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**Title:** Beach Reads Ruth: Journey

**Date:** July 28 & 29, 2018

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Psalm 107:1-9](#)

**Text:** [Ruth 1:1-6, 16-18](#)

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It starts and ends in a place known as "lehem" which means bread. Specifically, the place is the "bet", the house of "lehem", the house of bread. But there was no bread in the house. This is the reason a man with a wife and two sons moved to a place that he never imagined living.

That's the beginning of our beach read story. The Bible is filled with stories just like you read on the beach or at the lake during summer vacation. This year's read fits the genre of romance. If this story was made into a movie, it'd be a chick flick. There is a handsome leading man, a romantic if not racy encounter. It's a feel-good story that overcomes tragedy. A tragedy is where it starts and there is a lot of it.

As we settle into the sand and open the book to start our Bible beach read, we find a man with a wife and two sons, a farmer, digging the ground with bronze tools around 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. It was a precarious occupation that hardened hands and strained the back in the hill country of Judah. Whatever yield of barley reaped was ground by his pleasant wife. Then, she would bake bread in a clay oven shared by other families. The simple act of sitting down and breaking bread was a hard-won victory over insects, rodents, thieves, and nature. Every year, they celebrated the abundant harvest with a festival, a joyful feast of weeks, a party named Shavout. But for several years, there was little to celebrate because the clouds passed over stingily. Prayers for rain fell harmlessly to the dry ground. Without rain, there was no grain and without grain, there is no bread in the house of bread.

It must have strained the faith of the man. He was faithful; his name says so. He was Elimelech which means, "God is my king." Perhaps because of that faith, Elimelech was able to do the unthinkable. He moves his family to a place where there was bread but where there were also enemies. They moved to Moab.

From the moment that Lot's daughter incestuously conceives and then gives birth to Moab, there was enmity between the Israelites and Moabites. There was fighting between the distant cousins, sometimes terrible wars. What causes a man to leave the safety of home and become a refugee in a foreign land? Hunger. His family was starving; he needed to provide for them. There are people today who understand this more than you or me, people who leave native lands in search of a sustainable life.

This is what Elimelech does. His faith justifies the journey because he has plenty of company in the Bible. Like father Abraham who journeyed to Ur and Jacob who took his family to Egypt, so too Elimelech, his pleasant wife, and two sons become refugees, aliens who leave home to find food. He knows what the Deuteronomic law demands. "Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:19) The story of God's people is the story of sojourners in foreign lands.

We don't know how long the journey took. They traveled east, crossing the Jordan River and the border into the Plains of Moab on the opposite side of the Dead Sea from Israel, retracing the steps of father Abraham. It was a walk that took at least a week, maybe as many as two, depending on where they settled. Likely it was near the Arnon River. We don't know for sure because this Bible Beach Read doesn't tell us. It is just located in "someplace, Moab."

When they get there, things don't go quite the way they expected them to go. Elimelech and his pleasant wife--she must have been pleasant because her name is Naomi, which means, pleasant-- watch their sons grow up to be men who date the wrong kind of girls. They weren't women of the night but as far as their faith went, they might as well have been. They were Moabites. What did they expect? They aren't going to meet nice Jewish girls in Moab.

Their sons end up marrying these Moabite girls, even though Jews were forbidden to marry Moabites. One woman was named Orpah, the other Ruth and for all, we can see in this story, despite the interracial marriage there was joy and happiness. There were different traditions and customs to overcome; language was a barrier, a different dialect. There was even a different god, Chemosh. But somehow, they made it work because this was the journey they were on and this was the faith they professed. They valued a covenant of love and honored their sons' wives. They learned to love their new daughters-in-law, and the women loved them back.

But as I shared, this story is full of tragedy and the first tragedy is a death. Elimelech dies. We don't know how he died. We don't know if it was from old age, disease or violence. We just know that Naomi finds herself weeping by the grave of her faithful husband, her sons and daughters-in-law surrounding her. Somehow, she found the strength to move on. Maybe it was because of her sons and their wives. Maybe it was because she longed to be a grandmother. Did she think, "God will bless my sons with children?" Or, did she worry that God might punish them because they married outside of the faith? That was the thinking of the time. The question was there in the back of her mind, as year after year goes by and there are no grandchildren. Ten years past and tragedy strikes again. She finds herself by another grave, standing in support of Orpah and then yet another, weeping with Ruth. Both of her sons die.

