

Ruth Held On (You Can Count on Me)
Ruth 1:1-18

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¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah.

They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.

⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food.

⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”

¹¹But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.”

¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

¹⁶But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you 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. ¹⁷Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” ¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

The Sermon

How amazing it is that we find each other in this life.

Siblings, parents and children;
 spouses, friends, acquaintances, neighbors;
 people we know or even just people we know about.

How strange and wonderful and deep it is
 that overlapping in the precious few years each of us has
 in our mortal lives,
 we share this miracle with others,
 and somewhere along the line, we find each other,
 out of all the people in the world,
 and all the possibilities

of where and when we could have been born,
and the miraculous string of coincidences
that bring our lives into contact with each other.

Our lives are made or broken
by whether or not there are people who say to us,
in their words or actions or just by being there:
“You can count on me.”

Steven Pinker has written about how, “in highly publicized incidents, ugly mobs [once] hurled obscenities and death threats at black children for trying to enroll in all-white schools.

He mentions in particular “the day six-year-old Ruby Nell Bridges had to be escorted by federal marshals to her first day of school in New Orleans.”¹

John Steinbeck happened to be there at the time and wrote about it in his widely known book called *Travels with Charley*. Steinbeck wrote:

“Four big marshals got out of each car and from somewhere in the automobiles they extracted the littlest...girl you ever saw, dressed in shining starchy white, with new white shoes on feet so little they were almost round...

‘The big marshals stood her on the curb and a jangle of jeering shrieks went up from behind the barricades.

‘The little girl did not look at the howling crowd, but from the side the whites of her eyes showed like those of a frightened fawn.

‘The men turned her around like a doll and then the strange procession moved up the broad walk toward the school, and the child was even more a mite because the men were so big.

‘Then the girl made a curious hop,’ wrote Steinbeck, ‘and I think I know what it was. I think in her whole life she had not gone ten steps without skipping,

but now in the middle of her first step, the weight bore her down and her little round feet took measured, reluctant steps between the tall guards.’”ⁱⁱ

Sometimes in this life we feel overwhelmingly small,
surrounded by people and powers that tower over us
and can make us feel even smaller
and more vulnerable than we are,
and it can be hard to tell whether we are among
friends and protectors.

Our living is made possible by people who say to us, “You can count on me.” Even if they don’t know they’re saying it.

The Jordan River connects the Sea of Galilee in the North with the Dead Sea in the South, with Judah on the west side and Moab on the East. Bethlehem is a little Judean town, west of the Dead Sea, not too far from Jerusalem.

The story of a woman from Bethlehem named Naomi takes place long before David is born there, which itself will be a thousand years before Jesus is born there.

Naomi was married to Elimelech, also from Bethlehem, and in Bethlehem they had two boys, Mahlon and Chilion.

They were, presumably, as happy as any family—as prosperous as any middle class household among the People of God who had settled in the land.

Their photo albums showed happy kids blowing out candles on their birthday cakes; Mahlon and Chilion's artwork was stuck to the fridge with magnets.

And then came the famine.

One year, the wadis dried up, as they were for most of the time; but then the rains didn't come to replenish them,

and they kept not coming;
and the land didn't produce;
and food got scarce and expensive;
and the jobs dried up.

So, they left the place they were from, the only place they knew, the familiar land around Jerusalem and what used to be the comforts of home in Bethlehem, and they went where the food was: to the other side of the Dead Sea, to the land of Moab.

They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

And then, Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.

They were growing up now, and since Moab was the place they lived and where they knew people, it was only natural that the women that the boys married were from there:

one married a Moabite woman named Orpah;
the other married a woman named Naomi.

Now they had been there for ten years.

Formative years.

Years of thinking about where they had come from.

Years of meeting new people.

Years of being "not from around here,"

but making it through with each other's help

and support and love.

Making connections; making friends; making new families. Maybe Naomi was excited at the prospect of having grandchildren.

And then, Mahlon and Chilion both died.

Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

She had already lost the home she had known,
 and now she had lost her hopes for grandchildren;
 and, as it was for women in those days,
 in not having a husband, she had lost her security.

She had lost, in a word, practically everything.

Our lives can be made or broken
 by whether or not there are people around who will say to us,
 in their words or actions or just by being there:
 “You can count on me.”

When word began getting around the country of Moab that back in Judah, they had food again, Naomi knew it was time to go back to Bethlehem.

It would be hard not to think that she would have mixed feelings about Moab. On the one hand, that country had taken first her husband, and then one son, and then her only other son.

On the other hand,
 Moab had been there for them
 when they had come needing food.
 Moab hadn't closed their border.
 Moab hadn't arrested them for seeking asylum;
 hadn't separated, incarcerated or humiliated them.

Moabites may or may not have called them names,
or made demeaning accusations about them,
or vilified their intentions,
but when their family was at its most desperate, they had been
allowed into Moab when they had nowhere else to go,
and had found life and, eventually, love there.

And now at long last it was time for Naomi to go back to where
she had come from,
back to the land she knew in her bones,
back where the food and the music
and the architecture and the accents
and the way the sky looked on the horizon
just felt like what she *knew* at some visceral level.

So, she started to return to Judah, along with her daughters-in-law,
Ruth and Orpah: three widows, all without the only security that
the rules of the day could provide. All they had was each other,
and the places they had come from.

“The places they had come from”—maybe that thought was where
Naomi said to herself, wait a second: what am I doing to these
beautiful, precious people who married my sons?

So she turned around to look at Orpah and Ruth and said:

“Go on back, each of you to your own mother’s house.

“May the LORD deal kindly with you,
as you have dealt with the dead and with me.”

And may God help you find security,
in a new household with a new husband.

