**Lead In** Welcome to the church at Bethel, where we gather because of the **gospel**: Jesus in our place! To those watching online and our guests here in person—let our round of **applause** be a big welcome to you. If you missed last week’s Easter worship gathering, do yourself a favor and go watch the service! The Sovereign Lord continues to change lives in St. Clair county!

Today we begin a new series in the book of **Ruth**. Why Ruth? First, Bethel has a fundamental belief that the **entire** counsel of Scripture encourages, convicts, trains, and grows you in righteousness. All of the Word, from beginning to end is good for your soul. For this reason we systematically preach and rotate through the OT and NT. Secondly, last year we preached through Judges, and now Ruth follows chronologically and canonically. Join me in the Book of Ruth today.

Immediately after World War II the allied armies gathered up many hungry, homeless children and placed them in large camps. There the children were abundantly fed and cared for. However, at night they did not sleep well. They seemed restless and afraid.

Finally, a psychologist hit on a solution. After the children were put to bed, they each received a slice of bread to hold. If they wanted more to eat, more was provided, but this particular slice was not to be eaten—it was just to hold.

The slice of bread produced marvelous results. The child would go to sleep, subconsciously feeling it would have something to eat tomorrow.

**The House Without Bread (Ruth 1:1-5)**

**A Moral Famine (1:1)** The book of Ruth begins nonchalantly at the time of the “judges.” This might not seem like much you but the “judges” were a season of blight upon the people of God. Specifically most situate Ruth between Ehud and Jephthah, the height of Moabite dominance.

**Ehud** – the left handed Benjaminite who disposed the large king Eglon in his inner chambers. **Jephthah** – the judge who promised the Lord, “If you give me victory I will sacrifice the first thing that greets me when I return home.” When Jephthah returned home his daughter runs out first. Jephthah sinfully sacrifices his daughter.

**Take-Home**: Moral famines lead to sinful decisions. Don’t go empty.

Rest assured, the moral famine did not begin and end with two judges. The entire 250-400 years are summarized by the biblical author this way: **Judg 21:25**    In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him.

You show me a society where everyone does what they want, and I will show you a society that has rejected the Lord as their true and rightful king.

**Take-Home:** We still live in a land of moral famine. Don’t go empty.

Moral malnourishment sounds like chief minister Polonius in Hamlet, “this above all: to thine own self be true.” A starving society is a world that worships at the god of “do what is in your heart, do what feels best to you, live out your truth, or even the Christian who says I love Jesus but I don’t need to do what He says.” To you, the Messiah says, “Be Holy for I am holy.” Ruth occurs during a time of moral chaos and apathy not because of government oppression, a new world order, a change in regime, but a lack of heart for the things of Yahweh among the people of Yahweh.

“When there is a famine of the word of God in the land the spiritual nutrients that enable the eye to spot sin as sin is gone.” – John Piper

**Take-Home:** When you do what is right in your eyes, you will morally starve. Moral nourishment begins when you ask daily, “Lord not my will but yours be done!”

**A Physical Famine (1:1)** To make matters worse, not only was the culture in moral chaos, there was a physical starvation in the land. This is not the first famine in history nor would it be the last. Due to a famine, **Abram** went down to Egypt to stay for a while. Due to a famine, **Isaac** journeyed down to the land of the Philistines. Due to a famine, **Joseph’s** brother came to the land of Egypt to buy grain.

**Take-Home**: Moments of physical need (famines) often advance God’s plan for his people. In our greatest moments of emptiness Yahweh proves that He is enough.

So, the family left Bethlehem in Judah to stay in the territory of Moab. **Bethlehem** is a Hebrew word that means the “house of bread or food.” How ironic that the house of bread failed to feed and satisfy this family. Wouldn’t you think that living in the land of the bread would be enough?

**Take-Home:** There will be moments that you do everything to provide physically, and you are left empty. It’s possible to be in church and spiritually empty. It’s possible to have everything the world says is success still be empty. Living in Bethlehem is not enough, only God can satisfy.

