

Ruth 1:1-19
Rev. Meredith Loftis
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In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and 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. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. 6 Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your 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 security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. 10 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? Do I still have 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. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, 13 would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 So 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 press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*

17

*Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"*

18 *When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. 19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.*

We are a people that tell a story. Our stories reveal who we are; our words reveal how we think and move; but beyond the words and content of a story, something deeper is revealed when

the Spirit flows through. We learn to listen beyond the words spoken to us, we learn to listen with our hearts, and the Holy One reveals mystery, and life, and grace.

We are tasked with listening deeply as Ruth the Moabite did to allow our stories to give voice to the life we seek.

In 1985, a group of four men united to tell stories about the mighty journeys of America; stories that told of the American spirit that could never be silenced; stories that you couldn't help but stop and listen to.

The four greatest Outlaw Country singers, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, and Willie Nelson, united to sing stories about the spirit of life that followed them, even after death—a spirit that continues through us today. This country super group, called The Highwaymen, sang powerful testimonies to the men that embodied the generations that were and that were to come; those characters that came to embody the legends of adventurous, daring, and hardworking men.

Each verse of their self-titled first single, *The Highwaymen*, from which they got their name, lifts up a man who boldly lived into his spirit and calling, yet lost his life in a perilous way. Four men are lifted up:

The Highwayman: The Highwayman, or outlaw, who roamed the great dusty roads of the wild West on his horse, weapons at his side, stealing from women, and killing soldiers along the coach roads, loses his life when he is finally apprehended and hung on the gallows. The Sailor: Sailing a schooner through the Horn of Mexico, the sailor loses his life in treacherous waters.

The Dam Builder: Building a dam on the mighty Colorado river, the dam builder slips and falls into the wet concrete of the dam structure and is buried alive in the great tomb. The Starship Captain in the future: this fantastical verse points to the man that will eventually tour the great beyond of space, into the Universe divide in his star-ship, until his spirit rests, and he may become a Highwayman perhaps again.

Each verse points to something a little different, whether it is seeking adventure, embodying a hard-working ethic, or exploring the universe around us. But poignantly each verse ends with, “But I am still alive.” It is a powerful reminder that while death meets them too soon, they are still around, whether reincarnated or their spirits embodied by other men who came after them. Death cannot erase them. They are heard and remembered. They are lifted up. Nobody forgets them or their names. Their stories remain. We listen deeply, beyond their words to the truths that they reveal to us.

In 2019, 34 years after The Highwaymen formed, a group of four women united to lift up the stories of the silent generations, those unnamed, forgotten women whose voices were never heard, never given weight, never given credence. About a month and a half ago, The Highwomen, composed of country singers Brandi Carlisle, Natalie Hemby, Maren Morris, and Amanda Shires, dropped their first album. Named in tribute to their male counterparts, The Highwomen have rewritten the Highwaymen's title song from a female perspective. Quite frankly, it is unforgettable.

I was a Highwoman

And a mother from my youth

For my children I did what I had to do

My family left Honduras when they killed the Sandinistas

We followed a coyote through the dust of Mexico

Every one of them except for me survived

And I am still alive

In their version, the Highwomen lift up the lives of a Highwoman, a woman who must escape Honduras with her children and flee north with the help of a Coyote through the dust of Mexico; a Healer, who is condemned as a witch at the Salem witch trials; a Freedom Rider, who is a black woman seeking justice during the Civil Rights era; and finally a preacher. She sings:

*I was a preacher
My heart broke for all the world
But teaching was unrighteous for a girl
In the summer, I was baptized in the mighty Colorado
In the winter, I heard the hounds and I knew I had been found
And in my Savior's name, I laid my weapons down
But I am still around*

*We are The Highwomen
Singing stories still untold
We carry the sons you can only hold
We are the daughters of the silent generations
You send our hearts to die alone in foreign nations
And they return to us as tiny drops of rain
But we will still remain*

*And we'll come back again
And again, and again, and again, and again*

Beyond the words, beyond the tune, beyond the stories, holds the audacity of women to seek freedom, to seek life, to seek hope, again and again, even when death is imminent, even when death catches them, even when they are forgotten. Beyond their words lives the deepest desire to be known, to be heard, and to keep on living fiercely. We read her words, but the Spirit melds them into our hearts. Can you hear the words of those women who came before us? Of Eve, Miriam, Hannah, Jephthah's daughter, of Mary Magdalene, the bleeding woman, the Syrophenician woman, of Priscilla and Lydia?

This is the spirit of Ruth. She is the woman who chased life and was given a life to carry in her womb, Obed, from whose lineage the Messiah would descend. She is the daughter of silenced generations that were redeemed when God chose to lift her up, to have her voice raised, and who redeemed Israel itself when she followed Naomi and chose to adopt the Israelite nation as her own. Without her, King David would not have been born.

