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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Ruth 1

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### Unfailing Love

*Greeting and Opening Prayer:* Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning to you all who are joining us online this morning. And welcome to all of our guests from Freeman Academy, MDS, and beyond. We are so glad to have you with us this morning.

Let us pray: God of unfailing and unconditional love, we thank you for the gift of music that has been offered here this morning. We praise you for beautiful voices, powerful witness, and hope-filled commitment as these students continue on their educational journeys. We thank you also for the work and witness of volunteers with Mennonite Disaster Service. We look to you this morning with this request: may the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

*Message:* The book of Ruth will lead us into Advent, which is only 7 weeks away. Our last series in the book of James was concerned primarily with teaching and encouragement for church communities throughout the Roman Empire. James had particular ideas about God and the community that he wanted to make clear for these churches. We shift away from a first-century letter to a narrative or story set in ancient Israel before the kings and prophets. The book of Ruth sits in the Hebrew Scriptures between Judges and 1 Samuel. Set in the era of the judges, the story of Ruth is really a story about a woman named Naomi and her family living in the village of Bethlehem, about 6 miles south of the city of Jerusalem before it is even Israel's capital.

Why are we studying Ruth, and why in this particular time? First of all, I had checked the lectionary for this time of year to see what was suggested for these weeks heading into Advent. When I looked further into October and November, I noticed that the Old Testament references were mostly from the books of Ruth and Job. While I do love the book of Job, I am not ready quite yet to tackle such a large and involved text from the pulpit, so I went with Ruth. As I thought more about the story and read through it several times back in August, I realized that Ruth had particular insights to offer us. Central to the story of Ruth and Naomi is the question of God's presence in the midst of tragedy or suffering. While James, the teacher, encourages us to stand firm in the midst of trials and temptations, the book of Ruth explores how difficult that coping with difficulty can be. The story goes even further, showing us how wisdom and creativity can help us walk through our horrible circumstances and make the most of what the present moment offers us. How pertinent are these ideas as we consider the last year and a half with COVID, a contentious election, natural disasters inside and outside of the United States, dysfunctional government processes, a dry and less than adequate crop year, and so much more? After watching the news or listening to the radio, we might be tempted to feel just like Naomi: bitter, discouraged, empty, hopeless, and contemptuous. So, I invite you to enter into this story.

We know little about the author of this text, and even less about when it might have been written. While the story is set in the time of the judges, few, if any scholars, believe that it was written during that time in ancient Israel's history. What we do know from the books on either side of this story is that this time in Israel's development as a nation was rough. The book of judges ends with the one of the twelve tribes, the tribe of Benjamin, nearly being wiped out by the other eleven tribes. The author of the book of Judges blames the chaos and anarchy of this time on the fact that Israel has no king; each person did what was right in their own eyes. These

stories form the backdrop of our present story, while looming in the horizon of Israel's larger story is the monarchy, of which Saul and David will be the first kings in the book of 1 Samuel.

King David's childhood home is where our story begins: Bethlehem, which ironically means house of bread, falls victim to a localized famine, forcing the family of Elimelech and Naomi to move east to the other side of the Dead Sea to the land of Moab. The neighboring nation of Moab has few good things going for it according to the biblical narrative. The Moabites are descendants of the relationship between Lot and his daughter after they had escaped the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. When the Israelites were waiting to take the promised land on the east side of the Jordan River, their interactions with the Moabites had been both hostile and shameful according to the book of Numbers. In Deuteronomy, the Moabites are forbidden to the tenth generation of ever entering the assembly of the Lord. Finally, the book of Judges tells of several volatile situations in which Israel is conquered by Moab, but God raises a leader to defeat them. The relationship between Israel and Moab is anything but healthy or diplomatic.