Now the family travels to **Moab**. According to Genesis the Moabites were descendants from **Lot**, the product of an incestuous relationship with his older daughter. The Moabites were the ones who withheld food when Israel was hungry from their exodus. Now Moab was a place of refuge.

Did God desire for this family to go to Moab? The text remains silent. Rabbinic tradition treats Elimelech poorly for his decision.

**Take-Home:** Be careful making decisions when you are hungry, tired and weak. Satan will always **hits** you when you are Hungry, Isolated, and Tired.

Now we finally meet the **family**. **Elimelech**, “my God is king,” brings his wife Naomi to the foreign land. **Naomi** means “pleasant, lovely, or delightful.” Soo, she will exclaim, “don’t call me Naomi (lovely), call me Mara (bitter). After the resettlement, Elimelech dies, and she is left with her two sons

**Spiritual Famine (1:4-5).** What began as a moral emergency, led to a physical emergency, now finds Naomi in a spiritual dark night of the soul. Her husband, the one who led the family to Moab died. We don’t know how or why, all we know is the outcome.

Hopefully, yet tragically, their two sons married, had no offspring and then die suddenly. Naomi is left without her two sons, and without her husband. To be without her sons and husband means that she now lacks any means of **support**. To remain without an heir in a foreign land means that she has no **identity**.

She is no longer Naomi, she is only the woman. The woman is left empty, broken, without identity, and seemingly, without hope.

**Take-Home:** Have you ever felt the weight and the hopelessness of Naomi? **Ps 130:1**    Out of the depths I call to you, LORD!

Have you lost your husband, wife, child? Do you desperately want a child of your own? Have you received a bleak diagnosis? Do you remember the call? Do you remember the doctor walking in? are you caring for someone you love, just to see them slip away physically, mentally, or spiritually? Are you alone? Are you suffering? Are you in great need?

**Take-Home**: Naomi didn’t have her husband or her sons, but she was never alone In her darkest night, Naomi was not alone. Yahweh provided a way for Naomi to find nourishment

**Ps 130:5**    I wait for the LORD; I wait and put my hope in his word. **6** I wait for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning - more than watchmen for the morning.

**The eternal house with Bread –** thousands of years later, the Father sent His only Son to a world that was spiritually empty. As providence would have it, and as the prophets predicted, God incarnate – Jesus, was born in an obscure little village five miles south east of Jerusalem. The location was a rural blue collar community filled with farmers who grew wheat and barley, day laborers who commuted to Jerusalem, and shepherds who supplied the temple with acceptable sacrifices.

The town only had 500-1000 people but has some national history. **Rachel**, the wife of the great patriarch Jacob died giving birth to Benjamin in this locale. **David’s** boyhood home was here – the greatest king of Judah. Jesus raised in Nazareth, was born here. Born in **Bethlehem** because of the census where every male had to bring their family back to their hometown.

God sent His only son to be born in Bethlehem (the house of bread) to a world starving spiritually. One day, the Messiah would declare **John 6:35**   “I am the **bread** of life,” Jesus told them. “No one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty again.”

To think, the Bethlehemites thought they were only known for their wheat and barley.

**Take-Home:** The Bread of life came to a world during a famine so that you could be filled. **6** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Naomi left Bethlehem because they lived in a house without bread. Now, Jesus has come so that you might have eternal bread.

**So What?**

Remember the children in WWII who were abundantly fed and cared for. However, at night they did not sleep well. They seemed restless and afraid. When they each received a slice of bread to hold the child would go to sleep, subconsciously feeling it would have something to eat tomorrow.

I am the **bread** of life,” Jesus told them. “No one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty again.”

If you want to follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior you can do so using words like this: My life is empty—I recognize its because of my sin. I need You. I believe Christ came to live, die and was raised from the dead to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, the Bread of life and I will follow Him.

**Exegetical Notes**

There are three human issues in the narration of the prologue that transcend time: aloneness, hopelessness in suffering, and the plight of old age (NIV, 539).

