

Hungry in the House of Bread: Emptiness
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
December 1,2019-AM Service
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Ruth 1

Let's start by imagining what verse 19 of our passage might have looked like. An older woman and a younger woman are coming up over a crest of a hill in Judea. They are not moving very fast. That's because they are exhausted. They've been travelling for days. They've come all the way from Moab. Slung across their backs are a couple of small bags which contain all their earthly possessions. Their clothes are tattered and dusty. As they come up over the hill, a valley opens up in front of them and they see their destination. The town of Bethlehem. They stop for a moment and look at the town. You might expect them to celebrate the end of their journey. You'd expect a smile or a hug or something. But the older woman's face is empty. Her eyes are cold and she looks as though she might have been crying. The younger woman's face is different. She looks concerned. She glances back and forth between the town in front of her and her companion's face. She's obviously worried about her. Finally, the younger woman reaches out and takes the older woman's hand. *"Come on Naomi. Let's go. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. We can do this."*

It's a picture of emptiness. I want to start with this picture because that's where the book of Ruth starts. The book starts in emptiness. As a whole, the book of Ruth is not an empty book, but if you want to hear the fullness of its good news, and if you want to see the hope in this book, you have to begin with the emptiness of these two women standing on the hill.

And Naomi's emptiness involves much more than her stomach. It's what I would call deep emptiness. Her economic prospects are empty. She has no men in her life, and in those days, that was a disaster. Husbands and sons meant economic and physical security. The culture around her is empty. When does this story take place? Did you catch that? The time of the judges. And what was it like in the time of the judges? How did the book of Judges describe the state of society? Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. It is a time of moral chaos. Everyone was looking out for themselves. And finally, her soul is empty. She hasn't exactly lost her faith-she still believes that God exists. But she doesn't see God as a source of hope anymore. In fact, it's the opposite. She thinks He is a source of affliction. She says it three times: The Lord's hand has turned against me (verse 13). The Lord has afflicted me! (verse 21) the Lord has brought me misfortune!" (verse 21). Her soul is empty. Deep emptiness. The first six verses of this book show us a woman whose life has lost its footing. If Job and Naomi ever got together for coffee, they'd have a lot to talk about.

This deep emptiness leads us to the central questions of the book of Ruth, the questions that drive the story. And those questions are: 1. What will happen to Naomi? Will her emptiness be filled? 2. How does a person live in the face of that kind of emptiness? How does a person live in a time of disappointment and loss and moral chaos?

Those aren't just questions for Naomi and Ruth; they're questions for us. How do we live in the face of our emptiness? Because all of us have seasons of deep emptiness. All of us have been in Naomi places or walked beside someone in a Naomi place. Have you ever had a season where the pit of sadness in your gut never goes away no matter where you are? Then you know what it's like to be in a Naomi place. Have you ever had a season where the silence of God seems so deadening, you can't even pray? Then you know what it's like to be in a Naomi place.

Or maybe a Bible verse or a song that used to comfort you suddenly sounds different. ‘The Lord has plans to prosper you; to give you hope and a future.’ The verse used to bring you joy but now it makes you angry. Has that ever happened to you? Then you know what it is to be in a Naomi place. Any of us who’ve endured a season of life where the bad news just keeps coming, where none of what’s happening to you makes any sense, and you can’t seem to hear God’s voice anywhere, then you know what it’s like to be in a Naomi place, and Naomi’s questions are your questions too: What will happen to my emptiness? And, in the meantime, how do I live in the face of my emptiness?

I think chapter one looks at the second of these two questions: How do we live in the face of our emptiness? To answer that question, I want to look at the main characters of the story to see how they react to their situation. As we watch them, we might learn something about reacting to our own.

First, let’s look at Naomi. How does Naomi react to her situation? The answer is pretty clear: she turns bitter. Her loss makes her bitter. What exactly does that mean? What’s the difference between just being sad, and becoming bitter? Well, it’s normal for a person to be sad after a loss and it’s healthy for a person to grieve after a loss. Bitterness takes hold when loss becomes your story. Bitterness takes hold when you become your loss. And that’s clearly what’s happened to Naomi. Naomi identifies so strongly with her loss that she names herself after it. *“Don’t call me Naomi anymore, call me Marah because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.”* ‘Don’t call me pleasant (Naomi) anymore because there is nothing pleasant about my life! Call me bitterness (Marah) because life is a bad joke.’ It’s the opposite of the chorus of Blessed Assurance. It’s like Naomi sings, “This is my story, this is my song, Counting my sorrows all the day long.” Naomi reacts to the emptiness by becoming bitter.