And she gave them each a kiss goodbye,
and they all had a group hug, and they cried.

And both of the daughters-in-law said, “No way. We’re going back with you to your people.”

But Naomi put her foot down.

She waived, for both of them, the legal expectation that widows were supposed to marry their late husband’s brother, on the grounds that, at this stage,

it was about as likely that Naomi would get married again and have more kids for them to marry

as it was that Ruth and Orpah would want to stick around for 20 years waiting for them to grow up so they *could* marry them.

But then she turned serious again, and she said,

“No, my daughters,

it has been far more bitter for me than for you,

because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.”

Imagine feeling, on top of all of that loss, that even the love and care of God have been taken from you.

And they “wept aloud” again; and this time, now convinced, Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye, and turned around to go. They saw the back of her neckⁱⁱⁱ as she headed off in the direction from which she had come when she’d married Naomi’s son.

But watching Orpah go off into the distance until she became a speck on the horizon and eventually disappeared, Ruth held on to her mother-in-law Naomi.

And Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

And Ruth said: Don't even ask me to do that. I'm with you now. And while most people are born into who they are, today, I'm choosing for myself.

Where you go, I will go;
Where you stay, I will stay;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
And where you die, that's where I'll be when I die.

And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Ruth could still go back home to her own mother in the land that she knew in her bones like Naomi knew Judah, and left Naomi to crawl back to Jerusalem where, ten years removed from all her relationships there, Naomi would have essentially come back as a stranger in the very place she came from, with no security and no prospects.

Or Ruth can say, wherever you are going, I'll go there, too.

Maybe Ruth has seen something in Naomi that she wants to be part of. Maybe she has seen what God means to Naomi and has decided, "I want that in my life, too."

Or maybe she just refuses to let her go off alone to suffer who knows what kind of fate.

Or maybe it's a combination of both. Maybe Ruth has recognized that the bonds of being God's children are both deeper and more demanding than the bonds of our individual identities, and so even though her Moabite identity and ethnicity entitles her to find greater security,

she still insists on clinging to Naomi,
who has nothing to offer Ruth
but the only thing that matters: herself.

Our lives can be made or broken
by whether or not there are people who say to us,
in their words or actions or just by being there:
“You can count on me.”

There are bitterly contested elections going on throughout the nation this Tuesday, coming in the midst of a profoundly divisive time that brings into every corner of the country divisions and charged rhetoric;

and people are having a hard time hearing each other over the droning of opinion-based TV and radio and websites which are designed to get us riled up with half-truths and outright lies and anything to get our blood boiling.

Meanwhile, things are happening that are profoundly counter to Jesus’ teaching in the gospels and the prophets’ warnings in the Old Testament.

And all over the country, in public places and work places and churches and schools and homes, people of differing political ideologies are struggling to know how to relate to each other—even, or sometimes especially, as family members, church members, classmates, work partners.

And some are despairing, and some perhaps could use a little more introspection and circumspection.

Our lives are made possible by people who say to us, by their words or their actions or their presence: You can count on me.

We are weak but living imitations of the source of all life, the God who does love us who says, at all times, You can count on me.

When you put your differences to the side—not ignoring them or abandoning your principles, but just finding a way to compartmentalize, momentarily, the areas in which you differ with someone—and make it clear that when they need you, you are there for them, you say to that person: You can count on me.

When you stand by people who have nothing to offer you but themselves, you are saying: You can count on me.

When, as Jesus directed in Matthew 25, you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner, you are saying both to them and to him: You can count on me.

When Jesus says in John 15, “You are my friends when you do what I command you,” you can be assured that he hears you saying: You can count on me.

When they have done their part, and can no longer do anything for you or give you anything, and still you follow the commandment to “Honor your father and your mother,” you say to God and to your parents, You can count on me.

We heard this summer from a former POW in Viet Nam who said that, after seven years of stewing hatred and dreaming of revenge, on the day he was finally released, as he walked out of the Hanoi Hilton, he made the commitment to let it go and to forgive his captors. He told us quietly, “I walked out of two prisons that day.”

He was saying to the people who up until that moment had been his jailers, his enemies, his tormentors: You can count on me.

When you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, you say to Jesus and to them and to a world which is starving right now for a witness for peace: You can count on me.

Jesus went to the cross saying even to those who crucified him: You can count on me.

The Holy Spirit doesn't abandon the Church to the consequences of our own faith-poor decisions, but keeps saying, "You can count on me."

How amazing it is that we find each other in this life.

Siblings, parents and children;
spouses, friends, acquaintances, neighbors;
people we know or even just people we know about.

How strange and wonderful and deep it is
that overlapping in the precious few years each of us has
in our mortal lives,
we share this miracle with others,
and somewhere along the line, we find each other,
out of all the people in the world,
and all the possibilities
of where and when we could have been born,
and the miraculous string of coincidences
that bring our lives into contact with each other.

And God says, I know you will fall short.
But human lives can be made or broken
by whether or not there are people
who will be there for them.

And, God says: In the life and death and resurrection of my Son, I have tried to show you that even when it doesn't work out, and you forget, or you blow it, or you're not as good at it as you could and

should be, the world that I have made and bought and redeemed still needs you to keep trying, and keep doing better.

So no matter who you are, or where you are from or where you go, and no matter what happens to you, I still promise, says the LORD:

You can count on me.

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ⁱ Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (p. 387). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (p. 387). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. Quote from John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley and later novels, 1947–1962* (New York: Penguin, 1962/1997), 194.

ⁱⁱⁱ The name Orpah is derived from the word for the back of the neck. See Marks, Herbert, ed. *The English Bible (Norton Critical Edition)* New York: Norton, 2012; n. Ruth 1:4 (p. 493).