

**Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – October 9, 2016**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

**Ruth 1:1-19 (NIV)**

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. 2) The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. 3) Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4) They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, 5) both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. 6) When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 7) With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. 8) Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. 9) May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud 10) and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." 11) But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12) Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—13) would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!" 14) At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. 15) "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." 16) But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17) Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." 18) When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. 19) So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem.

Fellow travelers on the path of life;

I was talking with my sister the other day and she was telling me a bit about a recent vacation she took with my parents to do some sight-seeing in Michigan's upper peninsula on the shores of Lake Superior. For a time it seemed to me that the high-light of their trip was seeing a big turtle! From what my sister first told me it didn't seem like it wasn't a very exciting trip – they went to wild-life refuge which was supposed to be a safe-haven for some sort of endangered species of bird and hiked down a path and saw nothing. Later in our conversation, she did get excited about the boat ride they took to see the shores of Picture Rock National Park near Munising. Thankfully, the day they took their boat ride it wasn't too windy and stormy!

Our journey through life is like that sometimes, isn't it? Somedays everything just seems to plod along. Other days things seem peaceful and serene. And then, there are those stormy times of life. In the Old Testament Lesson for today, God has shared a glimpse of the life of a woman by the name of Naomi. She is presented as woman of faith who feared the Lord. As we heard, the path of life took her on some rather challenging journeys.

Naomi and her family live in Bethlehem about 150 years before the time of King David during the time of Judges when there was a famine in the land. During this time in the history of God's people the Lord often had to demonstrate his faithfulness to his wayward people by sending difficulties to call them back to him. Although his people had committed themselves to him, sadly they often ended up turning away from him to pursue their own interests and pleasures that frequently involved worshipping and serving false gods. At times like that God would discipline his people until they repented. Then he would raise up leaders (called judges) to rescue them and lead them back to the Lord.

Naomi's family included her husband Elimelech and their two sons, Mahlon and Killion. Confronted with the challenge of providing for his family, Elimelech decide to relocate his family to other side of the Jordan to the county of Moab for a time. The Moabites were "cousins" to the Israelites – they traced their

family line back to Abraham's nephew Lot. Unfortunately, there was bad blood between these two groups of people. Still Elimelech decided that it would be in the best interests of his family to leave behind his extended family - his relatives and friends. He left behind his connection to God's faithful people and God's Word to live with a people who worshipped other gods. It's interesting to see where "life" and the decisions we make lead sometimes yet God turns everything to good for his people.

**Theme:** God Works Everything for Our Good

1. He preserves our faith wherever the travels of life take us
2. He gives us faith to serve him wherever the travels of life take us

As events in Naomi's life unfolded it must have seemed to her as if the move to Moab was like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. A decade's worth of history is summarized for us in these words: **Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4) They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, 5) both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.**

Poor Naomi – she was a widow in a foreign land with only her daughters-in-law to care for her. There is always more than meets the eye, isn't there? The Psalmist reminds us: **"The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing."** (Psalm 145:14-16 NIV)

Naomi knew where to turn in her time of need. The Lord had preserved her faith. **When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 7) With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.**

There was no longer any reason for Naomi to stay in Moab. She had come with her family in search of food because there was a famine in Bethlehem. Now the famine was over so she decides to set out on a journey back to Bethlehem. Once again, she packed her things and prepared for another journey. Accompanied by her daughters-in-law she reached the main highway headed toward the land of Judah. It must have been a bittersweet experience for Naomi. Ten years earlier, she and her family had traveled that same highway – and now she's alone without her beloved and caring husband Elimelech and her dear sons, Mahlon and Killion. Surely, she couldn't expect Orpah and Ruth to accompany her to Bethlehem. What kind of a life would await two foreign widows from Moab there? As much as Naomi loved them, she had their interests in mind when she said to them: **"Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. 9) May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye..."**

As Naomi spoke with Orpah and Ruth, her faith in the Lord was on display. Her love for her daughters-in-law was evident in the prayer and blessings she spoke. It was the Lord who had brought them together and the Lord would continue to provide for them. It may have seemed like it was just a chance happening, that it was the decision of her husband or that it was just the "journeys of life" that caused their lives to intersect – but the Lord was behind it all. He preserved Naomi's faith in the land of Moab and as we will see in moment, he gave Ruth faith to serve him wherever her travels in life might take her.

