

The book of Ruth takes place during the time of the judges, meaning that there is no king in Israel and everyone is doing what they deem right in their own eyes, which unsurprisingly, results in a lot of evil. During this time a family flees Bethlehem in search of food. The resources in Bethlehem are dwindling and so it is time for them to move on.

Sadly, they find only more misfortune. Naomi loses both her husband and her sons, leaving her alone and without support in a foreign land. In Ancient Israel, a widow couldn't just get a job or apply for social security. She would be left penniless and dependent on the support of the generous and kind.

Full of sorrows and grief, Naomi looks around and knows she must once again move. She gathers herself and prepares to return to Israel where the famine is over and she has the very best chance of surviving and maybe someday thriving again.

Naomi knows the path ahead will be difficult and uncertain, so she calls her daughter in laws to her and encourages them to simply return to their parents home where they might remarry and be blessed with children. To stay with Naomi would be to risk their futures. There is no guarantee that they would be safe on the journey, or find Israelite husbands. Naomi, at great personal risk to herself, encourages them to return to their parents homes, knowing that will leave her to face the challenges ahead alone.

There are two paths before Ruth and Orpah. One leads to relative security in their family homes, with a remarriage and the near certainty of children, and thus financial stability. The other leads to challenges great and unknown.

I cannot imagine what it was like to be those women at that moment. I know that my instinct would be to stay put, to return to my family. In fact, in times of crisis I have done just that. When I found myself a single mother all those years ago, I loaded up the pieces of my life in my car and returned to my native Cincinnati. I craved the familiar and the support of my family over the unknown. That and I really hated living in Atlanta.

Orpah decides to return to her family. Scripture gives no indication that this was wrong. There is no booing and hissing. No dramatic curses. Orpah leaves on what appear to be relatively good terms. She does what perhaps most people would have done in her place.

But Orpah is never mentioned again in scripture. No one knows what happened to her. Jewish tradition has painted some details in that are almost entirely negative, but I see no scriptural evidence that her choice was sinful and the Rabbis tend to like to make a point, especially at the expense of women in Scripture. Orpah fades into history. Perhaps she had a lovely life. I hope so, but we don't know. What we do know, is that she didn't change history.

Ruth decides to take the harder path and insists upon staying with Naomi. And the days ahead are not easy. They travel about fifty miles west to Bethlehem, literally across the dead sea. They locate a male relative for Ruth to marry, but there's a whole lot of uncertainty in the meantime. There are days of hunger, of not knowing where the next meal will come from and if it will be enough to get through another day, another week. There are a million places the story could go wrong. And yet, by the grace of God, Naomi and Ruth are not just spared, they are woven into the greatest story ever told, and Ruth marries Boaz, and has a boy named Obed, which means worshipper or servant. Obed would go on to have a son named Jesse, who would have a son named David, the great King David. Ruth, by her choice, becomes the grandmother of King David and a maternal ancestor of the very savior himself, Jesus Christ.

All this because she took a risk, took a chance, and stuck things out. She was faced with two decisions, neither appears to be sinful, though we might argue one more virtuous than the other, but otherwise there wasn't a moral mandate to stay with her mother in law. It seems the Spirit may have been acting on Ruth's heart, for she does declare that Naomi's God would be her God. And through this great risk, Ruth is exalted and changes the course of human history.

In seminary, a lot of us referred to our call to ministry as strange and wondrous. Of the people I went to school with, many have been called to strange places, from Alaska to Scotland, to work with people they never imagined they'd be serving. I've had colleagues who worked with sex workers on the literal streets, with indigenous peoples, with refugees, and everyone else you can think of. I laugh when people say it must be boring to be a pastor. It's truly the opposite. I've met people I never would've, gone places I never would've, had so many adventures. And that can be true for all Christians.

Following God is an adventure. It truly always had been. Imagine going about your day and suddenly God gives you this crazy huge building project for an arc. Imagine you're tending your herds and suddenly God calls you away to the promised land. Imagine God calls you from exile to free and entire race of people from slavery to form their own nation. Imagine you're a widow, being called to a new land to be the grandmother to the great king David who would usher in a golden age in the history of Israel.

You don't have to be someone special to change history. You don't have to be special to be called by God to do incredible things. Every single one of us has a role to play in God's plan, all we have to do is follow.

Consider where God might be calling you to be. Maybe it's something scary and or fraught with risk. Maybe it requires a step of faith. Maybe you just really don't want to because you're worried or scared or you're looking around for someone better. I would encourage you to take those steps, to follow the call, to take the road less traveled, because God may want to be using you in an incredible way. Somethings the smallest decision can change everything.

Consider the choice placed before two young men at the turn of the century. Two Russian Jewish boys were invited to church in a methodist church in New York. One of them said yes but the other refused. The one who accepted was Abraham Silverstein, who became a missionary to the Jews. His work, the missions he started, continued well after his death. The other young man returned to Russia and dedicated his life not to God, but to communism. He would lead the Red army and go on to commit war crimes before falling from grace and being assassinated.

What would've happened if Trotsky had gone in with Silverstein? What would have happened if Orpah had stayed with Naomi and Ruth. We will never know. All we can do is listen for God's call and follow, even if the road seems dark and uncertain.

As Frost wrote: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

May we always have the courage to follow the roads that God calls us to.

Rev. Kate Mauch

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