

### OPENING HYMN

“Bless Now, O God, the Journey”  
(ELW 326)

### OPENING PRAYER

Lord God, see us. When we need guidance, open our hearts to know your way. When we need support, help us remember the gifts of community. When we grieve, remind us of your steadfast love and mercy. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*
- Scrap paper and pens or pencils

# Faithfulness

## Session one

Faith where you are: Ruth and Naomi

BY DENISE RECTOR

### INTRODUCTION

During Epiphany, we gather as the church to discover God’s glorious work of salvation. Jesus has come to us, and this weary world rejoices. The cycle of the church seasons helps us remember what God has done. In Christ and in community, during great times and not-so-great times, together, our faithfulness grows.

Where is God in hard times, and what does it mean to be faithful? How do we walk faithfully, day-to-day, when life is not a bowl of cherries? In what ways can we faithfully support our friends and loved ones when they are in difficulty? What does faith look like in Scripture? In our experiences? In our conversations?

Today, we are coming back together as a nation, after a contentious, difficult election. We may or may not be experiencing the quiet that often comes after a busy holiday season. Depending on the weather, we may look outside and be reminded of the hymn, “In the Bleak Midwinter” (ELW 294).

Sometimes I wish I was more able to enjoy the moment, in that moment. Instead, my mind jumps ahead to gray January days. The end of Christmas is sad for me. The calendar is going to move on; that’s a fact. So how can I try to make peace with a difficult ending, and keep moving into the future?

### THE GRIEF OF ENDINGS

📖 **Read:** Ruth 1:1-5

In the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth, what looks to be the beginning of a warm family story suddenly takes a turn—a big, life-changing turn. They are grieving a difficult situation: the death of Naomi’s husband and two sons. One of those sons was Ruth’s husband. Yet amid their grief, these two women draw strength from their togetherness and their faith in God.

Psychologists have a term called “anticipatory grief.” When I first heard this term, I wondered if they were talking about grieving something that hasn’t happened yet. Indeed, that’s one way it manifests: *anticipating* the loss—say, of an elder family member whose health is failing—and feeling sad before it happens. But then I read a book in which one of the characters had a husband who died. She talked about how they had planned to travel the country, visit grandchildren, explore the Grand Canyon—and how sad she was that he had died before they had a chance to do those things. That, too, is anticipatory grief: knowing the things you looked forward to and grieving the fact that you can’t do what you had planned.

Naomi and Ruth’s culture was very patriarchal. Much of society, especially the opportunity to earn an income, was male-oriented. A woman without a husband, brother or son was in danger of being an outcast and of having no way to work and feed herself—that is, other than the so-called “world’s oldest profession,” prostitution. That option led to sexual exploitation and oppression, as we find in various stories in Scripture. What’s more, in many instances, mature women are not valued for their gifts of wisdom and connection—not only then, but still today.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. Have you experienced any sort of anticipatory grief? Share about that experience to the extent you feel comfortable.

2. Here we read about a famine, and a man from Bethlehem moving with his wife and children to Moab. Fast-forward to today: What are some reasons a family might migrate (move) to a new place?

**THEIR MOTHER’S HOUSE**

📖 **Read:** Ruth 1:6-18

Naomi is now a matriarch in a culture of patriarchs, with two daughters-in-law and very few prospects. In her grief, she has to make some hard decisions. Naomi applies her wisdom and life experience to her circumstances the best way she knows how: She decides to go back to her husband’s country.

“People may remember my husband and sons from before we moved,” she says. “They will see I have no one now. Perhaps they will take pity on me and help me.” (We will see how that turns out in a bit.)

Naomi, in her kindness and insight, considers that her daughters-in-law can benefit from similar regard if they also go home. So she tells each daughter, “Go back ... to your mother’s house” (v. 8). Even in her grief, Naomi sends them with a blessing.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

3. How does Naomi bless her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, in verses 8-9?

In a patriarchal society, women find it important to bear sons. Sons are able to work, start and establish a family, and feed them. Daughters, however, do not have the same level of empowerment. Naomi knows that her age means she cannot remarry or have sons. She expresses that even if she could bear infant sons, her daughters-in-law would not “wait until they were grown” (v. 13). Naomi bravely makes plain her pain and bitterness.

The three women continue to grieve together, then each daughter makes a decision. Orpah kisses her wise, loving mother-in-law goodbye (v. 14), taking Naomi's advice and returning to her own mother's house in Moab.

Ruth makes a different decision. Instead of going to her mother's house, Ruth in effect *chooses Naomi* as her mother. The deaths of the men in the family mean an ending for the women. But in a sense, Ruth's choice and Naomi's acceptance are a beginning. Their new life together will be one of discernment, connection and risk—all while relying on God's promises and instructions to the people of Judah.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Can you think of a situation in your life that felt like an ending, but led to a beginning? How did that feel?

