



Sermon Transcript

June 6, 2021

An Extraordinary God! An Ordinary People!

Turning Over a New Leaf

Ruth 1:1-22

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 6, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Ruth 1:1-22

1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The 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. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, 5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband! Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people. 11 But Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 13 would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law. 16 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. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. 18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, Is this Naomi? 20 She said to them, Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Introduction

This past year, Anthony Hopkins won the Oscar for best actor for the role he played in the movie *The Father*. This movie takes you inside the struggle of an aging man battling dementia. The film puts you in his shoes, as the audience experiences the confusion this aging man feels as he tries to sort through his past memories and present realities. Near the end of the movie, resigning himself to what is happening to him, the character Hopkins plays confesses, “I feel as if I am losing all my leaves.”

That is a great way to describe the ordinary progression of time and life. “I feel as if I am losing all my leaves.” Brett McCracken said of this line in the movie: “As we watch; we become painfully aware: this will happen to our parents one day. It will happen to us.”¹ We will lose all of our leaves.

Here we are at the beginning of summer. It is a season of the year that we all look forward to, especially in New England. After coming out of the long dead of winter, we bask in the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the trees with their lush green leaves. We have a stately bronze beech tree in our backyard and it casts a large shadow over our yard. I put the hammock under the shade of this tree. We have our picnic table under this tree. It often feels ten degrees cooler under the shade of that tree. It is a spot in our backyard that brings me a lot of joy. But we all know, with the ordinary passing of the seasons, in just a few months those leaves will fall again and eventually that tree will be barren. It will lose all of its leaves. The ordinary passing of the seasons is a great reminder to us of the ordinary passing of life. We will lose all of our leaves.

Some here are in the spring of life, looking forward to growing up and the prospect of the future. Others are in the prime of life, the summer. Some, like myself, are in the

autumn of life. The color of my leaves is changing and I have lost a few leaves, that is for sure. And then, like the character in the movie, some are feeling as though they have entered the final season of life. They too might be drawn to say, “I feel as if I am losing all my leaves.”

But it strikes me that the losing of leaves is not confined to a particular season of life. Every week, even in the prime of summer, when I mow the grass invariably there are leaves that have fallen from that stately beech tree. Perhaps a passing storm violently ripped some of them from a branch or a twig. Or at times, there is a broken branch with a cluster of fallen leaves lying there on the ground. Leaves fall in every season of life. It is safe to say that these past fifteen months we have all felt the pain of falling leaves in our life. We have all felt loss of some kind. Some of that loss we can easily define. This past week, Bonnie and I traveled to Pennsylvania to visit both sets of our parents; something we hadn’t done since the Christmas prior to the pandemic. A loss of time. Some of it is just a feeling we just can’t shake—a feeling of loss—and we may not be able to fully put our finger on it. It is just there. We have been reminded this year that we live in a world with constant loss. How do we cope in such a world?

Through the month of June, we are going to make our way through the Old Testament book of Ruth. The book of Ruth tells a story in four short chapters. Each chapter is carefully and artfully designed as if they present a Four-Act Play. At the end of Act One, Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi returns to her hometown of Bethlehem after having been away for over a decade. Some of her lady friends caught wind that Naomi had returned. “You will never guess who I saw in town today?” “Who? Who did you see? Tell me!” “Naomi is back in town!” “Naomi!” With excitement they run to their old friend whom they had not seen for a long time and they greet her warmly, “*Is this Naomi?*” But beaten down by life, Naomi returns their greeting by saying, “*Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.*” In other words, when Naomi returned to her hometown she told her old friends, “Over these ten plus years, I feel as if I lost all my leaves.”

