Ruth *Legendary 2: Ruth: A Love Story*

***Ancient Romance***Our sermon today is from the book of Ruth. We are continuing in our summer series: Legendary 2, which is a sequel to last summer’s series in which we looked at some of the legendary characters of the Bible.

Ruth is one of two books in the Bible that are named after a woman, and it is a love story. The concept throughout these Legendary series has been that are looking at these stories like movies—ancient blockbusters--and most of them would fit into the category of action-adventure stories. But if you were going to pick a movie genre for Ruth, you’d have to go with Romance. The big question in Ruth is whether or not the two main characters will be together at the end.

The thing is, though, some of the romantic elements in this story might seem a little strange to us. Because this story is built around some ancient customs that we are not all that familiar with. For example, a key plot element in this story is the practice of levirate marriage—in which if a man dies without an heir, it is expected that his closest male relative will marry his widow in order to continue his line. That’s something we just don’t see. There’s also the practice of “gleaning” in which farmers leave some of their fields unharvested so that the impoverished can come through and take some food home. Again, it’s foreign to us, but it is a key feature in this story. We’re even going to see a business transaction sealed by the exchanging of sandals, something that only happens in this story in the Bible and nowhere else.

And yet, even though some of the parts of the story seem unusual to us, this little gem of a book remains a powerful illustration of Godly love. Let me take you through the story, and along the way we will see three facets of love that teach us about God, and also challenge us to display such love in our lives. We’re going to talk about Loyal Love, Righteous Love, and Redeeming Love.

***Loyal Love***Let’s start with **Ruth 1, verse 1:**

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.

There is a lot of information in this verse which gives us important context for this story.

We’re told that this story takes place during the time of the judges. In our English Bibles, the book of Judges is the book right before Ruth. And the period of the Judges is not a highpoint in the history of Israel.

In fact, the last verse of Judges—so the verse that comes right before Ruth 1:1—says that “In those days Israel had no king: and every one did what was right in his own eyes.” That’s pretty much the thesis statement for the book of Judges—the whole book is a downward spiral of sin, judgement, rescue, and then a return to sin. Everybody does as he sees fit. Everybody does what seems right in his own eyes. The time period in which the story of Ruth takes place is a period of sin and lawlessness.

Plus, we are told that this is a story about a man from Bethlehem. We know Bethlehem as an important Biblical town; but at this point in the story it is not known for being a quiet little place of peace. Rather, one of the final stories in the book of Judges (chapter 19) takes place in Bethlehem and it is a grotesque story of rape, violence and murder. This story does not get off to a very good start.

But it gets even worse, because in an effort to find relief from famine we are told that the man from Bethlehem goes to a place called Moab. That doesn’t mean much to us, but for the ancient Israelites it would have been deep with meaning. In the Bible, Moab is not a good place. In Genesis, after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his daughters thought they were the only people left on earth. Lot’s daughters seduce him into incest in an effort to continue the line, and one of the children born to them was named Moab.

Then, in Numbers 25, as the children of Israel are wondering through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, a group of Moabite women seduce a group of Israelite men and it leads to a plague that kills 24,000 people. That’s the reputation of Moab—and especially Moabite women—in the Bible: seduction, temptation, immorality.

That’s the context for this story: a time when everyone does what is right in his own eyes; a town known for violence and rape, and an Israelite who turns His back on the Promised Land by going to the pagan den of iniquity that is Moab.

But, for all that, this is not a story about big national events but rather one that focuses in on the domestic drama of this one little family. **Verses 3-5** tell us that the man, whose name is Elimelek, dies in Moab. His two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, take Moabitess wives, but over the course of the next decade they both also die, without any children. Now Elimelek’s widow, whose name is Naomi, is left with her two daughters-in-law, whose names are Orpah and Ruth.

It is a devastating series of tragedies. Hunger followed by loss after loss after loss. Worst of all, in the culture of the ancient near east, to die without children was the curse of all curses. It meant your name stops with you. For Naomi, who is widowed and past child-bearing age, it will be as though she and her husband never existed.

