

Small Books Big Truths: Ruth

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Ruth 1:1-17

When I was a kid, from the time I started school, pretty much until I entered High School, I was very much disadvantaged in the height department. For starters, have a summer birthday, which meant I was always not the youngest kid in my class, but one of the younger ones. And I was also slow to grow. So any time the teacher would line us up by height, I was almost always the smallest one. Plus, I had genetics working against me. I have a tall mom, but my dad is tiny – he stands right at 5” tall. And maybe weighs 100 pounds or so, after a big meal.

And I remember lamenting to my dad, quite a bit, about how hard and how frustrating it was to be so little. My legs were never long enough to win races on the school playground and I always felt like I just had so much “catching up” to do with my classmates.

My dad never had much sympathy for me, though. Because the truth is, as tiny as he was, he always managed to find ways to use his size to his advantage.

My dad is a caver. He worked for the Carlsbad Caverns National Park for 30+ years. And he probably knows more about the cave than most other people alive. I think he probably started seriously thinking about retirement about the time young, starry-eyed rangers started coming up to him and telling him that he was “a legend.” I mean...it’s true...he was...but I think that always made him a little bit uncomfortable.

So, one of my dad’s big claims to fame is a room in the Caverns called “The Bemis Chamber,” named after my dad, Tom Bemis. And it got that name because my dad, who was probably only about 20, 25 years old at the time, was the only one at the park small enough to fit through the hole to explore it. He tells great stories about that adventure – how he had to stretch one arm up overhead to make himself smaller in the shoulders to be able to inch through the passageway, taking off his belt to make it easier to squeeze through. And what he found inside was a beautiful room – a room that to this date, has only ever been seen by my dad. Because my dad is both tiny and adventurous.

Sometimes, small is a gift.

Today we are starting a new sermon series titled “Small Books, Big Truths” where we exploring some of the smallest, shortest books of the Bible. The books that we tend to have to search for when we are trying to turn open to them, not because we don’t know they are there, but because in some cases they may be just a couple of pages long and they get lost between the bigger books.

Now, when we say small books, we do not mean insignificant ones. In fact, in some cases the stories that we are going to be reading are going to be really familiar to a lot of us, because they are powerful, and some of them are beloved. Stories like Ruth, and Jonah. And we will also get to some stories that may not be quite as well-known, like Obadiah, and Jude. And then also, some really interesting stories that are important for us, but are fascinating because even though they are in the Bible, they barely – if ever – even mention God. Stories like Esther. And Philemon.

So today, we are going to start with a crowd favorite – a little short, sweet story nestled deep within the big-ness of the Old Testament.

So, when the Old Testament begins, from the very beginning we see huge, grand, sweeping narratives. We see God's power and might from the very first day of creation when God thought, "today I'm going to create light." And a one-day project turned into a weeklong project, and when all was said and done the heavens and the earth and everything and everyone in them existed when just days before there had been nothing but a formless void.

And then we get other big stories. Adam and Eve. The Fall. The Tower of Babel. The Patriarchs – Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The story of the creation of God's people – big highs and big lows. Amazing faith moments and devastating sin moments. Then we get Moses, a burning bush, plagues, the Red Sea, MASSIVE miracles. The wilderness, the 10 Commandments, the Promised Land. Walls tumbling down. Judges. Prophets. Life with God in charge. Then we move into the next big stage of Israel's story when the people start to get discontent and begin clamoring for a king. Someone other than God to lead them. And that starts a whole other string of big stories. David and Solomon and the Exile.

So we move from Genesis and Exodus, with big, exciting stories about the foundations of our faith, into Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, massive books spelling out the Law, and the guidelines for life in community. Then Joshua and Judges, as people are starting to figure out what it means to live as God's chosen people. 1 and 2 Samuel. 1 and 2 Kings. 1 and 2 Chronicles, Israel establishing itself as a nation on the world stage. Big stuff.

But nestled amongst these big books, these massive stories about nations and civilizations and prophets and kings is one tiny little book. Sitting there between Judges and 1 Samuel, almost disappearing, it's so short. Just 4 chapters long. 2 pages, in my Bible. And it feels almost out-of-place there. Because it's not a big story about big things happening. It doesn't really do much to advance the Old Testament story that much at all. It's about one little family, and their story. Just a passing footnote in history. A story about nobodies, really. Widows. Outsiders. Forgotten and overlooked people. People

who might get passed over anywhere else because they are not big enough, or important enough. And yet, it is such a beautiful, powerful story.

When we read the book of Ruth in its context – reading straight through, from Judges, to Ruth, to 1 Samuel, Ruth feels almost like taking a deep breath. Or like we're hitting the pause button or taking a time-out to get a big drink of water. The reader has just finished reading the book of Judges, where we start to get the feeling that the people are just messed up. Again and again and again, the people sin, and again and again and again, God raises up foreign enemies to oppress them until they turn away from their sinfulness, and again and again and again, the people cry out to God for help, and again and again and again God raises up a judge to save them. This cycle repeats itself over, and over, and over, the people growing more and more forgetful every time, never thinking "hey, we have been here before and if we continue on this path it may not turn out well for us."