Why did Naomi feel this way? When she left town over a decade before, she left as a tree full of leaves. But when she returned to town, all these years later, she returned empty. As we look at Act One of the story of Ruth, I am struck by the rather ordinary way our leaves fall throughout life. Often our leaves fall because of things that happen to us, things out of our control. We are often swept up by the events of our time and by the consequences that come because of the decisions that are made by others and also by our own doing. In rather ordinary fashion, our leaves just happen to fall. But

the book of Ruth reminds us that God is at work in all of this. The book of Ruth shows us how God is doing extraordinary things through our ordinary struggle and loss. Even in Act One we see how God begins to turn over a new leaf for Naomi through the loyal love of Ruth. In fact, that is the answer that McCracken gives to the question: “How do we cope in a world of constant loss and relentless speed?” The answer? “We love.”²

Ruth: Act One: An Ordinary Life and an Extraordinary Love

An Ordinary Life: Carried by our Time

The story of Ruth begins with a rather loaded statement, *“In the days when the judges ruled.”* This tells us when the story of Ruth took place. It took place during the time of the judges. The book of Judges is the book right before the book of Ruth. It is a period of Israel’s history that lasted for about 300 years. It is a time period that began after the death of Joshua, when Israel settled into the promised land. This time period ended when Israel inaugurated their first king, King Saul. In fact, that is one way the time period of the judges is described. It says at the end of the book of Judges, *“In those days there was no king in Israel.”* At that time, there was no centralized government. The story of Ruth takes place at some point during these 300 years *when the judges ruled.*

The reason why this opening statement is a loaded statement is because this was a difficult time in Israel’s history. It was a time in Israel’s history where people were not very faithful to God, nor were they loyal to each other. The flavor of this time is described in the very last verse of the book of Judges. After the summary statement, *“In those days there was no king in Israel,”* we find these words that define the prevailing mindset of the people of that time. The author looks back on this time and can only conclude that this is a time when *“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”*

It is kind of like my generation, the Baby Boomers. We were given the nickname “The Me Generation.” We were tagged with this nickname because of our narcissism and our unending quest for self-fulfillment. But then I saw a *Time Magazine* article from 2013 describing Millennials, those born between 1980 and 2000. This article described this generation as the “Me, Me, Me Generation.” The author begins by saying, “I am about to do what old people have done throughout history: call those younger than me lazy, entitled, selfish, and shallow.”³ The author is no doubt a Baby Boomer who thinks her narcissism isn’t quite as bad as the subsequent generation who grew up under the guidance of Baby Boomers. Which makes me think that the tag line for the book of Judges is not all that unique to that time and those generations. It sure does sound like a

contemporary assessment of the time in which we live. *“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* sounds like something you could say about 2021.

This 300 year period of Israel’s history is known for the cycle or the pattern in Israel’s relationship with God that would get repeated over and over again. The cycle went like this. They would do evil and drift away from God and God would then give them over to a neighboring country who would oppress them for an extended period of time. At some point in their misery they would cry out to God to deliver them and then God would raise up a “judge” who would deliver them from their oppressor and they would once again experience rest and peace in the land.

So when things went bad in the land because of the spiritual decline of the people, everyone suffered. Everyone was caught up with whatever the national consequence was for breaking covenant with God. You see this common struggle in verse 1, *“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.”* As the leaves were falling all around them, this family was also experiencing their own loss of leaves. They were suffering under this famine and they felt compelled to leave their home and settle in a foreign land. We discover the names of this family in verse 2. Elimelech was the father. Naomi was his wife and the mother of their two sons: Mahlon and Chilion.

It is a good reminder to us that sometimes we lose leaves simply because we are carried along by the events that are happening around us. We are not spared by what happens around us. In fact, I would say that this is a rather ordinary reality of every generation. We may not be able to identify what God is up to in the events that often consume us, like we can in the book of Judges. But like this family from Bethlehem, we know what it is like to be carried by our time and to lose some of our leaves.

What leaves did you lose this year during the pandemic? You couldn’t escape it. You and I were carried by it. We have all felt loss this past year. There are a lot of ways we could describe the “loss of leaves” we felt this year. One thing I think we have lost due to the isolation we have experienced is the sense of relationship. For some, that has translated into loneliness. But in the context of the church it has led to separation in both the church at large and our own local church family. When we see each other on a regular basis, our relationship to each other holds us together. But in the absence of being together, we gravitate more to our ideas than to our brothers and sisters and we have become more polarized than we were before. Like Naomi and her family, we too are carried by our time and consequently, we too have lost some of our leaves.