**THE NEW NORMAL**

📖 **Read:** Ruth 1:19-22

So Ruth and Naomi go to Bethlehem, where, indeed, Naomi is remembered. However, Naomi is not the same woman who moved away with her husband and sons. She demonstrates this (vv. 20-21) by giving herself a new name: Mara. (*Naomi* means “pleasant”; *Mara* means “bitter.”) At this point, she has lost almost everything she needs in order to be cared for in her society; all she has is Ruth. And Ruth is considered an outsider (v. 22). “Ruth the Moabite” is now in the land of Judah.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

5. Pretend you are Ruth, and you overhear Naomi saying the words in verses 20-21 to an old friend. As Ruth, how do you feel?

**GLEANING WHAT GOD HAS PROVIDED**

📖 **Read:** Ruth 2

Naomi's wisdom and trust in God have helped both her and Ruth. In turn, Ruth's decision to go with Naomi, and her faithfulness to the older woman, forged an important connection. While the culture in the story is quite different from our own, one similarity is this: Sometimes it's who you know that matters.

Naomi and Ruth's connection is important. But let's remember that the hand of Naomi's God, the God of Judah, is at work here also. The women have returned to Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest. The famine that drove Naomi's family from Judah, all those years ago, is over.

People in Judah are faithfully following God's directive to not harvest all the grain, but to leave some at the edges of the fields. These small amounts of grain at the edges, and the grain that is accidentally overlooked in the field, can then be gathered—“gleaned”—and eaten by people who need food. In this way, God provides for the hungry.

God gives this command twice: once in Leviticus 23:22, “Leave [the gleanings] for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God”; and again in Deuteronomy 24:19, “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings.” (In Matthew 12:1, we see Jesus and the disciples benefiting from this way in which God cares for the poor. The religious leaders in Jesus' day are unhappy about it—that's another Bible study.)

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. How do the situations in the verses from Leviticus and Deuteronomy apply to Naomi and Ruth?

The chips seem to be stacked against Ruth and her mother-in-law. Because of their losses and because of cultural norms, they are vulnerable. Yet these women rely on God’s command and on the farmers’ obedience.

Another similarity between Ruth’s time and ours is that word gets around quickly. The farm laborers would certainly have wondered about a young woman they didn’t know, gathering grain alone at the edge of the field. Boaz wonders too—since it’s his field. It is more than a happy coincidence that has brought Ruth to a field that turns out to be connected to Naomi’s late husband’s family. This is (at least in part) the result of Naomi’s God-given wisdom to return home in the first place. Then word gets around that Ruth “came back with Naomi,” that she is from Moab and that she is a hard worker: “She has been on her feet since morning” (vv. 6-7). The laborers tell Boaz everything they know.

Boaz has also heard some of the talk around town—about how Naomi lost her husband and sons, and how Ruth cared for her, even to the point of coming to this land that is not Ruth’s home. Boaz is moved by both Naomi’s loss and Ruth’s commitment. He tells Ruth to glean at his field and nowhere else, and to do so alongside the other women he knows. He also tells his laborers to take some grain from what has been harvested for *him* and leave it instead for *Ruth*.

Ruth and Naomi, with the help of Boaz’s authority, are able to glean all that God has provided—not just grain, but also safety and connection to a man related to Naomi by marriage.

**THE FEET AND THE CLOAK**

📖 **Read:** Ruth 3:1-13

Because of the patriarchal norms of the culture, marriage did not have as much to do with love as it does in many places today. In Ruth’s time, marriage was a contract between families, as well as the main form of social and economic security for women. Again, Naomi’s loving wisdom leads her to “seek some security” (v. 1) for her young daughter-in-law, using the connections available.

The way these women connect to their faith in God and serve each other is worth noting. In chapter 1, Ruth relinquished her home, praying to find care and sustenance with Naomi, Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God. This real-life faith journey has brought them to Boaz. Now Naomi boldly discerns that Ruth can approach Boaz in a way that can help them both, and Ruth agrees.

Let’s “uncover” the question that always comes up with this part of the story: Is uncovering Boaz’s “feet” a euphemism for having sex, or for Ruth making herself sexually available? Frankly, reading verse 3 in today’s culture makes it sound like Ruth is getting ready for a date! (While the 1989 NRSV reads “anoint yourself,” the 2021 NRSV Updated Edition says “put on perfume.”) Also, we know that the society was patriarchal, so to our modern minds and conditioning about sex, it might make some sense to consider whether this section is about sexual activity. And verse 13 notes that Ruth does “remain this night” on the threshing floor with Boaz.

