

Homiletical Outline: Ruth 1:6-18

Title: "A Return and a Turn"

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Introduction

It feels like everyone has moved this past year. If you haven't moved homes, I'm sure you know someone who has. The pandemic has altered people's lives in many ways, and they're moving because of it. However, not everyone is moving for the same reasons. Many people are completely uprooting their lives and moving to brand new locations, many taking advantage of full-time remote work or places where they can do more outdoors. However, many are also going back to their hometowns, even childhood homes. I just read a stat from the Pew Research Center that said the number of U.S young adults living with their parents increased 6% in the first six months of 2020. All this goes to show: people are moving!

Our story today is about moving. It takes us to a dusty road, somewhere in between the mountains of modern-day Jordan and the hills of Bethlehem, Israel, where three women are in the midst of a move. Just like many today, some are moving to their hometowns, and some are going to a new location. They share something in common, however: they've lost practically everything, and they're all attempting to navigate how to each move forward in their lives. *Turn with me to Ruth 1, text today is vv. 6-18, but we'll be reading portions at a time., starting vv. 6-9*

Ruth 1:6-9

⁶When 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. ⁷With 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. ⁸Then 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. ⁹May 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”

As Pastor Jason spoke about last week, the first verse shows how God has already been gracious to Naomi’s people—the Israelites. What’s more, we see that Naomi, by preparing to return to the Promised Land, is countering the original disobedience of her husband Elimelech. As far as we know, nothing has happened in Moab that was driving Naomi out—she is actively choosing to return. Of course, her obedience isn’t perfect—she only returns once the living conditions in Israel have become more bearable—but she returns nonetheless.

I want to pause there. In my walk with Lord and attempt to grow in sanctification, I can often get hung up on my motivations behind doing something for the Lord. Sometimes I’m just doing it, not because I want to, but because I know it’s the right thing to do. Sometimes it’s the complete opposite—in a given moment, I choose the more righteous action but my motivations may have been a touch selfish. Regardless, too often I question my motivations and don’t act because I’m afraid they’re tainted. Well, I think we can look at Naomi’s actions here and squash that idea—after all, she may be acting simply out of convenience, now that her homeland has food again. But she’s ultimately still being obedient to God’s call to his people Israel to dwell in the Promised Land.

In the same way, just as God calls us towards growing in holiness, we can’t expect to have 100% perfect motives 100% of the time. We still need to move towards him. That is what Naomi does here in our text: despite having moved out of Israel with her family at the drop of a hat, and staying for 10 years, Naomi makes the crucial decision to return to Israel, the Land of Promise. She has no idea what’s in store for her there, but it’s clear that she doesn’t have anything to lose.

You see, in that day and age, being an elderly widow was just about the lowest social status one could have. Men were literally the only breadwinners and the ones able to own land. Being widowed and without prospects of remarrying was akin to getting evicted from your house and having everything from the oven down to the oven mitts sold to the bank. Naomi has nothing left in savings. She’s at her wits end. But what does she do? While she clearly isn’t happy with God, as

we'll see in a few short verses, she doesn't rave and rant at Him, disown him for taking everything from her. No, in fact she takes one step closer to Him by choosing to return to the land He'd given to her people. It wasn't a gigantic step—it wasn't taking a step up the hill to sacrifice one's only son on an altar, like Abraham, or stepping into a sea with only a staff and a horde of Egyptians racing up to kill the people you're leading, like Moses—but it was a step nonetheless. It was a move toward faithfulness and obedience.

And friends, this is the first point I want to make this morning: **returning to God begins with a step.**

As Pastor Jason mentioned last week, those of us—the ones who call ourselves Christians, who confess Christ as Lord and have submitted our lives to him—those of us who are not moving towards God are drifting away from him. Naomi had been drifting from God for 10 years as she dwelled outside of the land he'd chosen for her people. But, with the decision to step out in the direction of Israel, she set herself on both the literal and figurative path of fellowship and blessing from God, as we'll see when we continue in this book. In the same way, if we're feeling spiritually adrift or stuck, it only takes one step in the opposite direction to get us back on the path to holiness and sanctification.

Coming back to our narrative, we find Naomi and her two daughters-in-law standing on the road back to Israel. We can imagine Naomi, having made her intentions of returning clear, beginning her journey, while Ruth and Orpah begin trudging alongside her silently. Having been bonded by going through the tragic events of their recent past together, no one speaks for a while, not quite ready to acknowledge the obvious—that the two daughters-in-law weren't going to finish the journey with Naomi.

After all, the two women are relatively young, still have prospects for remarriage. Naomi offers them nothing with regard to social stability and wellbeing. Further, they're Moabites, outside of the tribes of Israel and outside of God's command to dwell in that land. You see, there is, as we might like to say, a "history" between Moabites and Israelites. As the book of Numbers records, while God's people were still wandering in the desert, waiting to get into Israel, the king of Moab hired the prophet Balaam to literally curse the people so that he might

defeat them in battle and drive them out from the land. So, there are not exactly warm feelings between these two people groups. And Ruth and Orpah surely had to be aware what it would mean if they went to the land of their historical enemies.