And by the end of the book of Judges we are all set to jump into the stories of Samuel and King Saul, and King David – with even more rulers and more rebellion and more sinfulness.

But first, when we have finished reading Judges and we are all but convinced that the human race is doomed to one day implode, when it seems like God's people are bound and determined to do anything and everything they possibly can to turn away from God except when it is convenient for them, we have this story here as a sort-of "and yet." A book that shows us that maybe all hope isn't lost. On the world stage, things are going haywire, but when it really comes down to it, there are individuals and people living life and navigating their way through their own day-to-day struggles, who simply exude God's love, even in the face of deep personal tragedy. Ruth stands as a sort-of answer to the bad news of Judges. As if to say, "bigger and more powerful is not necessarily better. Might and sheer force do not always translate to greater faithfulness. Take a look at this story about a few tiny nobodies. When the world is going to battle and clamoring for kings, the kingdom of God is most present and most at-work in stories like we have here.

In the first few verses of the book of Ruth, we are drawn into the struggle of the story. There is a man named Elimelech, who is married to Naomi. Elimelech and Naomi are young parents of two young boys named Mahlon and Chilion. One day, a famine strikes their home in Bethlehem and they have to leave Israel in search of food, finally landing in the foreign land of Moab. This itself is a major life upset for them. They left their family, they left their friends, in an age without modern technology – so for all they knew when they left home, they were saying goodbye forever. Plus, Moab was different from Israel. The people were different. The traditions and customs were different. They had to start all over again and learn a whole different way of being.

And if that wasn't enough, soon after they moved, Dad died, leaving Mom, Naomi, alone to raise her two boys by herself. She didn't have a job, and there weren't very many job opportunities for young widows with children. The best she could hope for would be for another man to come along and marry her, but that wasn't working out so well either. So she struggled. A lot.

Time went on. Mahlon and Chilion grew up, and got married to two beautiful young Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. But then, as luck would have it, Mahlon and Chilion also died, leaving behind their lonely and destitute mother and their two young wives.

For awhile these three grieving women cling to each other. They have grown very close and they rely deeply on one another for strength and support. But one day, Naomi decides that it is time for her to go home. With her husband and both of her sons gone, she needs to go back to a place where she has family and friends. She needs to be around her own people so that she can really, truly, grieve in her own way and have support and care. She needs to not feel so alone.

And so she says to her two daughters-in-law, "it's time for you to go back to your people too. You have been amazing to me during this time. But now – you need to get on with your lives. You are young. If you go back to your mother's house, you will have no trouble meeting somebody and marrying again and having the absolute best life possible.

Orpah heeds Naomi's words and goes back home again, to get a fresh start on life. But Ruth – Ruth isn't having any of that. She is bound and determined that she is under no circumstances going to be leaving Naomi's side. It didn't matter to her if that meant she'd never find love, or never rise out of poverty, or never have children or a family of her own. "We're in this together, for life," Ruth tells Naomi. "Where you go, I'll go. Where you lodge, I'll lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God."

Basically, "I haven't the foggiest clue what life is going to look like for me if I follow you, but I don't care. I'm not going to live my life based on "what-ifs. I'm not going to spend my life chasing after whatever sounds bigger and better and shinier. As long as we are together, then I can weather whatever life throws my way."

And that was that. Ruth journeyed with Naomi back to the land of Israel, and made her home there. Eventually Naomi decides that it is time to sell off her late husband's estate, and a distant cousin, a well-off man named Boaz buys the land, and marries Ruth. The two of them have a son, named Obed, who would grow up to be the grandfather of King David.

And then, just like that, the big stories of history pick up again. Israel cries out for a king and chooses Saul, the big, strong athletic-looking guy with the perfectly-chiseled face, while God chooses David, the little shepherd, the youngest and the smallest in his

family, the little guy whose ancestors were nobodies, walking through famine and poverty and death – but became somebody because when the world was in a mess of sin and brokenness, the little nobodies like Ruth decided to carve out a different story. A story of love. And commitment. And dedication. Ruth chose to put “bigness” and success on hold for the sake of somebody she loved. Without even knowing God, she decided to trust that God would provide her with enough for today, and tomorrow she would deal with tomorrow, whatever tomorrow might bring. But for right now, she would tend to what was most important. And making sure Naomi had a companion – that was most important.

And these little things, these little moments, these smallest of small somethings in a family of poor, inconsequential nobodies, these are the moments and the lives upon which God builds his kingdom.

Conversations between friends. Random acts of kindness. Acts of care between two grieving widows. A profound commitment to someone else. A resolve to trust where God is leading, even when life has handed you nothing but pain. These little, daily, moment-by-moment actions that may or may not ever be seen by another human being. They may never be fully-appreciated. They may be skipped right over on the way to bigger, more powerful stories. But these moments, these little somethings are the fabric of the tapestry that God is creating. And because of that, the little actions, the little stories, the little people, the little conversations, the little, day-to-day moments of our lives of faith are the very things that make up the vast and enormous story of God’s grace.