Here’s a different idea: This scripture has also been interpreted as being about not just feet but lower extremities. “Uncovering,” or taking the blanket off Boaz’s legs and feet, would be a quiet way to wake him without waking anyone else. (In verse 14, we learn it’s important that no one know she is there.) This understanding fits with what Boaz says about Ruth’s reputation as a “worthy woman” (v. 11).

In all this discussion about feet, it's easy to overlook the cloak and the act not of *uncovering*, but of *covering*. Naomi and Ruth know they need Boaz's "cloak" of protection, and their status as his next-of-kin may be the way God is meeting their needs. The women are bold in requesting his care as the elder instructs the younger. Ruth uncovers Boaz's feet (from under a cloak, maybe?) and says to him, "Spread your cloak over [me]" (v. 9).

Ruth truly meant it, back in chapter 1, when she declared that Naomi's people would be her people, and Naomi's God her God. The bond that Ruth and Naomi had when Ruth was married to Naomi's son has lasted, even to this moment. Boaz is not just *Naomi's* next-of-kin, but also *Ruth's*. Ruth has risked coming to the threshing floor to ask him for the protection that the next-of-kin male traditionally provides. "Spreading the cloak" is about protection and inclusion—providing for Ruth and Naomi's needs.

Boaz is pleased to be chosen by Ruth and notes her "loyalty" (v. 10) to both him and her mother-in-law. However, tradition says that the nearest next-of-kin should care for the women, and Boaz is not their closest relation. He respects and kindly responds to Ruth's humility by calling her "daughter" (v. 11). He also takes an oath to care for her as next-of-kin if the closer family member declines. And note: Boaz fills *Ruth's* cloak with barley! She goes home to tell Naomi everything that has happened, and Naomi assures her that Boaz will "settle the matter" (v. 18) promptly.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Does this part of Ruth's story seem empowering to you? Submissive? Both? Why?

**A HAPPY ENDING—AND ANOTHER BEGINNING**

📖 **Read:** 4:1-12

This section may need a bit of untangling. Here's a look at what's happening: Boaz happens to run into Naomi's closest male relative.

Boaz calls this relative over for a conversation, asking 10 male elders to bear witness. Basically, he says, "OK, you know how I am related to Elimelech, right? Well, Elimelech's widow, Naomi, is back from Moab and is selling some land he owned. Now, you're the closest relative, so you have the first right to buy it. If you want to buy it, say so now, here, in front of these elders who will be our witnesses. If you don't want to buy it, I'm next in line."

After the male relative says he will buy ("redeem") it, Boaz continues: "Now, listen: If you buy the land, you are also promising to care for ("acquiring" in v. 5) Ruth, to maintain her deceased husband's name on what was Elimelech's property." Then the man reconsiders, saying that he already has an inheritance coming, and somehow one would compromise the other.

As we noted before, in this culture marriage is a contract. The male relative decides not to buy the land—which means he also decides not to marry Ruth. Since he has given up his "right of redemption" (v. 6), Boaz takes off a sandal to confirm the agreement and announces that he has "acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to" her husband and sons (v. 9). Furthermore, he will marry Ruth so her deceased husband's name may remain with the land, and the land may remain in the family. After this pronouncement, the elders bless Boaz and invoke the history of the Israelites: the 12 tribes of Israel, headed by the children born to Rachel and Leah.

📖 **Read:** 4:13-22

Your Bible may have a heading before verse 13 that says, “The Genealogy of David.” You may think to yourself, “What does King David have to do with any of this?” Good question! Turns out, the elders were not just witnesses—they were prophets. God allows the faithfulness of Naomi and the loyalty of Ruth to impact one of the most important family lines in Scripture. Ruth and Boaz marry and have a son. The baby is named Obed, meaning “servant of God.”

The women of Judah praise God because there is a male heir for Boaz and Ruth. These women—possibly including the one who first heard that Naomi was “Mara”—bless Naomi because of her daughter-in-law Ruth’s love. And they call Ruth’s child *Naomi’s* child, similar to how Ruth, in effect, named Naomi as her own mother. Perhaps the detail of Naomi nursing Obed is meant (figuratively) to emphasize the child’s connection not just to Ruth, but to Naomi’s generation.

The elders invoke Perez, an early ancestor of Boaz. And we learn that Obed, the son of Ruth the Moabite, will be the grandfather of King David!

#### **CONCLUSION: NAOMI, RUTH... AND JESUS**

For the Hebrew Scriptures, a non-Israelite woman in the lineage of King David is momentous. As Christians, we note an even deeper connection: to the one who called himself the Son of David—Jesus. Both the Gospel of Matthew (1:1-17) and the Gospel of Luke (3:23-38) list Jesus’ genealogy (with some variations), showing that Jesus comes from the line of King David, and thus of Ruth.

