

Ruth's Better Story

Fr. Thomas Ryden

Apostles Anglican Church Scriptures: Ruth 1:1–19a; Psalm 113; II Timothy 2:1–15;
Luke 17:11–19

I haven't talked about Star Wars in a while from the pulpit I don't think and I try to get at least one good Star Wars illustration in a year, and anyway, I have a reputation to uphold, so here goes.

One of my favorite things about the world of Star Wars is the ways in which the films build off of and echo one another. George Lucas, the creator of the franchise, has spoken about this as the different pieces of the story rhyming with one another, and for Lucas, who is a student of ancient and mythic literature, he has rightly identified this as an integral part of many of the enduring stories from history. Similar characters are faced with similar choices, to choose the Light or the Dark, to side with anger or compassion. And one cool way that Star Wars marks these moments is through the visual cues that occur in these moments. There are many times throughout the films and even in some of the television shows where when a character is in one of these rhyming moments, if you put the images of the two movie scenes side by side, you could see that whichever one was made later was intentionally crafted to look like its predecessor. We also get musical themes from the score that hint at the same connections. I could make a slide show of this stuff, but the Sunday homily is not the place for such things, alas.

But I think one of the reasons I am so drawn to this aspect of my favorite fictional universe is the fact that we see this sort of rhyming, not just in other pieces of

literature, but in our own familial and societal stories. How often do we find overlap between our story and the story of our parents? Between the story of our nation today and other nations of the past? And critically, will we learn from the successes and failures of those past stories to tell the absolute best story we can with our own lives?

The Bible is a treasure trove of these sorts of stories, from the Garden of Eden onward, there are repeated patterns of what it looks like to walk in harmony with God and sow those mustard seed actions we heard about last week from Fr. Jack, or to turn against the ways in which we have been called to walk. Scripture will come to call these ways the way of life and the way of death, the way of blessing and the way of the curse. And as we stumble from Genesis to Revelation, the broken creation becomes the Garden again, all through the one who chose every right path, God himself in human form.

But along the way, we have positive and negative examples presented. In the Daily Office readings for this week, we read the story of Ahab, one of the most notoriously negative role models in all of Scripture. But today, our Old Testament reading keeps things a little more positive. The story of Ruth is a good story, one we would do well to emulate. And so let's return to Ruth chapter one and ask ourselves for the remainder of our time this morning what sort of patterns in the story of Ruth we can take on ourselves in order to tell a better, more faithful story.

Like many of our personal stories, the story of Ruth has all the complications of life in the real world; along with the goodness and light there are hardships and

surprises, not all of them pleasant. Had Ruth's life gone according to the plan she probably had for herself, she would not have entered into the fullness of what God had for her. But she made it there because she took small steps of faithfulness along the way, even when things looked uncertain or even dire.

The first thing we should see about Ruth is that she comes from a surprising place. Much is made of the way in which Jesus welcomed outsiders into his Kingdom, and rightly so, for Jesus is not only dining with the outcast and the sinner in the Gospels, he is often interacting with, healing, and commending the faith of those who are not native Israelites, a foretaste of his kingdom that he will command his apostles to proclaim to the ends of the Earth. But it would be a mistake to assert that this is some sort of new mission that comes with the arrival of Jesus, as if the God of the Old Testament has a separate mission from that of the Son. Ruth shows this to not be the case. That promise made to Abraham is for his family, yes, but it is for the sake of the world, as God promises to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham's line.

Ruth is an outsider, a Moabite. The people of Moab begin in the Scriptures as the descendents of Lot's son of the same name, Lot being Abraham's nephew. These two peoples linked back to Abraham's family, however, do not seem to get along. There was a good bit of fighting between the Israelites and their neighbors to the South, with battles with the Moabites before and continuing after the time of Ruth. Later on, Solomon would bring false worship from Moab of the God Chemosh into his house.¹ In other words, the Moabites are not the heroes of the biblical story. And yet, Ruth is

¹ See entry on Moab in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*; Gen 19:37, Numbers 21-24, Judges 3, 1 Sam 14:47, 1 Kings 11.

one of the heroines of the biblical story. In fact, she is put forth as a prime example of how to be faithful to Yahweh in the presence of great unfaithfulness within Yahweh's people. We are 8 books into the Scriptures and a non-Israelite woman is a title character.

The first few words of the book of Ruth set the story in time but they do a good bit more than that. "In the days when the judges ruled..." The time of the Judges, the story that comes right before Ruth's story in our Bibles, was a time of great distress and instability among God's people. The refrain of the book of Judges, and it is repeated several times in the text, was that "everyone did what was right in their own eyes." And the result of that was forgetting God and succumbing to a pattern of unrighteousness, domination by outside forces, and God's subsequent deliverance through a judge, like Deborah or Gideon. But the pattern kept repeating. Judges has one of the most horrific endings to any book in the Bible, a tale of sexual violence and murder that displays how chaos reigns, particularly at the expense of the vulnerable, when everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

And so the story of Ruth stands as a contrast to the story of Judges. The first sentence frames her story that way, a welcome reprieve from the violence of a world far from God. While the people of Israel can't get it together, this woman from Moab finds her way in through faithfulness and commitment to God. The insiders don't get it. The outsider does. It is the same sort of Kingdom reversal that we see in our Gospel reading, where Luke makes sure to tell us readers that the leper who comes back to thank Jesus, the one who is commended for his faith, is a Samaritan.