An Ordinary Life: Carried by our Circumstances

The story of Ruth quickly moves from what is happening “out there” in the world around them to what is happening personally in the life of Naomi and her family. Her leaves are falling and they have been falling for some time. It is easy to read the first part of chapter one and quickly move through the circumstances that have marked Naomi’s life. But in verse 4 we are given the time marker of ten years. Carolyn Custis James says of Naomi and her suffering, “The collapse of Naomi’s world did not happen in a day but was spread out over years of heartache and tragedy.”⁴ She is in many ways the female version of Job. She was a person of faith wrestling with the circumstances of life and she was dealing with a God who doesn’t always explain himself. Have you ever noticed that about God in your life? Many of us will go to our graves without an answer to the question “Why?” That is the ordinary life of faith—of the Christian.

The story begins by telling us that there was a famine in the land of Israel. Do you remember the cycle we just alluded to that takes place in the book of Judges? Over and over again, the people of Israel would turn away from God and then God would send an oppressor who would rule over them. This would cause them to turn to God and cry out for help. Famine was one of those things God used to address the adulterous heart of Israel. And yet this famine had a personal impact on the life of Naomi and her family. We don’t really know what it means to starve or to face the prospect of going without food. We did see long food lines this past year, and we have seen a long line of cars lined up in our parking lot to receive food from HOW. When in a pinch, we have an ample supply of food to care for those who struggle. But Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, was so overwhelmed by the famine that he left Bethlehem—which means “house of bread”—and he moved his family to Moab, a foreign and pagan country.

We quickly find out in the introduction to this story that during this ten year period, while living as immigrants in a foreign country, Naomi’s husband dies. Her two sons married Moabite women—Orpah and Ruth. During this time, her two sons died as well. On top of that, her two daughters-in-law were barren, unable to conceive and give birth to children. Being a widow and being barren account for some of the greatest sufferings of women in the Bible. The Hebrew word for “widow” comes from the root word *alem* which means “unable to speak.” In the ancient world a widow was indeed the “silent one.”⁵ Without a father, husband, son, or other male relative to speak and to act in her defense, a woman had no voice, no legal rights, no recourse against injustice.⁶ When Naomi returns to Bethlehem, she is clearly in the category of the “have-nots.” She left over ten years ago with a husband and two sons. She is returning with a barren

widow from another country walking along with her. She literally returns with nothing. This is why she says when greeted by her old friends, *“I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.”*

Naomi’s story is Naomi’s story. It is unique to her. But it is not entirely unique. In many ways, it is our story too. When we were visiting this past week with both sets of parents, we got caught up on some of the latest happenings with relatives and family friends. There were stories of hospitals and aging relatives and addictions and estranged relationships and disappointments and regrets ... stories of leaves falling. But these were not stories happening somewhere “out there” in the news. Rather, these stories hit close to home. They were personal. They were felt. And quite frankly, we had our own stories to share ... our own experience with the loss of some leaves. It is all too ordinary.

Eugene Peterson said rather candidly, “No literature is more realistic and honest in facing the harsh facts of life than the Bible. At no time is there the faintest suggestion that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties ... On every page of the Bible there is recognition that faith encounters troubles.”⁷ And when we do go through these things, it does rattle our faith. We do feel it. When Naomi honestly shares with her friends how she is feeling, I don’t think that is a lack of faith. Carolyn Custis James said it this way: “To tell the truth, when the full force of our sufferings hits us, no matter how long we have walked with God or how much theology we have mastered, faith in God can take an awful beating.”⁸ I am grateful for the honest cries of God’s people in the midst of their own suffering.