This is the first of four sessions in this Bible study, which focuses on having faith today, even in difficult times. The goal of this study is not to give an example of a life tied up neatly with a bow for you to try to copy. That’s too much pressure, and frankly, an unfair expectation. The story of Ruth and Naomi illustrates that we can learn not how to be perfect, but how to be real in sharing our

difficulties. We can turn to Scripture and lean on each other.

#### **CLOSING HYMN**

“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” *ELW* 587 or 588

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Throughout the ages, God, you have blessed us with foremothers of the faith. May their devotion and loyalty be a strength to us. Help us to come alongside those who are grieving and support people in need, materially and spiritually, so that your good creation may flourish. In Jesus’ name. Amen. 🌿

# Faithfulness

## Session one

Faith where you are: Ruth and Naomi

BY DENISE RECTOR

### SESSION GOALS

- Notice how Ruth and Naomi exhibit faith and agency in difficult times.
- Encourage a clear-eyed look at grief in the text.
- Explore the tension between submissiveness and empowerment in the time of Ruth and Naomi.
- See how God's love changes who we think of as insiders and outsiders.

### OVERVIEW

As we journey together, we'll explore:

- How Ruth and Naomi sustained themselves as widowed women in a patriarchal society and met God's providence.
- Psalm 22, where David faced painful vulnerability and humiliation, yet eventually testified, full of praise, that God is God, even in the worst of times.
- Jesus being confronted by the anguish of Jairus, the isolation of the Woman Who Was Bleeding, and a crowd of people with varying degrees of belief.
- Peter's confusion as the church's teachings expand about who God welcomes and what is unclean. (Spoiler alert: Nothing God made is unclean.) We'll also hear about Peter's work to explain this to his friends in Jerusalem, who think he's doing it wrong.

### NOTES FOR LEADERS

When we look back at the love and care we have witnessed across generations, we see where we have come from and how God has been present. Life together teaches us about God's faithfulness. The opening hymn, "Bless Now, O God, the Journey" (*ELW* 326), fits our day-to-day journey of faith as well as the journey of Ruth and Naomi.

Moving through this lesson, we see several times when Naomi and her daughter-in-law are quite vulnerable. This section and other parts of this story may move some participants to share their experiences of grief (anticipatory or otherwise). Encourage this, as time allows.

In some ways, today's society and culture are in marked contrast to Ruth's. Our time is not as patriarchal as theirs, yet there are still opportunities constrained by gender roles and tradition. Looking at the ways that these women managed to empower themselves, we may learn something about faith and community for our own time. Leaders should be aware that the group may experience some tension when discussing empowerment alongside constraints.

Gleaning was a common subject of paintings in agricultural societies. You can find several visuals to share with your group at the Wikipedia entry for "gleaning."

Even in a patriarchal society, God provided for people who are poor—widows, foreigners and others—through the law given to the Israelites (see, for example, Leviticus 23:22). Indeed, God has provided more than grain for both the elder and the younger woman in this story. Naomi says that, yes, Ruth should continue gleaning there, because Ruth may be more vulnerable in a different field.

Even if the understanding of "feet" as private parts here is a misinterpretation for the book of Ruth, it certainly makes this story a bit scandalous—and, therefore, memorable. In Ruth 3:9, Ruth is using a form of humbleness when she calls herself

“your servant.” Ruth is (1) referring to herself with modesty, (2) making it clear that she knows she is of a lower social status than the prominent, elder, land-owning Boaz and (3) signaling that she is willing to be Boaz’s wife.

The closing hymn, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” (*ELW* 587 or 588), is our testimony to God’s goodness, and a fitting way to remember the mercy God showed Ruth and Naomi during this difficult part of their lives.

### **SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)**

1. Ask participants to read the study and complete the questions before they arrive.
2. Either sing the Opening Hymn or pray the Opening Prayer (not both).
3. Ask each person to share one memorable point and/or one question they have from the session.
4. Discuss the questions that group members raise, as time allows.
5. End with either the Closing Prayer or the Closing Hymn.

### **A LITTLE LONGER (45–60 MINUTES)**

1. Sing the Opening Hymn and pray the Opening Prayer.
2. Read through the study as a group. Ask a group member to read the scripture passages aloud where indicated.
3. Invite one or two responses to the questions in each section.
4. End with the Closing Prayer. Sing the Closing Hymn if time allows.

### **TWO-HOUR STUDY (works well with larger groups)**

1. Sing the Opening Hymn and pray the Opening Prayer.
2. Read through the study as a group. Ask a group member to read the scripture passages aloud where indicated.
3. Break into small groups of two or three to discuss

the questions in each section. (People can remain in their group for all the questions, or switch groups as they prefer.) Take 5 minutes to report out on the conversation before moving to the next section.

4. Invite participants to share a favorite hymn or contemporary song that reflects the theme of the lesson.
5. End with the Closing Prayer and the Closing Hymn. 🌸