Yahweh has been welcoming outsiders from the beginning. His vision for New Creation assumes that the outsiders come in and become part of the family. One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 87, where the Psalmist recalls God saying to the nations, even the enemies of Israel, that they all were born in Jerusalem. We should not be surprised when God raises righteousness out of places we in our limited vision would not expect. Thanks be to God that when we were sinners and outsiders, God welcomed us and Jesus came for us. Far be it from us to assume that he would stop with us.

Ruth's story also shows us how the faithful follower of God will endure hardship. Tragedy enters early into her story. It is in fact difficulty that sets the table for there to be a story at all. Just like the famine that reunited Joseph's family at the end of Genesis, it is a famine that sends Naomi, her husband, and her two sons into Moab and creates the familial bond between our two main characters, Naomi and Ruth. In Moab, Naomi's husband dies and the two sons marry, and one of those wives is Ruth. It is not long before these women share in suffering together. The fate of the father is visited upon his sons, and in a period of 10 years, Naomi finds herself without a husband or sons, a fate that is not only emotionally devastating, but presents a serious threat of poverty in a context where a childless widow would almost certainly become destitute. It is no wonder that in the course of the story Naomi requests a name change, naming herself after the bitter hand which she has been dealt.

But there must have been something about this family's relating to one another that was good because both daughters-in-law rebuff Naomi's first direction that they return to their people and find new husbands, as Naomi directs them in verse 8 and

9. When Naomi insists, Orpah, the other daughter-in-law, does return to her family of origin, but Ruth holds on yet further; she is determined to see this through. She knew that her path lay with her poor mother-in-law, and she was not going to be denied.

How many times are we tempted to give up when things get tough in life? In our faith? If we are not careful, we start to perceive resistance as a reason to abandon the good to which we have been called. We see hardship as an excuse to not pursue the thing God is calling us to do. "I'll do it when things calm down, when things are more stable." Ruth understood that it is in the midst of hardship that we must cling most closely to our identity and calling as children of God.

What did Ruth see in Naomi? There was certainly the 10 years they had spent together as family, and she clearly had compassion on her vulnerable state, but it seems like there is something else. Ruth sensed a call through this difficulty and into a closer relationship with the people of God. Ruth is resolute: "But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

There is something greater than even familial love and friendship that ties Naomi and Ruth together. It seems like Orpah shared those things as well. But Ruth has sensed the calling of the one true God. To go back to her people would likely entail stepping back into the pagan religion of her upbringing, but she recognized that which was real when she saw it.

Some of us grow up in a home where we learn the gospel, some of us have come to faith as adults. For some of us our faith is part of our familial and cultural identity from the beginning of our lives, some of us did not. But regardless of where we have come from, Ruth's story shows us that our identification with God's people, in Christ, in baptism, is now the most central identity that we have, running deeper than any family or cultural ties could. Ruth's better story has following God at the center.

Finally, the pattern that we see in Ruth's story that we can trust to be repeated is that this good story, of those who were outsiders overcoming adversities by centering the God of the universe in their lives, produces a bounty that we could not even imagine. Ruth serves as a bridge text in the story of God's people, from the chaos of the judges to the time of the kings, notably the peace and prosperity of King David's rule. A student of Israel's history may rightly wonder how in the world these disorganized and lost tribes who got conquered every couple of years turned into the Davidic dynasty. Ruth has a direct role in that story.

The last few verses of the book of Ruth drop a bombshell. Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David. Her story of faithfully seeking to stick by her destitute mother-in-law and bring herself under the God of Israel puts her right into the familial line of the family that makes things right for Israel. If you were an Israelite before David's time, his reign is what you were hoping for. If you were an Israelite born after David's time, his was the time you wished you could return to. Ruth is literally an essential part of the DNA of the rule and reign of David. Her faithfulness would have been a family story that David heard growing up.

And of course, we know that the story gets even better, because Ruth shows up in the New Testament as well. Because of her faithfulness, Ruth is not only the ancestor of the one who would make things right for a little while for the people of Israel, she enters into and helps to create the family that would welcome the one who would make all things in all the peoples of the world well, Ruth's descendent, Jesus of Nazareth.

Whatever story you've been given this morning, you have the opportunity to tell a better one by partnering with the God of the universe. Like the story of Ruth and Naomi, yours may be in a phase of hardship and loss. But whatever circumstances in which we find ourselves, our call further into the care and will of God is the same. He is calling us all, outsiders and insiders alike. If you would have asked Ruth if she could have imagined that God would bring the Messiah out of the family tree she almost didn't even have, I am sure she would say no, but that is the sort of thing that God can and does do.

So today, may we all have the dedication of Ruth to follow where he leads, trusting him to sustain and provide for us. Let us lean on him when all else seem lost, and let us look toward the hope of all of our stories made right in the God who is Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.