How do we respond to circumstances that God brings into our lives often determines outcomes? Elimelek’s response to the famine was to move his family to Moab – a decision contrary to God’s revealed will to His people. The son’s decision to marry Moabite women was also contrary to God’s revealed will. These decisions spelled disaster for their family (NIV, 544).

God is concerned about the lives of ordinary people, including a woman (TOTC, 245).

**Ruth 1:1    During the time of the judges, there was a famine in the land. A man left Bethlehem in Judah with his wife and two sons to stay in the territory of Moab for a while.**

Judges

* The setting is the time of the Judges: ca. 1200-1050 BC. The exact time within this larger time frame is unknown.
* The overall view of the time of the Judges is negative (cf. Judges 21:25).
* The people failed to be the distinctive people of God. So they brought down God's judgment on themselves cyclical good times and bad times; peace and prosperity followed by difficulty (including famine). So 1:1 is during a bad time, and 1:6 - 4:17 is during a good cycle.
* The book of Judges teems with violent invasions, apostate religions, unchecked lawlessness, and tribal civil war (NICOT, 84).
* Ruth most likely falls between Ehud and Jephthah since, except for Eglon, Israel dominated Moab during that time (NICOT, 84).
* The chaos described in Judges throws into sharp relief the extraordinary kindness that pervades the Book of Ruth. This kindness – hesed – functions as a key agent for the transformation that occurs in the course of the book’s narrative (JPS, 4).

**Famine**

* Famines in the OT often advance God’s plan for his people. See Gen 12:10; Gen 26:1, and Gen. 41-50 (NICOT, 85). And inspire prayer in them.” – Lucas Osiander
  + Such echoes of Genesis, which continue throughout Ruth (especially 4:11-12), inform the reader that this is a story about ancestors (JPS, 3).
* “God also afflicts his church with famine sometimes: both in order to bring back the more dissolute to repentance and to test the faith of the pious, in order to curb and contain the lust of the flesh, and to excite

**Bethlehem**

* See the map in Block, pages 766-767. The physical setting is Bethlehem in Judah. Bethlehem means "house of bread," so the irony is that there was a famine in the house of bread. However, farming had always been difficult in this area, even in the best of times.
* How ironic that the “house of bread” failed to feed this family.

**Moab**

* Moab was east of the Dead Sea, mountains, and plateaus.
* The two nations had a rocky relationship over the years. Israel and Moab were kinfolks. Moab and Ammon were the descendants of Lot by his daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.
* God forbade the Israelites to conquer the Moabites.  
  David trusted the king of Moab with some of his own family.  
  Problems with the Moabites in Numbers 24 and 25: they seduced Israel to Baal worship.
* They also hired Balaam to curse Israel. In Deuteronomy, Moab was prohibited from entering the assembly to worship.
* The family left the familiar for the unfamiliar, the known for the unknown. The foursome was legally a “stranger,” and so was its world. Further, to seek refuge in Moab was both shameful and dangerous (NICOT).
* According to Genesis19:30-37, the Moabites descended from Lot. Specifically, they descended from an incestuous encounter between Lot and his older daughter. Deut. 23:5 accuses the Moabites of refusing to provide water and food after Israel fled Egypt (JPS, 5).
* Not only is Bethlehem the site of a famine, but Moab, the place associated in Israel’s memory with the withholding of food (Deut. 23:3), becomes the destination of an Israelite family seeking to escape the famine (Linafelt, 4).

**Stay/Sojourner**

* Sojourn–a temporary stay; Elimelech did not intend to stay there forever. Northern Moab was prosperous with fertile land. Was Elimelech sinning for going to Moab? The text does not reveal the answer to this question. The rabbinic tradition treats him badly on this point.
* Hubbard sees similarities between the characters in Ruth and the patriarchs. Also, the bad times are indicators of good things and times to come, just as in Genesis.
* Had a protected legal status between the full rights of a native and the few rights of a foreigner. As outsiders, they would have been at the mercy of the Moabite customs and hospitality (NICOT, 86).