I don’t mean to be unsympathetic here. We shouldn’t judge Naomi too harshly because in our seasons of deep emptiness, in our Naomi times, we all struggle with bitterness. If that hasn’t happened to you yet it will someday. Is bitterness a good reaction? Is it the reaction God wants? No. Is it an understandable human reaction? Yes. It’s not desirable, but it’s understandable which is why the Bible gives us the lament Psalms and the book of Job—so that we can navigate our way through these empty seasons.

Another main character in this story is Ruth. How does Ruth react to the deep emptiness? I think we can agree that Ruth’s response is a remarkable response of faith. What’s remarkable about it? Lots of things, *but the center of Ruth’s reaction is a promise.* In the face of the emptiness, Ruth makes a promise. Naomi tries to push Ruth away (which is just what bitter people do), but the Bible tells us that Ruth clings to her. *“Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and you God will be my God. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”* In the midst of her Mother-in-law’s emptiness she makes an unconditional promise.

Does Ruth’s promise have any echoes for you? It actually sounds like God’s covenantal promises. Psalm 139: Where can I go to escape from your presence? If I go up to the heavens you are there, If I make my bed in the depths you are there, if I flee to the far side of the sea even there your right hand will hold me fast.” Romans 8: “Not even death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.” May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely if even death separates you and me.” It’s an amazing thing. In the middle of this emptiness, this Moabite girl, this foreigner, this outsider, makes an unconditional promise that echoes the steadfast covenant love of Our Lord and our God.

This is just the right sort of response. When people around us are in trouble, we want to explain and fix. “OK Naomi, we’re going to solve these problems. Here’s why this is happening to you and here’s what you need to do.” We love those approaches because they make us feel like we can understand life and we can control it. What you need to see about those kinds of solutions is that they tap into human means: My brain’s ability to understand the situation and my hands ability to fix this thing. When your instinct is always to understand and fix, you’re rooting yourself in human power.

The best reaction to deep loss and deep emptiness is a loving promise. “My dear friend. I don’t know why this happened to you. I don’t know how to fix it. But I love you. And I am not going to leave you. I will be here beside you no matter what.” When you make that kind of loving promise, you are not tapping into the strength of your hands or the strength of your brain, you are tapping into the life changing power of God’s covenantal love. Lew Smedes is so good on this. Here’s what he writes: “When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay.” This is exactly what Ruth does. And this is what we can do too.

That’s how two of the main characters in the story responded to the brokenness. But that’s not all the characters in chapter one. There is one more main character to consider. Who is that character? It’s not Orpah. It’s not Elimelek. This character is far bigger than those two. This character is the main character of the entire book. *The other main character is the Lord.*

Where is God in this story? It’s not always so easy to see Him. He doesn’t speak any words or do any miracles that we can see, but He’s there. At the end of the chapter Naomi is telling her old friends to call her Marah and telling them that God has abandoned her and that God is against her. But she’s wrong. God is there. If I were there as her pastor, I would point to two places to show that God had not abandoned her.

First, I’d point at Ruth. “Naomi! Look! God is in your daughter in law! That Moabite girl who clings to you and says that not even death will separate her from you. Who do you think taught her to love like that and promise like that!? Who else but the God whose son was willing to hang on a cross so that all his promises could be kept. God is in that girl!”

Second, I would point to the barley. Did you notice that little detail in the story? The story began with hunger in Bethlehem. The story began with hunger in the house of bread. But then in verse 6 and again at the very end of the chapter we hear that Ruth and Naomi came home at the time of the Barley harvest. God has filled the empty fields with amber waves of grain. That’s a pregnant detail—pun intended. That detail points towards fullness. By the time the story ends this grain will be part of the story. For now, it is a sign that God is on the move. It’s a sign that God is up to something. Naomi stands on that hillside, head to the ground, lost in her bitterness. But all around her, as far as the eyes can see stretch fields of golden grain. It’s a sign that God is about to change everything.

It reminds me of another Biblical scene. Flash forward a thousand years. We’re in Judah again. Once again two people are cresting a hill outside Bethlehem. This time it’s a husband and a wife, and they too are exhausted and empty after a long journey. He’s walking but she’s on a donkey. She’s very pregnant. They pause and look down over the town. In the streets of Bethlehem, the Shepherds are taking their flocks out to the field for the night. The baker is arranging bread in his market stall. Nearby the innkeeper is hanging a ‘no vacancy’ sign on the front of his establishment. “Another day, another dollar!” he says to the baker. The baker grunts. Up on the hillside the two figures start their descent into the town. The woman starts because her

baby has just given an almighty kick. Something's happening in Bethlehem. God is on the move, and everything is about to change.

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