This experience of losing our leaves may be ordinary, but is not easy. We feel it. But here is the beauty of the book of Ruth. Not only does the book of Ruth remind us that we can be honest and real with our struggles. But it also reminds us that as our leaves are falling that these struggles are important. Even when the tree of our life seems to be close to barren—empty of all our leaves—God is mysteriously at work in the mess.

Much of what happened to Naomi was out of her control. Was Elimelech’s decision to go to Moab out of God’s will—a lack of trust? What about her two sons marrying women from Moab? Their “untimely death” and the lack of being able to conceive could be the negative consequence of decisions they have made. And that is the way it often is in our life. Due to things outside of our control and due to consequences of decisions that have been made, we experience the hardship of life—our leaves fall to the ground. And yet, God takes all of this—our sins—our sufferings—our cries and he is mysteriously at work in the mess. In our ordinary struggle comes his extraordinary love.

An Extra-Ordinary Love: Carried by Loving Kindness

There are two key words that are important to the story of Ruth. The first word is *go'el* which means “kinsman redeemer.” It refers to the nearest adult male blood relative who served as an advocate for any vulnerable or unfortunate clan member. Naomi was in need of such a “redeemer.” The “kinsman redeemer” does what he needs to do at his own cost to redeem and restore his relative to wholeness. In the case of Naomi, the “kinsman redeemer” would restore an aging widow facing old age alone without anyone to care for her.⁹ This is part of the reason Naomi urges Orpah and Ruth to return to their homeland. She has no other son to give to them as a husband. And furthermore, even if she was still able to give them a son, it would be long time before they would be old enough to marry. We will look at this key word in the next several weeks.

The other key word in the story of Ruth is the word *hesed*. This is an important word in the Old Testament that is often used to describe God’s love for his people. K. Lawson Younger says that there is no English word that can actually capture the meaning of this word accurately. It connotes the ideas of covenantal loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, goodness, mercy, love and compassion.¹⁰ In the Old Testament, God is celebrated over and over again for his *hesed*—his loving kindness. It is a rather extra-ordinary love in a world filled with ordinary hardship. The book of Lamentations—the title says it all—it is a book that weeps over the falling of leaves, the falling of the city of Jerusalem. What is it that enables the people of God to cope with the destruction of Jerusalem and their deportation to Babylon. It is the *hesed*, the extra-ordinary loving kindness of God that carries them. Right in the middle of their cries of sorrow we read these wonderful words of hope. *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*

Naomi doesn’t quite see it yet. When she returns to Bethlehem, she is so weighed down by the constant falling of leaves that she says of God, *“the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.”* What she can’t quite see at this point when she says that she is returning empty, is that standing right beside her in the person of Ruth is God’s *hesed*—God’s loving kindness being expressed through Ruth and her loyal love—her kindness and goodness for Naomi. So often our troubles and sorrows cloud our vision from seeing how God is caring for us along the way.

We may not have a word in English that fully captures the meaning of the Hebrew word *hesed*. But you know it when you see it. And we see the kind of loyal love—loving kindness—this word describes through the actions of Ruth. When Naomi decides to

return to Bethlehem she endeavors to return alone. She urged both Orpah and Ruth to return to their families because there was nothing for them in Bethlehem. After laying out all the reasons why it would be best for them to return to their families, Orpah weighs the facts and submits to her mother-in-law's counsel. She returns home. Ruth, on the other hand, could not be persuaded. With unyielding loyalty and kindness, Ruth would not leave Naomi's side, even though there was nothing in Bethlehem for her. She was a widow. She was barren. She was from Moab. But still, she said to Naomi, *"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. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."*

Some would say that this marks the point of Ruth's conversion to Israel's God. That may or may not be. Either way, it gives us a window into Ruth's faith. No matter what she was about to face, she had discovered God and she left it all to follow him. That is the well that she is able to draw from to express this kind of love to Naomi. In a very tangible way, Ruth became an expression of God's loving kindness for Naomi. Naomi thought she returned empty, but she returned with Ruth. At the beginning of the sermon I asked the question Brett McCracken pondered. "How do we cope in a world of constant loss and relentless speed?" The answer? "We love."

