: Ruth 1:1-18

read by Hector Chediya

### Sermon

Disorientation

Everything seems turned upside down

Loving acts become places of risk

Maybe this is how the world feels to you at the moment

Nothing is as it used to be

We're not sure how things will be tomorrow, next week or next month.

Disorientation

Everything seems turned upside down

Safe actions feel risky.

While it could describe our world and our experience, it could also describe that of Naomi. Her world had been turned upside down over and over again.

First she had known famine - Bethlehem, the House of Bread, was empty - no bread, no grain. The Promised Land of milk and honey was barren. She had been forced to flee, a refugee seeking a new home where she and her family could be nurtured. Wonder of wonders, she finds it in Moab - the place of the enemy, of the ungodly who act to Naomi and her family with the love and welcome of God.

Then, as roots were taking hold, with family growing and strengthening, she's struck again, not once but three times, by earth shattering loss: her husband and sons all dead. She loses not just those she loves but her identity, her place in society.

Disorientation hits again

The world seems turned upside down again.

I'm sure that Naomi's reaction may at first have been one that feels familiar. That in those early days she will have woken up forgetting the deaths, expecting to see her husband beside her, her sons at the other end of the room. I expect there were days, many days, when she squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to open them to the reality, wanting to live in the fantasy of life as it had been for a moment longer. Faced with disorientation this is often our longing: to go back to the old normal, to turn back the clock.

But if we are to find abundant life we must move forward: to find new places to call home. For Naomi this happens through her lament, grief and anger as she cries out bitterly about her loss of husband and the impossibility of new sons. Her lament and grief enable her to face the reality of her life and to move beyond the fantasy of turning the clock back. It enables her to face her fear that God too has abandoned her, that God's hesed, God's Covenant love, God's loving kindness is no more.

Disorientation  
The world turned upside down  
Maybe by now it feels like it will never stop turning  
and churning

And in the lament and the search for way, when Naomi feels far from God's love and without identity or home or place in society, her daughters-in-law become embodiments of God's hesed, God's relational deep love. Orpah shows God's faithful trustworthiness as she chooses to find her home in the home of her family and grieves the necessary separation from Naomi and Ruth. Ruth shows the faithfulness of God in travelling with and seeking out God's people wherever they may wander and however much they suggest God should go away: "your people will be my people, your God will be my God"

Is it just me who has  
"I will be your God  
and you will be my people"  
echoing through my being as I hear Ruth's words?

Her words shout and sing of Naomi's identity and home at a point when Naomi doesn't believe in the existence of either, and so she begins the work of God in embodying and accompanying Naomi's restoration as she starts the journey from disorientation to find a new home.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases  
God's mercies never come to an end  
They are new every morning, new every morning  
Great is thy faithfulness O Lord,  
Great is thy faithfulness.

**Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
hold me with thy powerful hand:  
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,  
feed me now and evermore;  
feed me now and evermore.**

**Open thou the crystal fountain  
whence the healing stream shall flow;  
let the fiery, cloudy pillar  
lead me all my journey through:  
strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,  
be thou still my strength and shield;  
be thou still my strength and shield.**

**When I tread the verge of Jordan  
bid my anxious fears subside;  
death of death, and hell's destruction,  
land me safe on Canaan's side:  
songs of praises, songs of praises,  
I will ever give to thee;  
I will ever give to thee.**

William Williams (1717–1791) translated by Peter Williams (1727–1796)  
Methodist Church. *Singing the Faith* (Kindle Locations 12575-12596).  
Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd. Kindle Edition.

### **The Blessing**