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Women and Immigrants

Texts: **Ruth 1: 1-18; Mark 12: 28-34**; “A new country”, by Nicola Yoon, from *The Sun Is Also A Star*

When older kids are first learning the order of the books of the Bible in Sunday School, they learn Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy as the five books of the Law, what the Jewish people call the Torah, and what English speakers call the Pentateuch, if they call it anything at all.

Then come the next three books, and it always gets a giggle: Joshua Judges Ruth. I mean, who is this Joshua dude who has the arrogance to judge Ruth? Does he even know her? Haha! That’s about all anyone knows about Ruth, that it comes after Joshua and Judges and makes a funny sentence out of the Biblical order. Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman, the other being the book of Esther. Esther is a Jewish woman who becomes Queen of Persia and saves her exiled people from genocide at the hands of a Persian official. The festival of Purim celebrates her accomplishments. She is a hero. Ruth has no festival celebrating her. Ruth is not Jewish. Ruth is from Moab.

That probably doesn’t mean much to you, but let me tell you why it should. Israel didn’t much care for Moab. Now, I’m not saying the Israelites hated the Moabites more than anyone else among the tribes surrounding them - because they might have hated the Edomites just as much - but I think it’s fair to say that no Israelites were thinking about taking their vacations in Moab. Israel hated the Moabites so much that they started a rumor in Genesis 19 that the Moabites got their beginning from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter.

The Moabites weren’t fond of Israel either. They attacked Israel when Israel was fleeing Egypt during the Exodus. Israel attacked the Moabites, to steal their land to settle in Canaan. Moab returned the favor as often as they could. There are suns that don’t burn as hot as the hatred between Israel and Moab. Deuteronomy 23:3 even goes so far as to ban Moabites and their descendants down to the tenth generation from entering the assembly of the Lord.

So it’s fair to say that there was no love lost between Israelites and Moabites, and Ruth is a Moabite. Yet, here she is, with a book of the Bible named after her. What is that all about? We shall have to wait and see.

The book starts out with a famine in Bethlehem. That’s already hinting that there will be surprises in the book, because the name Bethlehem means ‘house of bread’, and it’s in the house of bread that there’s no bread, or really much food of any kind. The first person we meet in Ruth’s book is not Ruth. It’s a man named Elimelech, whose name means ‘My God is King’ – just the kind of in-your-face, jingoistic Israelite name that would antagonize people in Moab, who were very proud of their own god (Chemosh).

The second person we meet is also not Ruth. It’s Elimelech’s wife, Naomi. Her name means pleasant. Then we meet their two sons, Mahlon – which means sickly – and Kilion, which means ending. But still no Ruth.

Well, the famine has to be pretty bad, because Elimelech takes his two sons from Bethlehem to Moab looking for food. They are forced to become immigrants into the territory of their enemy.

It's hard to be an immigrant under any circumstances, but these were particularly hard. As Nicola Yoon said in our contemporary reading, it involves a lot of risk. You've heard stories, about life in the new country, and in this case most of the stories about Moab probably weren't good. You were leaving language, people, country. You would have to adapt. They had their own god in Moab – Chemosh. What would happen with your faith in Israel's God? What if they didn't accept you in Moab? Why would they? But off to Moab they went, and there they lived. They were accepted by the Moabites and became their friends and neighbors. There, amidst the people they had hated and feared, they found food and a home and acceptance. Ten years they lived there as immigrants in a foreign land. When Elimelech died, he was buried there. The Moabites were so welcoming that they even let their daughters marry the immigrant neighbor's boys. Hatred and fear were replaced by love and respect once they got to know each other.

That's kind of the immigrant story everywhere. Once you get to know these strange people from another country, they aren't what you thought they were. They're just hungry people fleeing a famine, or ambitious people hoping for a better life, or lonely people hoping to make new friends, and sometimes get married to a native-born son or daughter. Sometimes they do the marrying first, and then the immigrating – coming to live in the country of their new spouse, so she can finish her doctorate (or something like that). I know what that's like!