In the midst of all this bad news, **verse 6 gives** one small ray of hope: Naomi learns that the Lord has brought food back to Israel and decides to go back home. Oddly, her daughters-in-law decide to go with her.

At this point, Naomi does some soul-searching and decides she can’t ask these women to go with her. They have family in Moab. They are still in their child-bearing years. There is still hope that they can find new husbands. In **verses 12 and 13** she introduces the concept of levirate marriage by explaining that even if she were to get married immediately and have another son—which she probably could not—these ladies wouldn’t want to wait until that son was old enough to marry and still think they could have sons of their own.

It appears that Naomi has genuine affection for both these women—they have experienced plenty of tragedy together—but she cannot ask them to make this kind of sacrifice just to help her. **Verse 14 says**:

**14**At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

Orpah decides to bow out, and you can’t blame he. But Ruth clings to Naomi—and the word for “cling” is the same word used in Genesis 2 to describe how a man and woman will cling (or “cleave”) to one another in marriage (Gen. 2:24).

Then comes one of the most famous passages in Ruth, **verses 16 and 17:**

**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.”

You may have heard these verses read at a wedding. There are even some couples who have used these verses as their vows to one another. And if so, that’s great. The language here really works as a description of the commitment we make in marriage. Just keep in mind—and here’s what is so amazing about this—these words are being spoken by a daughter-in-law to a her mother-in-law!

And here is the first facet of love that I want us to consider: **Loyal-love.** What Ruth is demonstrating here is a commitment to the good of Naomi, a loyalty that will remain through thick or thin. Not only is Ruth throwing her lot in with Naomi, she is also throwing her lot in with Naomi’s God. In her time in Naomi’s family she has found something in the God of Israel that she wants, she has found a way of living that makes sense to her.

Back in **verse 8**, Naomi used a word that is important throughout the book of Ruth, and really, a word that is crucial throughout the Old Testament. She said:

**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.”

The word translated “kindness” is the **Hebrew word “hesed”.** This is a Hebrew word I’ve mentioned several times before, because it is the Hebrew word that is used to describe God’s love throughout the Old Testament. “Kindness” is a good translation, but it is incomplete. This is a word that cannot be easily translated with just one word. Grace, mercy, love, covenant faithfulness. All these things are tied up in this word. This is how God deals with his people. This is God’s commitment to love those He has chosen.

And that’s why I like the phrase “loyal love.” That’s what Ruth is demonstrating in her commitment to Naomi. That is the kindness that Ruth has learned from this God she is now committing herself to.

***Righteous Love***Ruth and Naomi go to Bethlehem, and **the last verse of chapter 1** notes that it is the beginning of the barley harvest.

Here is where we are introduced to the concept of gleaning. In Deuteronomy 24 God gave instructions to farmers that, while they are harvesting the land, if they overlook a plant or two, they should not go back to clean up after themselves. Rather, they should leave what they miss so that the impoverished are able to go through the fields and gather something for themselves. This form of charity allows those in need to contribute some labor to their own need.

This is gleaning. And now that they are settled in Bethlehem, Ruth volunteers to go out and glean on behalf of herself and Naomi. **Chapter 2, verse 3** tells us that “as it turned out”--and I think the narrator is deliberately using that phrase in a knowing wink to the reader that nothing just so happens—the field Ruth chooses belongs to a man of standing named Boaz, who just so happens to be a relative of Naomi’s dead husband.

Here is where the love story begins. When Boaz comes to visit his fields, it doesn’t take long for the new girl to catch his eye. **Verse 5:**

**5**Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?”

It doesn’t come across so great in English, but this is sort of the ancient equivalent of saying “Whoa, check her out!” Boaz is clearly smitten at first sight, and when he learns Ruth’s back story his interest only grows.

What follows is something that I can only describe as ancient flirting. Boaz invites Ruth to glean exclusively from his fields. In **verse 9** he even tells her that he has ordered his men not to touch her—which is a rather ominous reminder that Bethlehem is not a completely safe place for a young, unattached woman.

He invites her to have lunch with him and in verses **15 and 16** he even makes arrangements with his harvesters to leave a little extra in the field for her.

