

“Naomi’s Sojourn”
Advent Three: Lake Shore Baptist Church
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One could scarcely call it a decision, my choice to head back home. I just get up one day and start walking. The same way the very act of waking up has become involuntarily, this too is unwilling by me. Every night I lay down, hoping for eternal sleep, wishing for nothing but death. And yet, some unseen force pulls me out of bed each day, moves me to prepare my meal, opens my mouth to eat. My body complies independently; my spirit is elsewhere, wrapped up in despair. One day the force tugs at my feet and without forethought or warning, I begin the long lonely trek home.

It is the logical thing to do, certainly. I am a widowed woman living in a foreign land. My sons are dead. I have nowhere to turn and no one to provide for me. The sensible response is to leave my home of ten years and return to my kin, in hopes someone will take pity. And so this is what my body does, whether my mind is aware of its practicality or not.

My daughter-in-laws try to follow me. This is nonsense, of course. They even less clear-headed in their grief than I. I am all they have left of their deceased spouses—and I am nothing much, a tired, grouchy woman whose sons far outshone her in company and in charm.

The girls follow me out of longing for what they have lost. I can see that. When the grief passes, their sense will return. They will understand why I send them back. These young women have a future if they stay in Moab, the home of their families. Unlike me. A foreign woman past marriageable age doesn’t stand a chance. To come with me would reverse their chances. They would end up foreign, spent women without a hope for happiness.

This business of following me is all wrong. They must go back. I say so. Stop them in their tracks and demand they leave me. I say it harsh, because I know what is best and I wish to leave no room for doubt.

Orpah looks as if she will have a melt-down right there on the side of the road. She has always been rather demonstrative. I’m not much for touching, but I lean forward—albeit awkwardly—and kiss them both, to soften the rejection. At this rare brush with affection, they wail. They protest. “No! We will go with you.”

I nearly laugh. What are they thinking? What ever has prompted such feverish display of loyalty? “What?” I say, “Can I provide more sons for you to marry?” My voice is growing shrill. “Even if I were to marry and conceive *tonight* would you wait for the boys to be grown?” I am mocking the girls now, which I somewhat regret when I see the pain in their eyes. “It has been far more bitter for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has turned against me!” (Ruth 1:13) I cry to them in anguish, willing them to see that to sojourn with me is to choose emptiness.

They are weeping in earnest now and even I can see the tears are genuine, that they are not just residual tears for their husbands, but they are fresh tears, prompted by the thought of losing me. I shift my feet, uncomfortable my departure is causing such pain.

Orpah finally kisses me goodbye, and to my surprise I feel a tear rolling down my own cheek, though whether it is for her or for my son, I do not know. Most days I am too numb to cry at all.

Orpah leaves, and I wipe the back of my sleeve across my nose. Ruth is standing there, quietly waiting. I turn to her, and she rushes me. Suddenly I am in an embrace like none I have ever known before, as if she is trying to meld together our skin. One can only stay stiff for so long inside such a hug. I acquiesce. Before Ruth even begins to speak, I know that for us, there will be no parting of ways.

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That night as we rest from our travels, it is bitterly cold and I toss and turn, unable to stay asleep in the chill. Ruth climbs into my bedding to warm my frail body. “Thank you, Mahlon,” I mumble groggily, but I am awake enough to realize I have called her my son’s name by mistake. I say nothing more. A pain shoots through my heart. Ruth does not correct me. Only brushes the hair from my face and hums softly.

Her words from earlier in the day drift through my mind like a piece of poetry. I can remember every word:

*Do not press me to leave
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—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do this and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1:16-17)*

Where had she learned to speak so beautifully? It had left me speechless.

I accept her decision in silence. On the one hand, I am more moved than I know how to say. How have I, who feels so alone and forgotten in this world, garnered such devotion? On the other hand, I fear for Ruth’s future. I feel selfish for being relieved by her commitment to me—what is in it for her but hardship and the needs of an aging woman?

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When we arrive, the people of Bethlehem are shocked to see us. We can almost feel the buzz of the rumors darting and dancing behind us wherever we go. I feel irritable that our tragedy is reduced to gossip, and so I snap. Demand that they do not even call me Naomi, as if to erase the me that was here long before, before It All happened. I am not news! I am sorrow walking. I say:

*Call me no longer Naomi,
call me Marah,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full,
but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? (Ruth 1:20-21)*

That shuts them up. For the time being. Later, I will need their gossip, need to know where and with whom we might find favor. But for now, I just want peace and quiet. No chatter. No opinions. No gushes of sympathy. I want to be left alone.

I'm not alone, of course. Ruth is here too. What am I going to do with her?

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To my surprise, Ruth finds her way around town and around the gossip faster than me. Without delay, she comes up with a way to get food. I tell myself she is a young energetic woman deeply motivated by her hunger, but I know her major concern is my health. We had eaten so sparingly on the journey. She is eager to get started gleaning the fields. I tell her, "Go, my daughter" (Ruth 2:2).