**2 The man’s name was Elimelech, and his wife’s name was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the fields of Moab and settled there.**

**Elimelech**

* Elimelech: my God is king; Slotki saw his death as punishment for leaving the Promised Land, so he translated the name "unto me is the kingdom;" the irony is that "my God is king" left the land, showing a lack of trust in his king
* In the first two verses, Elimelech is clearly the focus of attention. He is the one who leaves Bethlehem of Judah to live for a while in the field of Moab. The syntax of these two verses suggests the initiative for the trip to Moab was Elimelech’s, and the participation of his wife and sons was a secondary issue (NAC, 625).
* It seems that Elimelech designed his own solution instead of calling on God for mercy and repenting of the sins that plagued the nation during the dark days of the Judges (NAC, 627).

**Naomi**

* Naomi = pleasant, lovely, or delightful (contrast that later with her saying, "don't call me lovely or delightful, call me bitter [Mara]"; ironic that the pleasant one experienced unpleasantness and became unpleasant for a while

**Mahlon** = to be sick  
**Chilion** = failing

**Ruth**   
Ruth = friend or compassion (what does it mean if someone is ruthless?) Boaz = strength

**3 Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, died, and she was left with her two sons.**

* Naomi is the central character in this verse and the following verses. Her husband died. The narrator was very succinct: no mention of any illness, how long he was sick, or any other factors that we might expect the narrator to reveal to us. Now Naomi lives with her two sons: "to be sick" and "failing." We see that she is the focus of this narrative and that her situation will become progressively worse.
* A famine shattered the solidarity between man and the land. Now death destroys harmony between the man and woman (NICOT, 92).
* The author gives no reason for his death. In particular, nothing suggests divine punishment,’ but later Jewish traditions accuse Elimelech of having deserted his people (JPS, 6).

**4 Her sons took Moabite women as their wives: one was named Orpah, and the second was named Ruth. After they had lived in Moab for about ten years,**

* The two sons married foreign women. The natural expectation would be for the sons to marry to raise sons to continue the family name. Whether this was a cause of concern or worry for Naomi is not answered by the text. We know later that Naomi blessed the women before she urged them to return to her families, so there was certainly love between them at the end of the ten years.
* Deuteronomy forbids intermarriage with the Canaanite people in the land (7:1-6), but the Moabites are not specifically mentioned. So whether Mahlon and Chilion sinned by marrying Moabites and how Naomi felt about this are not addressed in the text.

**Ruth**

* + The etymology of this name, which appears only in this book, is difficult. The Moabite Mesha inscription uses the form ryt, “satiation,” or overflowing with water (JPS, 7).

**Ten Years**

* The sojourn (temporary stay) turned into ten years.
* The passing of ten years makes the audience anticipate the happy event which would normally follow marriage, the birth of children. Thus it quietly introduces one of the book’s dominant themes, the lack of heirs (NICOT, 95).
* This may be another allusion to the Abraham story, for Abraham and Sarah were in Canaan for ten years before Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to serve as a surrogate to birth to a child in Genesis 16:3 (JPS, 7).

**Five, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.**

* First, Naomi's husband died, and now both of her sons. Truly "delightful's" fate was anything but pleasant. Naomi has no husband, sons, land, or means of support. For a woman in that part of the world at that time, circumstances could not be any worse than they are for Naomi at that point.

**The Woman**

* Furthermore, due to the nature of family and societal life in Hebrew society, Naomi also has no identity, so the narrator refers to her simply as "the woman."
* Naomi is now empty (without a husband and sons) and lacks identity.

**Illustrations**

Immediately after World War II the allied armies gathered up many hungry, homeless children and placed them in large camps. There the children were abundantly fed and cared for. However, at night they did not sleep well. They seemed restless and afraid.

Finally, a psychologist hit on a solution. After the children were put to bed, they each received a slice of bread to hold. If they wanted more to eat, more was provided, but this particular slice was not to be eaten—it was just to hold.

The slice of bread produced marvelous results. The child would go to sleep, subconsciously feeling it would have something to eat tomorrow. That assurance gave the child a calm and peaceful rest. *Charles L. Allen, God's Psychiatry (Revell, 1988)*