Clearly, Boaz is attracted to Ruth. When she asks why, here’s his answer. **Verses 11-12:**

**11**Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. **12**May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Not only does Boaz like the way Ruth looks, he likes the way she acts. He is drawn to her character.

When Ruth tells Naomi about all this, she clearly sees the hand of God at work. **In verse 20** she says: “The Lord bless him! He has not stopped showing his kindness the living and the dead.” That’s the same word—*hesed*—from earlier. And here Naomi introduces another important term: Boaz is a close relative, he could be a guardian-redeemer.

Now the story takes a shady turn. All in all, this is a PG story, but in chapter 3 it starts to look like it could get very R-rated.

Naomi decides to push the issue. It’s a couple of months later, the barley harvest is coming to an end, and there is a tradition for farmers to feast and then camp out on the threshing floor when all the work is done. **Chapter 3, verses 3 and 4**, is Naomi’s advice to Ruth:

Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. **4**When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

This is, to put it mildly, a very forward thing for Ruth to do. She’s supposed to put on her finest clothes, put on perfume—not the look of a farm laborer, in other words—and then wait for Boaz to go to sleep before going to him, peeling back his sleeping bag, and then getting into bed with him. The words that Naomi uses—“uncover,” “his feet,” and “lie down” are words that are loaded with innuendo.

The question is: what will Boaz do when he discovers Ruth lying next to him?

There’s another story in the Old Testament that centers on the custom of levirate marriage, and I think it is instructive here. In Genesis 38 a woman named Tamar is married to Judah’s oldest son, Er. When Er dies without a son, Tamar is married to his younger brother Onan. Onan takes Tamar as his wife, but he is careful to make sure she does not get pregnant, since any son would technically be the heir of the oldest brother. When Onan dies, Tamar is told to wait until the third brother is old enough to marry.

But over time, when it becomes clear that Judah is not going to allow his youngest son to marry her, Tamar takes matters in her own hands. She dresses as a prostitute and puts herself on a road she knows Judah will be travelling. When he sees her, he does not recognize her as his daughter-in-law and apparently has no compunctions about engaging her as a prostitute. In this way she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son named Perez.

I don’t know if Ruth knew this story, but Naomi most likely did. And this appears to be part of her strategy. Will Boaz—who, as it turns out, is a direct descendant of Judah through the line of Perez—will Boaz wake up to discover Ruth in his bed and take advantage of her the way Judah almost certainly would have?

Well, the beauty of this story is that Boaz is not Judah. **Verse 9**, when Boaz is startled awake he asks:

**9**“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

This is nothing less than a marriage proposal from Ruth. The Hebrew phrasing for “spread the corner of your garment over me” is an almost exact echo of what Boaz said earlier when he described the God of Israel covering Ruth with his wings. It’s like Ruth is saying: “Do you remember how you prayed for God to protect me? Well, how would you like to be the answer to your own prayer?”

And Boaz’s answer is “Yes! Absolutely Yes!”. **Verses 10 and 11:**

**0**“The Lord bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. **11**And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.

In a time when everyone did what was right in his own eyes; in a town where impulses were acted on without thought our hesitation, Boaz is different. In Ruth he has found the woman of noble character that he has dreamed of, and he is going to treat her well. He’s going to do things the right way.

Here is an example of what I am calling **righteous love**. Boaz is not about to corrupt his character by taking advantage of Ruth. 1 Corinthians 13 says that love is patient. It says that love takes no delight in evil. Boaz clearly loves Ruth, and he is not about to do anything that compromises her noble character.

But that actually introduces one final problem. Because Boaz is so committed to making sure everything is done right and in the proper order, he has to let Ruth know that there is another, who has a stronger claim. **Verse 12:**

**12**Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I.

This obstacle sets the stage for the third and final act of the story.

***Redeeming Love***Ruth chapter 4 takes place immediately the next morning, and **finds Boaz seated at the city gate**, where it was the custom to do business at that time. He waits for this relative to come by—he’s never named, rather he’s referred to by the Hebrew equivalent of “Cousin So-and-So”—and then he lays out the situation. **Verses 2-4:**

**2**Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. **3**Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. **4**I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.”