This is the forgotten woman that HAS been named and forever sealed into our holy scriptures. And we listen to her, and we learn how to listen as deeply as she did. This is the miracle that God delivers to a Moabite woman, considered an enemy of the nation of Israel, that had lost everything, and while death stared her in the face, she instead felt the Spirit of the Holy One overwhelm her and give her the audacity to act and hope. And we witness this first when she clings to Naomi instead of separating herself.

This is the Spirit that embodies Ruth and gives her courage and bravery; the spirit that moves Naomi, her mother-in-law, to not abandon herself in her grief and loss after her husband

and sons die, but to embrace the Spirit of coming back again and again...as the Highwomen did and continue to do.

Though death had confronted them time and again, first in Naomi's husband, and then in the death of both her sons, Ruth would not allow death to silence Naomi.

Ruth is a Highwoman, born to tell her story of how God lifted her and Naomi up and redeemed her again. Ruth is the Highwoman who lives fully and persists in the spirit of those women and men that struggled before her to find life when only death was present.

The fact that the book of Ruth is included in our bible is utterly scandalous. It is tantamount to putting a book by a terrorist or our greatest enemy in our holy scripture. Not only is she not of the Israelite lineage, she is revealed to be the great grandmother of King David, who is the ancestor of Jesus Christ. "A nation so concerned about ethnic and religious purity had to grapple with the fact that not only David but also Jesus, the Messiah, had a Moabite woman as an ancestor."¹ According to Genesis 19, the Moabites are the descendents of Lot through incest with his eldest daughter, who sought to continue his bloodline after she and her sister's fiancés and their mother were killed in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's daughter gives birth to her son, Moab, for whom the Moabites are named. In their wilderness wanderings after their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites are told again and again to avoid mingling with foreigners; to marry a foreigner was to break the law and taint the line of Israel. Deuteronomy 23 states: *No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.*

And yet right between the book of Judges and the first book of Samuel when the monarchy of Israel starts, sits the book of Ruth. Only four chapters long, and named for a woman, this little book speaks volumes to our God who chooses not just Israelites, but the disregarded, the enemy, and the unclean to express the divine grace of Yahweh.

This Moabite woman, who has no claim, reputation, or worth, refuses to listen to the stark instructions of her Israelite mother-in-law. She sees Naomi; and she sees beyond her words of lament. Ruth is a woman that has known pain and desperation and her own lamentation. And she is a woman that is not willing to allow death and destitution to overcome her. Instead, she claims Naomi's identity, her people, and her God. She is a foreigner and disowned by God and the Israelites, who claims God and the nation of Israel as her own.

So we cannot skip over Naomi's lament in Ruth 1, for it is there that we see and experience Ruth's resilience and her ability to truly listen to Naomi despite her mother-in-law's insistence that she and Orpah, her sister-in-law, return to their own families. They can begin again, but she is done.

Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?...No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.

Yet Ruth would not heed Naomi's demands; she would not return to her own people, but clung to Naomi. She would not separate herself from this other woman. Her soul had mingled with Naomi's. She would not listen to the narratives of death; she listened beyond death to see life again for both Naomi and herself.

Ruth shows us that at times we must listen beyond the words that are uttered, beyond the voice and into the deeper levels of others' being. We cannot afford to simply wade in the shallows of our humanity, but must be willing to listen deeper to the pain or sorrow or joy or

¹ Lynn Japinga. *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament*, page 108.

thanksgiving or desire to live. It is our desire to express the depths of what it means to be human, to feel like dust, ash, and death, as well as light, hope, and thanksgiving.

And this means being willing to listen not only to others like us, but to foreigners and refugees like Ruth; to those we fear; to those we demonize; to those we've silenced. The Ruths of this world will no longer be silent generations. This also means being willing to have strength to voice our own stories of redemption.

"The greatest good news of this story, though, is the redemption of Naomi. Like her, we are in desperate need of redemption and grace and healing and compassion. Sometimes we are so fiercely stubborn and self-sufficient, even in the midst of grief, that we resist these gifts. We think we can make it on our own, but God provides the persistent presence of Ruth so that we can learn to receive." Often we use words to mask our truths; we use words to disguise and shield ourselves. But Ruth points us to the true Word of grace and redemption.

How do we listen with our hearts? How do we listen beyond the words of our fellow human beings and respond as Ruth did? How do we offer redemption to others and allow our souls to mingle with one another? And how do we listen to those especially who have been silenced and offer them a way to live authentically?

Our invitation during this season of the "Big Listen" has been to delve deeper and hear beyond the stories and words that have been offered to us about the life of our congregation. To seek the Spirit in each other. To see the life abundant and the life of dry bones that we all experience. Are we listening deeply? Do we hear God speaking?

We are Highwomen
We are Highwaymen
We seek life amidst the valley of death
Our stories started at the sound of Yahweh's breath
Our stories continue beyond bodies turned to ash
Yet we listen with hearts ready to sing
For we will always remain
And God's grace will follow us again and again
And again and again and again.