

**Highland Presbyterian Church**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent – December 8, 2024**  
**A sermon by Megan McCarty**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Ruth 1

Today's scripture is the entire first chapter of Ruth. But we're going to break it up into smaller pieces because I know if we don't, you'll all stop listening. So, hear now, the first five verses of Ruth, listening for the word of God:

"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. 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. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These sons 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, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband."

Ruth is an incredible Biblical figure. One that represents devotion, support, bravery, compassion, integrity, hope. She is one of only four women named in the lineage of Jesus, which, if you didn't know, the colored outlines of Mary in this banner right here represents those four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. But, it's sometimes easy to forget that Ruth's story starts with complete and total devastation. A famine that kills her father-in-law, her husband, and her brother-in-law. A famine that causes her and her mother-in-law Naomi to lose everything. With no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren, Naomi becomes a widow with very few means of support built into the culture surrounding them. Many of us know the sorrow of losing the people we love. This time of year can make that exceptionally poignant for us.

Sorrow can make us shrink into ourselves, believing that solitude is safer than the vulnerability of connection. When the weight of loneliness makes you feel forgotten and you wonder if your place in this world matters, it's easy to get sucked into a cascade of lies. You start thinking you're the only one carrying this weight of loneliness, the only one on the outside looking in. And it can snowball into other struggles like inadequacy, insecurity, and insignificance.

Recent studies from last year show that 1 in 2 Americans struggles with social disconnection. This led Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, to call loneliness an "epidemic." Loneliness not only hurts us on an individual level, but negatively impacts society as a whole. Feelings of isolation hurt our mental and physical health. This same research has shown that loneliness can take the same toll on our bodies as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

Murthy says, “If we fail to cultivate compassionate community, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country.” Cultivating compassionate community is the only antidote to loneliness. And in order to do this genuinely, we have to be vulnerable. We have to accept help. We have to offer help.

As nights grow longer and the world seems to hush under the weight of winter, we often find ourselves cloistered and secluded as we wait for the world to thaw. But the season of Advent whispers an ancient truth: We were never meant to journey these paths alone. In a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps culture, choosing communal life is radical—and deeply faithful.

Let’s read the next eight verses of Ruth:  
“Naomi 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. 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. 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. 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. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 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? 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, 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.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.”

Ruth, a Moabite woman, could have returned to her birth family after her husband's death, following the expected path. Naomi, overcome with loss and steeped in grief, initially pushes Ruth away. Instead of leaving, Ruth chooses a radical commitment to her mother-in-law. Ruth's choice wasn't merely about devotion. It was the formation of a new family built not on blood but on kinship, on the daring belief that our lives are better intertwined.

We're better together, and deep down in her bones, Ruth knew it. Naomi's grief didn't deter her or push her away no matter how hard it tried. Ruth keeps moving toward Naomi, embarking on a journey to a new beginning. As much as Naomi needed Ruth, Ruth needed Naomi—a beautiful picture of mutuality, which is deeply needed in our fractured world.

Ruth and Naomi's journey to Bethlehem, mirroring another future trek to the same town by Mary and Joseph, is a pilgrimage of faith. Both journeys hold discomfort and uncertainty, yet the travelers take it on together. This kinship echoes through the lineage of Jesus himself because Ruth is a woman who embodied the strength of connection over isolation. We aren't meant to do it alone.

The season of flickering candles and twinkling lights can have a shadow side filled with loneliness and grief. For many, it feels like anything but the happiest time of the year. And yet, this season offers ample opportunity for kinship and connection—to reach out to the grieving, to invite the lonely into our homes and hearts, and to show that in God's family, no one has to face their sorrows alone.

Ruth puts it all on the table, her memories, her culture, her rituals, and says none of these things are more important than what's ahead. This is especially noteworthy when we consider that she has just lost her husband. In the midst of unspeakable loss, where the temptation to believe that everything is lost is most seductive, Ruth demonstrates tremendous hope. Hope that this tragedy will not unwrite her own story. Hope that there is more to be written, and more to be lived.

The end of the first chapter of Ruth says:  
“Naomi said to Ruth, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you, 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. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Call me no longer Naomi; call me Mara, which means bitter, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.”

What would it look like to foster deep connections in this season—not just gatherings marked by exchanging pleasantries but by sharing your messy, holy, complicated life? The wisdom of Ecclesiastes reminds us, “Two are better than one . . . for if they fall, one will lift up the other.” Though often heard at weddings, this wisdom speaks to the fundamental human need for connection, no matter the relationship or what season of life we're in.

Earlier this year, Priya Parker wrote an article on [5 Ways to Build Belonging](#). Now, in this article, she's talking about hosting social gatherings, but there's so much in it that

resonates with church and beyond. She mentions how when we enter a room at a social event or maybe when we walk in the sanctuary, we scan the room to see who is there. We are checking things out, trying to see if we belong in this space. Trying to discern how much of ourselves we can share; how safe this space is for us. It can be easy, Parker says, to confuse “belonging” with “sameness.”

Belonging is about more than just our shared connections or interests: it's about feeling a part of the whole without having to all be the same. Creating a sense of belonging is at the heart of meaningful connections with one another. It creates an environment where everyone feel valued, understood, and accepted. It allows us to open up and participate. And the first way to do that according to Parker, is to get skin in the game. Become vulnerable. Take the time to create deep connections with one another. Care about each other; ask about each other; listen to each other. This is what the church is. This is the compassionate community that we are all desperately seeking.

There is so much for us to learn from Ruth when difficulty arrives at our doorstep. We may think it is time to go it alone or to let relationships atrophy into mere formalities, but hope says hold on. Hope may compel us into unfamiliar places, where our social standing falls, but let us remember that God is still writing our story. A story where our hope will encounter God's faithfulness. You can't go alone; we can't go alone. Nor were we meant to. Together in our companionship, may we find the reflection of God who chose to be with us, to share in our humanity, and to show us just how bad we need each other. May it be so this holiday season. Amen.