

Wherever You Go, I'm There! Message for November 1, 2009

Brief intro to Ruth – for next two weeks, we'll be looking at this book. Today, some background on the times, on the role of women, and on the book itself, this week only on Chapter 1.

Short, intimate book that has all the elements of a good dramatic play:

It contains four acts, some realistic characters we can care about, twists and turns in the story line, begins with tragedy, ends with hope.

Some say it shows how those who love and obey God really live – the story isn't like Noah and the amazing ark surviving a flooded earth –

It's sandwiched between Judges and Samuel – and all the less noble stories of the Hebrews of the time, it's about a family, with family challenges and plans, with sadness and redemption.

There's loyalty and love – honorable behavior and a sincere desire to do God's will based on Hebrew rituals and customs.

And Ruth, one of two women honored in the Bible with their own books, became a direct ancestor of King David, who is the direct line to Jesus himself.

The names used in the story of Ruth even appear to have hidden meaning, indicating that the author was perhaps trying to teach a lesson:

Ruth, (*the daughter-in-law who stays*), is a shortened version of '**retut**', which means '**lovely friend**'.

Naomi, (*the widow and mother-in-law*), means '**pleasant**', but the name she called herself later in the story, **Mara**, means '**bitter**'.

Boaz, (*Ruth's eventual husband*), means '**powerful**' or '**strong**'.

Mahlon and **Chilion**, (*Naomi's sons who die*), mean '**sickness**' and '**used up**'. (Tradition says their names fit because they disobeyed Jewish customs and married Moabites – perhaps their death is punishment for this).

Orpah, (*the other daughter-in-law*), means '**back of the neck**'; she turned her back on Naomi and returned to Moab.

Elimelech, (*Naomi's husband who dies*), means '**my God is king**'. (Tradition says that he was given this name by hopeful parents who wanted him to follow God, but **because he left Bethlehem to live in Moab, and allowed his sons to marry Moabites, he died as punishment for this act**).

Ruth is a book which is almost poetic in its style and length – a novella, a snapshot into one family's life.

It's composed in a writing pattern known as “**chiastic structure**” or “**ring structure**” which symmetrically draws the reader into a focal event – and helps to emphasize key points.

The **author is unknown**, though some say Samuel could have written it.

Others say the voice it contains almost puts it in authorship by a woman, since so many of the issues described are those women of the time would care most about and the two main characters are strong and capable women.

There's even discussion as to **when** it was written – most authorities seem to feel it was written **during or shortly after the reign of David**, it appears to take place during the time of the judges around 1100 BC (before the people of the Holy Land had a king), when the Jews were not in favor with God due to some **backsliding in their behavior**.

Moabites were particularly disfavored because of their history – descendants of Moab, (son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his oldest daughter after the disaster in Sodom and Gomorrah).

As a people, they **worshiped many gods** and **fell into old ways** of living – not honoring the connection they had with the God who brought them to their promised land - and doing things like **marrying out of their religion and sometimes even performing human sacrifice**.

And while theologians note that Moabites were almost untouchables, apparently it was **all right for Israelites to sleep with or marry Moabite** women...Solomon supposedly had many Moabites in his fleet of concubines..

Ruth and Orpah were Moabites – considered foreigners, and of a less-than-desirable lineage.

What was the **daily life** like when Ruth took place? For most married women, the days were full of different types of labor.

A typical woman's day may have included the tasks related **housekeeping** (cooking, cleaning, etc), and **child care**, as well as **work related to the care and feeding of any animals** –especially animals that provided a service, like **sheep for wool** – or looking after the **garden for food and for flax which produced linen used in clothing**. Not only did the women tend the animals and gardens, but they usually also **dealt with the raw material to turn it into fabric**, including **carding, weaving and dyeing the fibers, and then putting the strips of fabric together to create garments**.

Single women had fewer choices (some forced to **prostitution or begging**) – **widowed women were restricted to specific rules regarding marrying again within the dead husband's family.**

It wasn't easy being a woman in Biblical times.

So, in this backdrop, let's begin to tell the story of Ruth.

Early on, we are told this occurs **during the time of the Judges**, and there is a **lengthy drought in Bethlehem.**

Naomi, her husband *Elimelech*, and their two sons make a move to Moab to escape it. This is seen almost as an **insult to God, because they should have changed their ways, returned to God and allowed God to redeem them as God had so many times before.**

While in Moab, (and because the laws of marriage have slackened some due to the loosening of Jewish customs of marriage during the judge period), **both sons marry Moabite women – Ruth and Orpah.** At some point, **husband and sons all die** from disease, and the women find themselves alone in a foreign land with few choices.

The **drought in Bethlehem is over**, and **Naomi wants to go home** but she isn't stupid...

She realizes that...

1) she **doesn't have any more sons**, (by law, the two young women could marry brothers legally and continue to bear sons to carry on the family name) and even if she did, **they wouldn't be old enough to marry either of the two younger women.**

2) **she can't stay in this place alone** (she's too old to remarry and begin a new family) and

3) **her daughters-in-law aren't the typical Jews (they may be unaccepted in Bethlehem).**

But, she loves them, and gives them an out...she tries to send them to their families in Moab.

Now some commentaries say this is a **noble act of love** – others feel this is one of **dishonor to God** (how come she didn't leave this to God to work out instead?) or **even of hidden shame** because she knows how they could be received as Moabites in Bethlehem.

Naomi also realizes that **she's more or less trapped** – she and her husband chose to leave God's Holy Land, and she's probably bitter about her circumstances. (We hear about this again in the following chapters).

But **after hearing her lament and then her proposal**, everyone has a good cry and then both **young women vow to stay with Naomi**; there's more discussion, and in the end, **Orpah is convinced that she should return to her family**. She kisses her Naomi goodbye and takes off.

But **Ruth makes a life-changing decision: she stays** with Naomi.

To many theologians, this is **a remarkable and amazing act!**

Some even say **Orpha represents the more shallow “professor” of faith**, (talks a good talk but bails when the going gets rough), while **Ruth is a “possessor” – one who truly owns her faith – she's in for the long haul**.

She has nothing to base this decision upon but **loyalty, love for her mother-in-law, and perhaps some quiet hope** – whatever happens will happen, and because **she's aligned herself with Naomi's God** and the **promises God makes**, she makes a **leap of faith**.

Lot's descendant will return to God. This is a big concept!

Her speech to Naomi is a simple song of love...(sung)

***Wherever you go, I will go.
Wherever you live, so will I live.
Your people will be my people,
And your God will be my God, too.***

***Wherever you die, I will die.
And there will I be buried beside you.
We will be together forever,
Our love will be the gift of our lives.***

On its own, the story of Ruth is a beautiful **story of love between family members who struggle and between humble, fallible humans and their faithful God**. At the very least, it can inspire us to be more like Ruth.

Next week, we'll finish the book and consider how it all works for us today...there's more than meets the eye in this one.

God's Peace to us all!

Amen.