

The book of Ruth is set in the time of the judges, before there were kings, but it was most likely written shortly after the Babylonian Exile had ended, much later. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us about the first few waves of returning exiles encountered the ruins of Jerusalem and tried to restore what they had lost. Of course, while they were gone, the land was not empty—it was populated with lower-class Jews and the people who came to be known as Samaritans, the descendants of intermarriages between Israelites and Assyrian transplants. Those people had carried on living in Judah while the more educated social leaders struggled to cope with the trauma of exile in Babylon. Now that the leaders (or their children) were coming back, there was bound to be friction.

Ezra, a priest and a scribe, showed up in the second wave of returnees, bearing a Torah scroll with all the rules and a big pot of money and a letter from the king of Persia saying that Ezra was the boss and he could spend the money any way he wanted and he was allowed to have you killed if you disobeyed him. Ezra's feeling was that they'd better get the Temple up and running pronto, and get everybody on the same page with regard to every aspect of the Law, because if they'd gone into Exile as a punishment for displeasing God, that was not going to happen again on his watch. And one of the local transgressions he noted had taken root during the exiles' absence was that the lower classes had been intermarrying with people who were *not* of the tribes of Israel. That had to stop. In fact, Ezra said, you men need to send away your foreign wives and their children, and start over.

The book of Ruth is pushback. It starts with a very human predicament, which is a famine in Judah. Naomi and her husband do the very human thing, which is to hit the road looking for a place where there's food. People do immigrate when things at home become

unbearable, and the author is letting us see that the tribes of Israel are not immune to such pressures. They go to Moab, where their sons find wives. Moab is a step down. They're not very couth; their people are descended from the incestuous union of Abraham's cousin Lot and Lot's daughters. Deuteronomy 23:3 specifically says that Moabites cannot be joined to the house of Israel. But they have food in Moab, and apparently they're good enough for the son to marry their girls. But then tragedy strikes, all the women are widowed, and Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, accompanied by Ruth, who insists against Naomi's objections that she no longer has anything to offer Ruth.

So what we heard today is a story that is designed to show how immigrants and foreigners can actually be good people to integrate into Judah. Ruth volunteers to support herself and her mother-in-law by gleaning, gathering grain left behind by reapers. This establishes her as both vulnerable and hard-working. When the landowner sees her and asks his crew about her, they call her "the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the land of Moab," lest anybody miss the crucial information about her foreignness. But they also emphasize that she has worked hard all day, never resting.

Boaz's response is to rise to the level of Ruth's goodness. If she can be a good daughter-in-law, he can be a good landowner. He speaks to Ruth, assures her that she'll be safe from his men, and invites her to drink from the water brought for his workers. That's over and above what he's expected to do for a gleaner. All he had to do was ignore her and let her glean. And it goes on that way. Ruth is extremely deferential, and Boaz is more than gracious. He invites her to eat with his workers, and he piles up some parched grain for her to take home, as if he felt some responsibility for her already, and was making her a member of his household. She

takes home an ephah of barley, which is about five gallons. So A) the land is producing a lot, perhaps a sign of God's favor; and B) Boaz has definitely provided generously for Ruth and Naomi.

The next step is to establish some more permanent form of sustenance, and here's where the laws of Levirate marriage come in. If a man died, his brother was supposed to marry the widow, and their first child would be credited to the dead husband. Ruth knows this, which is another sign of the model immigrant, knowing the customs of the host country, and Naomi knows that Boaz is some kind of shirttail cousin to her husband. He isn't in any way obligated by the laws of Levirate marriage, because he's not a close relative—but he voluntarily takes on that responsibility. There's a closer relative who might be more obligated to marry Ruth, and this guy is holding some land that was her father-in-law's, but Boaz negotiates to get the land for marrying Ruth himself. That is basically your Old Testament Happy ever after. Marriage and land. Boaz has matched Ruth in good deeds and good disposition.

When Boaz declares his intention to marry Ruth the Moabite, the people give their blessing, and ask that God will make Ruth like Rachel and Leah and like Tamar. Rachel and Leah were Jacob's wives, essentially the matriarchs of Israel and founders of the community, so they're expressing not only high hopes but also the fact that a Moabite *could be* just like the matriarchs of Israel. And Tamar was a foreigner and a daughter-in-law of Judah who, when his son died, refused to give her another one of his sons to marry. He basically violated the law of Levirate marriage, which guaranteed widows a way to go forward. Tamar then disguised herself, seduced Judah, and got pregnant with his son, and everybody agreed that she had done the right thing. So this part of the community's blessing is an acknowledgement that foreigners

are deserving of the same benefits that the law gives Israelites, and an acknowledgement that foreigners have been valuable members of the community.

And then of course the piece de resistance is that Ruth and Boaz's son becomes the grandfather of the best king of all time, David. So if the good Israelite, Boaz, had not risen to the occasion and received the good foreigner, Ruth, generously, Israel would have been deprived of the great King David. SO, Ezra, put that in your pipe and smoke it!

This sits well with us, of course. We appreciate the richness and diversity that immigrants and visitors bring to our community, and we are horrified at the brutality and racism that motivates our government to turn people away and even separate children from their families. I don't know how we're ever going to make reparations for just those border atrocities over the last few years. In many ways, the story of Ruth does not ask anything of us that we were not already asking of ourselves. But I think there's a larger point, or maybe it's an arc not a point, embedded in this whole narrative, that definitely should be held up.

An Irish priest, reflecting on years of peace efforts in Ireland, with disappointment and failure marking the path that he'd been part of, said, "It's better to fail in a cause that will finally succeed than to succeed in a cause that will finally fail." Ruth's struggle was to survive and to keep her beloved mother-in-law alive, and despite the xenophobia and misogyny of Israelite society, she persisted. She made the goodness of God her ally, so that the cultural obstacles arrayed against her, by comparison, were clearly not going to prevail. You could imagine that she felt like a failure for a long time, a lone female, a despised foreigner, a poor person. But she had said to Naomi back in Moab that Naomi's God would be her God, and I think it just made sense to her to persist in love of Naomi and trust in Naomi's God eventually to bring her

efforts to fruition.

All people are beloved children of God, and Jesus characterized the neighbor as the one who disregards divisions and hierarchies of human value. That means hungry immigrants, even the ones without Ruth's winsome personality. The cause that *will* finally succeed is the cause of bringing about full recognition of the human family, because it's God's intention. And so even though we are currently failing on a **tragic** level to enact policies that recognize the weightiness of each person's humanity, it's better to be fighting that good fight than to be succeeding at what is against God's will. It's better to be failing right now—but to keep working for it—than to succeed at the tragic deathward project of exclusion and division. I don't know if history has an arc, but God certainly has a direction, an energy, and it is always, always in the way of life and love and belonging.

Let us pray:

Healing God,
we pray for those who struggle toward your promise:
for refugees and immigrants with or without documentation,
for women and girls who have endured words of sexism,
for people of color who hear words of racism,
for people with disabilities who are told they are "less than,"
for elderly people who are told they are useless,
for young adults who are told they are entitled, selfish, and irresponsible.

The struggle to realize your kingdom is long and discouraging, but we know it is also the way of life. Keep us persistent and hopeful, God, and we trust your resurrection energy to see us all through. Amen.