One death would be enough to ruin Naomi's feelings about Moab. But three! Naomi felt God had some private vendetta against her. Naomi would not be human if she didn't ask that primal question about God. "If there is a loving God, then why do all these bad things happen?" It is a question that people struggle with throughout the ages and even in the Bible, pleasant people like Naomi can feel as if God is punishing them.<sup>1</sup>

Our beach read doesn't offer an answer. Suffering happens; there is no underlying reason given. God doesn't punish by taking lives, even if Naomi is going to feel this way. The deaths are simply reported, not explained. But there is a hint that Naomi might have expected it as her sons' names indicate that they were not stalwart physical specimens. One was named Mahlon which means "weak, ill" and the other was Chilion, which means "finished, spent." Why name your sons these names unless you expect them to die young? Naomi maybe sensed that she would outlive them.

The next picture in our bible beach read is painful and tragic. Imagine if you can three women on a dirt road outside of "someplace Moab." As we zoom in on their dusty faces, we see they are streaked with tears. Everything in the scene screams brokenness. There is a good reason. They have just become the lowest of the lowest in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. Women weren't allowed to own property. Everything to their names, well, isn't in their name. It was in the name of their husbands. They don't have a place. They don't have belongings. They are the most vulnerable in an ancient society. Widows. It is why in the very same laws about sojourners and aliens, God says, "Watch over the fatherless and widows."

With the loss of husband and sons, there is no one to watch over Naomi in "somewhere" Moab. She has nothing and as a widow, her only hope is the possibility that someone in Elimelech's family is alive who will take her in.

Naomi starts the long painful journey home to Judah and a remarkable thing happens. Right there, in the middle of the road, just outside of "some-where Moab", there is a scene that is one of the most famous, not just in the Bible, in all of literature, even beach reads. It is a moment so powerful that it will even make the toughest guy sitting in the room, tear up.

Naomi turns to her daughters-in-law crying and of course, they start crying. Everybody is crying. She says, "Go home. Go back to your families where you've got a future, where there is someone to take care of you. "No, no" they cry. "We aren't going to do that." Naomi insists. "Go home. You need to find a husband. You need to have children. You need to have a family. And living with your mother-in-law is going to make all those things impossible. Your future is with your family and my future is over. Go home."

And that is exactly what Orpah does. She kisses Naomi and heads home but not Ruth. Ruth speaks some of the most famous words in romance literature. "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." (Ruth 1:16) Your God my God. Let those words sink in. Your God is my God.

The Moabite woman is converting, right then and there. Ruth comes to faith in Yahweh through Naomi. Certainly, Ruth worshipped the usual Moabite gods, Chemosh and other local deities, but she now professes allegiance, not just to Naomi, but to Yahweh. What motivates Ruth to embrace Naomi's God? Why convert?

In a word, love, a special kind of love. In Hebrew, the love is "*Hesed*." Sometimes, "*hesed*" is translated as loving-kindness and other times, steadfast love, the kind of love that endures forever. It is the nature of God, the loving kindness that Naomi experienced with her husband Elimelech, that she counted on when becoming an alien in a foreign land, that she offers to her sons and then, to her Moabite daughters-in-law. It is what Ruth has experienced with Naomi. She discovers in her mother-in-law the very character of God, God's steadfast, enduring love and Ruth knows that love lasts forever. She wants it in her life, knows that Naomi embodies it and that through her, Ruth can experience "*hesed*". Naomi has lived her life as a witness and it was so powerful that Ruth says, "I want what you have. Don't tell me to leave. I'm going with you because I'm part of your people and your God. Your God will be my God." **What would it be like to live your life so that people say, I want what you have?** I want a faith like yours. I want to love like you love. I want to experience God the way you touch God. What would it be like to live your life so that people say, I want what you have? Ask Naomi.

Our beach read author doesn't. He simply says, "When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her." (Ruth 1:18. But you know she must have thought about it as the two walk down that dusty road from "somewhere" Moab back to the place where more than ten years earlier she left with a husband and two sons. She left with a full life but was returning empty. That thought, over and over again, ate on her so despite being pleasant all the days of her life, she is in a bad place. As they make their way into the village, people rush out to greet her, excitedly asking, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me." (Ruth 1:19c-20)

Wow. This pleasant woman who embodied God's love, who radiated "*hesed*" is now Mara, which means bitter. What can happen next? As the chapter ends and our time on the beach for today is over, we have a hint. They arrive in "*lehem*" at the beginning of the barley harvest. There has been rain and so there is grain. With grain, there will be bread again in the house, in the "*bet*" of "*lehem*," in Bethlehem, the house of bread.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaiser, F. J., Lewis, K. M., Lange, D. G., Jacobson, R. A., & Schifferdecker, K. M. (2013). A new look at sermon series: preaching through Ruth. *Word & World*, 33(2), 166-187.