But not only that. As one commentator puts it, “Having come to Moab as an alien herself, Naomi undoubtedly recognized from the outset the problems her daughters-in-law would face if they would accompany her back to Bethlehem.” Given all this, it simply makes sense for Naomi to return to her homeland, and for Ruth and Orpah to remain in theirs. And so, at a certain point, Naomi firmly tells them to return to their parents’ homes and remarry native Moabite men, further communicating that the women no longer owe anything toward her, that they are freed from her care. This selfless act couldn’t have been easy for her, given her intimate connection with these women, forged through the collective grief of losing the people dearest to them. Even though Naomi highlights the women’s kindness, when we take this text at face value, the kindest act comes from Naomi herself, by her freeing Ruth and Orpah to pursue wellbeing elsewhere

And so, the stage is set. Stopped in their tracks, Ruth and Orpah are expected to do the understandable thing— tell Naomi she’s right, hug a tearful goodbye, and then their separate ways. But that’s not what we read. *Turn to 1:10*

Ruth 1:10

[⁹Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud] ¹⁰ and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

Well, that’s a surprise. Going against all logic and reason, the women passionately plea to return with Naomi to Bethlehem, forging new lives amidst a new people. The text doesn’t tell us why Ruth and Orpah made this claim—perhaps they felt obliged to honor their mother-in-law out of respect to their late husbands, perhaps they just loved Naomi that much, or perhaps their response functioned as a coping mechanism since they knew that Naomi was right and that they would have to leave. The text doesn’t say, so we are only left to guess.

Naomi, however, is having none of it. This just isn't done. Despite their noble intentions of staying with her, she won't stand to see her daughters throw away their lives, as she views it. So she digs in: (*reading from vv. 11-14*)

Ruth 1:11-14a

“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”

Remember that, at this time, husbands and sons represented modern paychecks, life insurance, and social security all rolled into one. By choosing to go with Naomi, Ruth and Orpah would be delaying consistent paychecks for quite some time, perhaps for all time. Wanting them to avoid this, Naomi has crafted her extended, lock-tight answer to refute any sort of sentimentality or emotional reasons on their part.

But after this rational series of rhetorical questions, in Naomi’s last statement we see the curtain pulled back a bit on what’s going on in her heart. “It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!” Naomi, having lost every sort of security and hope in the future, is starting to resent the Lord. Feeling abandoned by both people and her God, in her woundedness she is even pushing away the two people still closest to her. Why would anyone want to stick with her? As she sees it, she’s used goods, and her God has left her in the dust.

Church, there might be some of you out there today who feel similar to Naomi: despite bumps in the road here and there, and seasons of feeling both close

and far from him, you've been striving to faithfully obey God. However, you feel like your efforts aren't being rewarded. Maybe you feel like God is a million miles away, and has simply left you to your own devices. As far as you see it, God isn't coming around anytime soon, so all that's left for you is to take things into your own hands and hope God shows up at some point. If this is you, I pray and ask that you remember the words from last week: just as God never left Naomi, even when she was far from him, so God has not left you. His timing is perfect, and while Naomi can't see it at the moment, while we can't see him right now, it doesn't mean he isn't there.

Returning to our story, as it turns out, Naomi's passionate plea works for one of the women—Orpah, finally bowing to the common sense of the day, dries her tears, kisses her mother-in-law goodbye and chooses the safe option, the sensible option, the one nobody would fault her for. She leaves for home.

It turns out, we don't hear of Orpah again. Importantly, she is never condemned for her choice—in fact, the text has attempted to show that her decision was, by human estimation, the reasonable one. Not having to face the risk of going to a foreign country with a widow with zero prospects. she simply descends into comfortable obscurity. More importantly, though, because of her decision, she does not get to play a role in God's plan for salvation history. With Orpah cleared from the stage, our attention and focus now turn to Ruth's response. As the text records in the second half of v. 14,

Ruth 1:14b

[Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye] “but Ruth clung to her.”

It's important to know that this “clinging” is not desperate or needy, as we might assume. Rather, the word used here for “cling” signifies a type of entrenched commitment, often in the context of a person leaving one life and choosing another. Ruth is not clinging in fear, she's holding fast in hope, clearly showing Naomi she doesn't plan on going anywhere.

But Naomi isn't quite done yet. As the text continues in Ruth 1:15:

Ruth 1:15

¹⁵“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

In one last attempt at persuasion, Naomi tries a new tactic—if both common sense and the prospect of security won’t convince Ruth to follow suit, perhaps peer pressure will work.

As we see, not only does it not work, but what is said next is one of the most moving statements in all of Scripture, a glowing example of radical commitment and love:

Ruth 1:16-18

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.”