The narrator of Ruth gives us little detail about the tragedy of Naomi's family as they live in Moab. All that we know is that Elimelech dies before his sons marry Orpah and Ruth, two Moabite women. After ten years, then, the sons also pass away, leaving three widows without any children, their sole source of honor or status in these ancient cultures. We hear nothing of what afflicted the husbands, nor do we hear the author's judgment of why such things have happened. Naomi hears though that God has been merciful and provided food for the people of Bethlehem, so she begins the journey with her daughters-in-law back to Bethlehem. Sometime along the way, Naomi makes her first attempt to persuade her daughters-in-law to go back to their families and villages to find husbands, the only path for them to security and well-being. Even though Ruth and Orpah are under no obligation to stay with Naomi, they weep and refuse

to leave her. Naomi tries again with even stronger words. Naomi knows that she cannot provide for them another son to marry and continue the family line nor can she guarantee them a secure life. She is fully aware of her limitations. She may even be realizing in this moment that they will not be welcome in the community when they arrive. She tells them to take advantage of the present moment and leave her behind so that they can still have what's left of their lives.

We get our first theological reflection on the widows' present situation from Naomi: "my experience has been far more bitter than yours because the Lord has turned against me." Orpah decides to go back and kisses Naomi good-bye, but Ruth clings to her, the same word used in Genesis 2:24 for marriage partners. Naomi tries for the third time to persuade Ruth: "look at the *Y* in the road in front of you. Take the chance that you have now to turn and go the other way, to return to a life that holds more than I can promise." But Ruth won't have it. Ruth responds with unfailing love or the Hebrew word *khesed*. Most often, *khesed* is translated as the unfailing or steadfast covenant love of God, undeserved and freely given, but humans are also capable of showing *khesed* to their neighbors. For us, *khesed* is loving-kindness or loyalty that extend beyond what the Mosaic law requires and beyond anything that the recipient expects or deserves. Ruth, the foreigner, the Moabite, shows *khesed* to her Israelite mother-in-law, walking with her and committing the rest of her life to her, ending her comment with an oath. Naomi is speechless.

When Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem, the local village women are all stirred up at the sight of their neighbor now ten years or more later. But Naomi has no desire to be reconnected or even to be called by her name. She is to be called Mara because of all that has happened to her. According to Naomi, God has dealt bitterly and harshly with her, brought her home empty, and brought calamity upon her, so there is no need to bless the air waves of the village with the sound of her name, the sound of sweetness or pleasantness. Naomi's emptiness

includes only Ruth: a widow, an orphan, and a foreigner, the marginalized of marginalized. We end chapter 1 with a glimmer of hope: the possibility of the food present in the barley harvest.

So, what might the Holy Spirit be revealing to us in Ruth 1? Maybe Naomi is right. Maybe God has it out for her. Had God taken away her family in judgment for their move to enemy territory, for her sons' marriages to foreign women, something that the Mosaic law had warned about not doing in the promised land? When our lives are filled with tragedy or calamity, is it all our fault, God's judgment for our wrong-doing or sin? What about those around us who are suffering? Maybe now that Naomi has returned to her home, where she belongs, God will take care of her. Is that what we can expect from God that as long as we're on the path that God has called us to, we can expect to avoid tragedy? So, maybe there is something deeper going on. Has God caused all of it as Naomi is claiming? What about Ruth, and her experience in all of this? Maybe Naomi's words are the harsh but truthful words of a grieving spouse and mother? Maybe this ending is a good reminder of where we find ourselves after tragedy strikes, when we struggle to figure out which way is up. We hold onto the words of this marginalized widow, Ruth, in her commitment to Naomi as the words of God and our neighbor holding onto us when we are most tempted to push God or our Christian brothers and sisters away: "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from travelling the road with you! Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay. Where you are, there I will be also." And maybe that's enough for now.

*Closing prayer:* Let us pray: God of unfailing love, we thank you that you never leave us even when our circumstances seem dark and dismal. We look to you, our hope and our life, our very breath. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we would extend your unfailing love to everyone around us, even our enemies. Open our eyes to your leading today. In Jesus' name. Amen.