After Elimelech died, Naomi was left a widow with two sons. Naomi wanted her family to continue, so she found some wives for her sons from the only kind of young women around, Moabite women, as I mentioned a minute ago. Mahlon and Kilion married Moabite girls named Orpah and Ruth – aha, there she is, Ruth at last!

But before we get to Ruth, an interesting side note: some 2500 years later, a young woman reading the book of Ruth thought that the name Orpah was a beautiful name for a young girl, and named her daughter after her. But she misread it and called her daughter Oprah instead, and now everyone knows Oprah!

Okay, back to Ruth. We barely meet her and Orpah when their husbands die. In real time it's ten years, but in Bible time, it's one verse. It's an absolute disaster for Naomi. Her husband is dead, her sons are dead, she has no grandchildren. All three women are left without any men to protect them in a very patriarchal world. Naomi decides that the only thing she can do is go back to Israel to look for her closest male relative to take her in. She tells her two widowed daughters-in-law to go back home to their mothers' homes, to find other husbands in due course.

Both daughters-in-law weep, but Orpah eventually kisses her mother-in-law goodbye and leaves. There is no shame in this. This is the expected and sensible thing to do. Naomi is going home, but Ruth and Orpah would become immigrants in Israel, with all the risks and uncertainties that would entail. Staying in Moab, their homeland, is much wiser. But Ruth, Ruth is different. She refuses to leave Naomi. She is dedicated to her. There truly was love between Naomi, the immigrant mother-in-law, and Ruth, the native-born Moabite.

What happens next is one of the most moving scenes in all of Scripture. It is the only scene in the Bible that passes the Bechdel test. (In case you don't know what that is, it's a measure of the representation of women in Hollywood movies. To pass the test, you have to have a scene where two women talk to each other about something other than a man. It seems simple, but only about half of all movies pass the test.) This scene between Naomi and Ruth passes the test, a single scene in all of Scripture. That's what we mean when we say it was a patriarchal society. Women are depicted only in relation to men most of the time. But this scene reminds us that women, even in patriarchal societies, are fully-formed

human beings, with their own interests, their own hopes and fears, their own personalities, with an interior life that is the equal of any man's.

Ruth tells Naomi that she's not leaving. "Where you go, I will go; where you stop, I will stop. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May Yahweh do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you." Ruth expresses her love and faithfulness to her mother-in-law by taking up the immigrant's task. Naomi is going back to Israel, to the land where Moabites are hated, and Ruth is going with her.

When people ask me what it's like to be an immigrant here in the United States, one of the things I tell them is this quote from Ruth. Becoming an immigrant here meant saying to my wife, "Where you go, I will go. And where you stop, I will stop. Your people will become my people, and where you die, I will die and there will I be buried." I am here. The United States' destiny is my destiny. My story is now an American story, with an American wife and American children. That is the immigrant's story everywhere, of course, whether to Moab, or Israel, or the United States. Your people become my people. Together our destinies are tied to one another going forward.

For Ruth, the die is cast. She's going to Israel as an immigrant with her widowed mother-in-law. It's not a future she envisioned when she married the handsome young immigrant boy next door, but it's her future now. How she will be received, and what will happen to her there in a country that has a history of demonizing Moabites, well, that is a question mark that is left looming over her life as she sets out on the journey to a new land.

It's a question mark we will leave hanging in the air until next week. Then we'll find out what happens next in this remarkable little book that looks at women and immigrants in such a flattering light, and insists on taking both women and immigrants as fully-formed human beings, worthy of knowing as individuals, people beyond stereotype and caricature.

Ruth and Naomi stride out of this chapter and into the rest of the book, and eventually into history as part of the story of Israel's kings, and God's Messiah. Ah but that, and more, is still to come, and all will be revealed next week if you remember to set your clocks right as Daylight Saving Time ends, and manage to appear in your accustomed pew for the rest of the story.

Amen