There’s a scene in the first movie in *The Lord of the Rings* series, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, that is one of my favorites. It is during the “breaking of the fellowship,” when the motley crew making their way to Mordor become split up by a gang of warrior-orcs, and Frodo makes the decision to continue on to Mordor alone. Except, right when he’s pushing out his boat to cross the river that would put him on the path to Mordor, his best friend Samwise Gamgee notices what he’s doing. Seeing him, Frodo yells out “Go back Sam! I’m going to Mordor alone.” But then Sam: “Of course you are, and I’m coming with you!” It’s one of my favorite scenes, not just because I love Sam, but because it’s a moment of pure devotion. Sam would rather face the fire and ash of Mordor than return home to the green hills of the Shire, if it means keeping his promise to never leave Master Frodo.

It's clear from our text today that, like Sam Gamgee, Ruth makes the completely illogical, radical choice—going to the land of her enemies rather than returning to her familiar home, if it means staying with Naomi. Her choice, like Sam's, is based on pure devotion. That's her reason why. Now, of course, it's also abundantly clear that God has orchestrated everything up to this point in the story. That's our baseline. So, in a sense, Ruth states these beautiful words, makes her decision, because God planned it, because God called her to himself. However, I don't think we can completely ignore the human element, either. You see, Ruth rejected the assurance of being known, being accepted, having social safety and support. She rejected the familiar, the safe, the comfortable. Ruth rejected all of that because she didn't want to lose her relationship with Naomi.

Not only does she not want to leave her mother-in-law, though: Ruth is planning on completely assimilating to Hebrew life. Using a formal vow that makes it binding for the rest of time, Ruth is choosing to become part of Naomi's people, live wherever Naomi lives, and die where Naomi dies. It was a full commitment to sticking with Naomi and Naomi's way of life.

However, most important for us to realize today is that, by committing to Naomi's way of life, Ruth has committed to Naomi's God. She is completely turning her life around, rejecting the pagan religion she grew up with and converting, Old-Testament-style, by committing herself to the covenant of the one true God of Israel—as we now know, a covenant that's fulfilled in Christ. She's choosing God.

As we've said above, Naomi's choice was a both a literal and figurative return. As someone who already knew God, Naomi's choice of obedience was a “return” to the Lord: Returning to God begins with a step. Ruth didn't know God, but she knew Naomi. And so, because of her devotion to Naomi, because of her relationship with Naomi, she chose to “turn” towards God.

This leads me to my next main point: **Turning to God begins with relationship.**

Just as Ruth made her conversion based on her relationship with Naomi, we see this in our own lives as well. While he certainly can and does use isolated, “out of body” experiences to bring people to him, I think that the majority of the time

God uses relationships in nonbelievers' lives to bring them to him. In fact, this was the main point of our "Loving People to Christ" series back in the fall, that evangelism is essentially forging relationships with unbelievers in our lives and letting our lives and examples do a part of the work in bringing them to the Lord.

I think oftentimes we can get hung up on feeling inadequate in our spiritual lives, too broken or not "godly" enough to be ministers of the Gospel. But nothing could be farther from the truth. If God could use Naomi, who was trying to actively make sure that the women didn't follow her way of life—if God could use Naomi whether she liked it or not—to bring a Moabite woman to himself, then he can certainly use people who are actually trying! He can use you. So, church, how are you utilizing your relationships to help people turn to God, to love people to Christ?

Now, before I go farther, I don't want to assume that all of us here in-person or watching online have made that decision to follow Christ or are in positions to reach others with the Gospel. To you I want to say that **it's important to note the world would tell you that Ruth is making a stupid decision by choosing to completely uproot her life and reject social, financial, emotional, spiritual comfort, and choose obedience to the only true God. The world would tell you that Orpah was the sane one, who chose the life she knew and the security she wanted, free from risk or new allegiance to a God she didn't know.**

But I'm here to tell you that, by choosing a life of obedience to God, Ruth is making the truest, realest, sanest, only possible decision, one that will see her enter into a story that will exceed her wildest dreams. Choosing God, deciding to be within His will, is always the safest option, despite what the world is telling you, and no matter how radical it seems.

So, if you are a Naomi, feeling burnt or left out in the cold by God, I'd encourage you to take that first step back towards him. It's always the right decision. Or maybe you are on great terms with the Lord, then I'd urge you to either begin or keep building those relationships with unbelievers, despite your insecurities, since that is the route God overwhelmingly uses to bring others close to him. Finally, maybe you are a Ruth, who is still wondering what this whole God thing is about but has liked what you've seen in the lives of those who follow Christ, or maybe

not liked what you've seen but are still interested in the source itself. I want to confirm those leanings and ask that you reach out to us or others in your life who may be able to have those faith conversations with you.

So, return to God. It only takes a step. Or turn to God, and enter into the best relationship you'll ever have. Amen

Pray

Benediction

Today we've talked about returns and turns, but I want to leave you with the best return of all. As stated in Hebrews 9:28

“so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

May you go forth keeping the hope of Christ's return in your heart and letting it spur you on to do his work in the world