It is the first time my mouth has ever uttered those words. My lips are accustomed to saying, "My son," and it is as if my soul slightly winces at the shift. I swallow. Ruth smiles back at me with such ease that the strangeness is swallowed up in her affection. She scurries off to glean, for during the harvest time those in poverty are allowed to follow behind the harvesters and take what they drop.

With my bad back and aching joints, I am not much good for working the fields, so eventually I let the townswomen come talk with me. I am afraid to open my mouth, lest my pain come avalanching out, burying my listener in memories of Elimelech and our sons, story and after story of our life together that will never be again.

To my surprise, I talk mostly of Ruth—her devotion, her resourcefulness, her startling faithfulness despite all odds. A woman remarks, "Why Marah! You're smiling!"

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The day Ruth comes home from the field of Boaz, I about fall over in shock. Not only is the amount of barley she gleaned unreal for the gatherer of dropped sheaves, not only had she been

offered bread and wine by the owner of the fields himself, not only had he heard of Ruth's kindness to me and commended her, not only had she been given parched grain in addition to what she gathered, not only was she given his blessing, BUT ALSO this man is our kin! I cannot believe her good fortune. Our good fortune.

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Ruth has been gleaning successfully in Boaz' field every day, but as the end of the harvest approaches, I fear what will come next. How will we continue to survive? Ruth has worked so hard, but what now? I must not leave this burden to her. She returns from the fields so tired I know it has not yet occurred to her to make further plans for our welfare. To show gratitude for her labor, I rub her aching feet at night and all the while I plot. I am so consumed with ideas for her wellbeing that I have nearly forgotten my grief.

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I have now thought about it from every possible angle at least thirty times, which means it is time to unveil my plan. At last I tell Ruth what I am thinking. She cannot be surprised that I am holding out hope for her and Boaz. But she must be shocked at the brazenness of my ideas. But I feel certain we must leave no loopholes. She must come across like an offer he will not wish to refuse. I can tell Ruth is amazed, but pleased. I cannot help but smirk just a little. Nothing like bonding over a bit of mischief.

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Ruth visits Boaz in the night, just as I suggested. He is receptive to her . . . **but** there is a kink in the plan. There is yet another man who even closer kin to us than Boaz, and technically, he has a right to Ruth before Boaz does. I am angry at these ridiculous laws that keep my daughter from such a good man, but Ruth is calm and at peace. She seems to think it will work out. Life has taught me that things do not work out, and that the people you love get taken away. But Ruth gently reminds me that she is still here and has not left me, so I must stop saying that *everyone* leaves. She reminds me that we have been given food and sustenance, that we have been shown kindness. She reminds me that sorrow is not the only narrative I have.

She doesn't say it, but I remember her words, "*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—there will I be buried.*" I think to myself, she has done more than adopt my God. She has become a woman of deep faith, which is more than could be said about me. I decide that perhaps God is not angry at my lack of faith; but rather, God sent Ruth to be faith for me, as a mercy on my grief. I don't feel trust, exactly, but I feel less empty somehow. Like perhaps I will not always be bitter.

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Oh my goodness, I can scarcely believe it! Word has arrived, and there is to be a wedding! Ruth and Boaz, at last. I feel something I haven't felt in a long time. I think I used to call that feeling

joy. Then, for a moment, the joy wavers and I am afraid. Will Boaz take my Ruth from me? But no, she has promised to never leave me, and when Ruth speaks, she means what she says.

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The day Ruth gives birth to Obed, the people say to Boaz, “through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah,” (Ruth 4:12). It’s been awhile since I’ve thought of Tamar’s story—a woman, who, like me and Ruth, knew great loss but eventually also knew joy.

And the women of Bethlehem say to me, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.”

And what do you know, but I feel like joining their praises. I cradle that precious grandchild in my arms and look over at Ruth, who *is* more to me than seven sons. She is looking at me, holding him. I think to myself, “I am no longer empty.”

The women have proclaimed, let the name of my grandson be renowned in Israel, but then I think how perhaps no one will remember this young woman. History is made of kings and men, of warriors and nations. We do not pass down the small stories of fiercely determined women who stay to help their mother-in-laws.

I want the world to know about Ruth, the Moabite, who saved me. When I was convinced God had forgotten me, it was her through whom God said, “I remember.” When I was wedged between anguish and grief, it was Ruth who carried me through to the other side. It was Ruth who gave me my name back.

Perhaps I will write this story down for the grandchildren to read some day. I once told my daughters, “The hand of the Lord has turned against me,” and I meant it. But now I know differently. Praise be to God who drew me up from the desolate pit, and praise be to Ruth, whose hand did the pulling. May all of you be so blessed as me. No matter your losses, may some surprise of love see you through. May the darkness you have known serve as a womb for joy to do its slow growing before birth. Amen.