Naomi wanted the Lord's blessings for both Orpah and Ruth. If they moved with her to Bethlehem, it might mean that as Moabites living among Jews that they would be forced to live the rest of their lives in poverty as widows. As Naomi prepared to leave them behind **they wept aloud 10) and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." 11) But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you**

**come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12) Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me--even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—13) would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them?**

They were young – they had a long life of opportunities before them (at least from a human perspective). Naomi didn't feel that way about herself and she surely didn't want to become a burden to them so she told them: **No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!" 14) At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.15) "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."**

The Holy Spirit used the testimony of Naomi and her family to work faith in Ruth's heart. The Lord worked through them to things out for Ruth's spiritual and eternal good. In faith Ruth was willing to Bethlehem to watch over and assist Naomi with her needs. Ruth's comments give evidence of her faith. **Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17) Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." 18) When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. 19) So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem.**

Ruth expressed her intention to follow Naomi and to stay with Naomi wherever she would go. She would be there by her side to care for her and to assist her. She would treat her like family and regard her family as her family as an expression of faith and love for the Lord. Ruth made a vow – similar to the vows that we make on our confirmation day to be faithful in her service to the Lord and others. It was her faith in the Lord that tied her to Naomi. It was faith in the Lord that led her to leave her own mother and father, her own homeland to travel with Naomi to the foreign land of Judah and an unknown future in Bethlehem. It was faith in the Lord that led Ruth to set aside concerns for her own safety and security to travel with Naomi with confidence in the Lord's willingness to make all things turn out well.

Neither Naomi's nor Ruth's confidence in the Lord was misplaced. As this account continues, the widows struggle to survive – it seems that no one was willing to step forward to offer assistance to them. But the Lord provided for them – in his Law the Lord allowed the poor to glean from the fields at harvest time. With Naomi's permission and blessing, Ruth picked up the leftovers that fell to the ground in the fields of Boaz.

In his Law, the Lord also set up regulations to insure that the property could stay in the family even in the event that there was no male heir. Ultimately, the Lord moved Boaz to take the steps necessary to redeem Elimelech's property of Naomi. Boaz also agreed to marry Ruth who became the great-grandmother of Judah's great king David from whose family line the Savior of the world would be born.

From our perspective ,it's easy to see the Lord's guiding and gracious hand at work behind the scenes working out everything for the good of Naomi and Ruth as he preserved their faith and gave them faith to serve him wherever he led. It may not have quite that obvious to Naomi at the time. It may not always be so obvious that the Lord is doing the same for us – working everything out for our good wherever the travels of life take us.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus, has promised blessings to those who seek his kingdom and his righteousness. **“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”** (Matthew 6:33 NIV)

Some days it seems the pace of life is plodding along like a turtle and we're not going anywhere fast. I suppose that can wither be relaxing or frustrating depending on the circumstances. But whatever the circumstances we can be content knowing the Lord has promised never to leave us or forsake us. He won't abandon us in the "dust of his tracks" as he speeds off to assist someone else. He promises: **"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."** (Cf. Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5)

Then there are those days when everything seems perfect and beautiful – that too is a blessing from our Lord who assures us that he will be with us always even to the end of time (Cf. Matthew 28:20)

When the days seem dark and stormy – the Lord is still there leading us with his rod and his staff as he provides for our physical and spiritual needs. Even though [we] walk through the darkest valley, [we need] fear no evil, for he is with us; his rod and staff, comforts us. (cf. Psalm 23:4).

As we travel through life, we may encounter any number of ups and downs. We might come to a variety of crossroads. The account of Naomi and Ruth helps us to understand how to deal with such situations. We can look for guidance from the God's word. Sometimes there will be a specific direction telling us to do or not do something. Other times things are less clear and we might have to look for a "scriptural principal" to guide us in making a choice. And then there may be difficult choices like the one which confronted Elimelech when he decided to move to Moab to feed his family. While we might wish that God would tell us which job offer to accept or when it's the best time to retire or move on to a new location – it isn't always that clear. So we'll call on the Lord in prayer asking him to guide us and led us to that decision which will enable us to remain faithful to him and to serve him wherever we go.

As a people who have been called to faith in Christ, we can go through life with the confidence **that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.** (Romans 8:28 NIV)

Fellow travelers on the path of life; God Works Everything for Our Good.

1. He preserves our faith wherever the travels of life take us
2. He gives us faith to serve him wherever the travels of life take us

Let's open our hymnals to hymn 451 and pray Precious Lord, Take My Hand.

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand;  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light.  
Take my hand, precious Lord; Lead me home.

When my way grows drear, Precious Lord, linger near,  
When my life is almost gone,  
Hear my cry, hear my call; Hold my hand lest I fall.  
Take my hand, precious Lord; Lead me home.

When the darkness appears And the night draws near  
And the day is almost gone,  
At the river I stand; Guide my feet, hold my hand,  
Take my hand, precious Lord; Lead me home. Amen.

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