In a moment we will hold the elements in our hands—the bread and wine—symbols of the "loving kindness" that is extended to us by our redeemer, Jesus. This is the well that we draw from to help us love when our future is uncertain and when we come along side each other in the church. We are told in Galatians 6:2 to be like Ruth and to *carry each other's burdens*. That is how we cope in a world known for falling leaves. We love! In doing so, we give demonstration to God's work and God's presence in the mess.

Naomi and Ruth Come Together

Carolyn Custis James tells the story of going to the nursing home to visit Elois Godfrey. As is often the case, when you go on such a visit, your intent is to be a blessing to the person you visit, but often that person ends up turning the tables on you and you are the one ministered to. That was her experience the last time she saw Elois. Neither of them knew it at the time, but Elois's final leaf would drop within forty-eight hours of her visit.

Carolyn Custis James said that Elois first wandered into her church when she was in her eighties. In her prime, she was a school teacher, a musician, a poet, and an avid golfer.

Like Naomi who returned home to the question, “*Is this Naomi?*” - looking at Elois in her nineties, her past is hardly distinguishable. “Is this Elois?” Her leaves have almost all fallen. In fact, much like Naomi who was returning home feeling the weight of her troubles, Elois was doing her fare share of complaining during this visit. And she was rather frank in her complaints. Who could blame her? She was keeping it real.

But then, Carolyn Custis James wrote, “Then as though she forgot that I was sitting there, she began to remind herself, “I’m forgetting God is here. I’m not living for his purpose.” Custis James said, “we sat in silence for a moment processing her words as she resolved to stop thinking about herself and to reach out to the people around her. With time running out, she still had a mission. She was God’s image bearer to the end, doing God’s work, even without realizing it, speaking for him to me.”¹¹

In some sense, I feel as though Naomi and Ruth come together in all of our lives. Like Naomi, we suffer and need to be reminded that as our leaves are falling in ordinary fashion, God is here. God is near. God is at work. God is turning over a new leaf in us. Sometimes we are reminded of God’s extra-ordinary loving kindness for us through the people he sends along our way. And as people who have been touched by the extra-ordinary loving kindness of our kinsman redeemer—Jesus—who died for us—even when our leaves are falling and our future is uncertain, we can be loyal in our kindness to our brother and sister in Christ. That is the church. That is our commitment to each other. To walk together through our suffering and strengthen each other with love. “How do we cope in a world of constant loss and relentless speed?” The answer? “We love.” Who is God calling you to love this week? Often when our leaves are falling, God is there, turning over a new leaf.

¹Brett McCracken “2 Trees, 2 Films, 10 Years” www.thegospelcoalition.org May 26, 2021

²Ibid

³Jean Twenge “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation” *Time Magazine* May 9, 2013

⁴Carolyn Custice James *The Gospel of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 37

⁵Bonnie Bowman Thurston *The Widows: A Woman’s Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 9

⁶Custice James, 62

⁷Eugene Peterson *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) 42

⁸Custis James, 43

⁹K. Lawson Younger, Jr *Judges/Ruth The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 399

¹⁰Ibid., 393

¹¹James, 71-73

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. In what way have you “lost some leaves” over the past fifteen months?
2. What are some ways you have experienced the loving-kindness of God through the love of his people? How did it encourage you?



Diving Into The Word

3. Read Romans 1:1-22. What catches your attention? What questions do you have?

Think about Naomi:

What caused Naomi to be angry with God?

What did Naomi believe about God?

Describe a situation in life where you shared Naomi’s view of God.

Think about your own experience

How do our circumstances influence our belief about God?

Why are our questions about God so important?

Think about Ruth

Why did Ruth reject Naomi’s counsel?

How do our beliefs about God influence how we see our struggles?

What does Ruth teach us about God?



Taking It Home

4. Do you most resonate with Naomi or Ruth? Why?
5. Who is God calling you to be a “Ruth” to this week? How can the others pray for you regarding this matter?