Now, we have to get a little understanding of this term, “Guardian-redeemer.” Different English translations have it different ways. Some say “next of kin.” Some say “kinsman.” Some say just “redeemer.” I know it, from the older NIV, as “kinsman-redeemer.”

The Hebrew word is “go-el” and it comes from Leviticus 25 and the system that was put into place to protect family property. If an Israelite got into financial trouble and had to sell his land—which is probably what happened to Elimelek when he headed for Moab—there was still a system in place where a family member could buy that land back so that it would not fall out of the family.

That’s what is happening here. When it says that Naomi has land to sell, it doesn’t mean that she could have been farming it this whole time, but that it can be redeemed by a relative of Elimelek looking to keep it in the family line. The first right of redemption goes to this Cousin So-and-So.

And, as it turns out, he is eager to take the land. The end of **verse 4, into verse 5:**

“I will redeem it,” he said.

**5**Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.”

Here’s is Boaz’s trump card. When it was just a matter of taking the land and providing for the widow Naomi to the end of her life, it was a good deal. At that point, the land would become Cousin So-and-So’s forever. But if he has to take Ruth as a wife—a Moabitess no less!—then the land doesn’t go to his current children, whom he prefers, but to any children he and Ruth might have together, continuing the line of Elimelek and Mahlon. Suddenly, Cousin So-and-So has second thoughts. **Verses 6-8**:

**6**At this, the guardian-redeemer said, “Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.”

**7**(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)

**8**So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it yourself.” And he removed his sandal.

Suddenly, the path is open for Boaz and Ruth to be together. The Elders at the town gate bear witness and bless the new couple, in **verse 12**, by praying that

**12**Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

And that’s what happens! In **verse 13** Boaz and Ruth are married and, almost immediately, despite a prior decade of marriage with no children, she becomes pregnant and bears a son.

**Verses 14 and 15** may be the key verses in the whole book:

**14**The women said to Naomi: “Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! **15**He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”

It’s interesting that the book comes back to Naomi. At the end of chapter 1, when Naomi and Ruth arrived back in Bethlehem, Naomi was telling people not to call her “Naomi”, which means “pleasant”; but “Mara”, which means bitter. Because she was bitter about all that had be-fallen her. She felt God had left her empty. She felt that God had abandoned her.

But now, she who was empty is full. She who was bitter is joyful. The Lord has not left her. He has, in fact, Redeemed her.

And that’s the final facet of love I want us to see in this story: **Redeeming Love**. Because what Boaz did for Ruth and Naomi—taking what is lost and returning it; taking what seemed hopeless and giving it a future--is what God is in the business of doing for His people. The Guardian-Redeemer which we see in this little domestic drama is just a hint of the Guardian-Redeemer God is for Israel, and for all of us.

Because the LORD calls himself a “Go’El.”  He is the Redeemer of Redeemers. He has not left us.

Remember again, this is during the time of the Judges. Even though the nation was on a downward spiral, God was still up to something good for His people.

Because there is one more surprise in this little book. **Verse 17**, we need to learn this little baby’s name:

**17**The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ohhhhh! Now we know why this little domestic drama matters to us! Now we know why this sweet little romance is in our Bibles! Obed, the son of Boaz and Ruth, is the grandfather of David, who is going to be the greatest King in Israel’s history and the one who God uses to end the downward spiral of Judges.

And, of course, for those of us who are Christians, it has even more meaning than that. **The final verses in Ruth** are a genealogy that tracks from Perez to King David. And when we get to the book of Matthew, the very first page of the New Testament, we encounter a genealogy that quotes this one almost name for name.

In Matthew, those names are a part of a longer line of names that leads directly to Mary, the wife of Joseph, the mother of Jesus Christ.

Ruth is in the bloodline of the Messiah! The Moabitess was the great-great-great- many great-grandmother of Jesus.

And He was the Guardian Redeemer of Guardian Redeemers! The facets of love we see so brilliantly illustrated in Ruth—the loyal love, the righteous love, the redeeming love—the *hesed* of the Old Testament—are all so wonderfully on display in Ruth’s greatest Son, the one we call our Savior!