



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

December 17, 2023

The Grandmothers: Ruth

Recap of sermon from December 17, 2023

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-18, 4:13-17

According to some ratings statistics, the Hallmark Channel has been the top entertainment network on basic cable in the fourth quarter of the year for several years. They are not the top network the other three quarters of the year. The difference? Hallmark knows Christmas.

The Hallmark Channel website claims that they have a new original movie every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night starting on October 20. That's 31 new original movies. Well, *original* might be a stretch. Everyone knows that these movies are all basically the same story. And we're all okay with it.

The fact that they are full of cliché, trite story lines, predictable plot points, and catalog-model attractive actors, is why we watch. We know what to expect. Like a big platter of Christmas fudge and hot chocolate, there's not much sustenance, but it feels good to consume.

The Book of Ruth could be read critically. We could question the agency of Ruth. We could wonder about Naomi's motivations. We could ask what "uncovered his feet" means. We could ask Boaz why he apparently allowed his men to assault *other* women in his fields. We could lament that the child born to Ruth is called "Naomi's." We can bring up issues of trafficking, abuse, patriarchy, and exploitation. These are all worthy questions of the text, and I'm thankful for scholars like Wilda C. Gafney who challenge these kinds of texts—but right now, as I ponder the Grandmothers, I'd rather see the story of Ruth as a Hallmark Christmas Movie.

Let's plug in the characters. A hard-working woman (Ruth) who has experienced grief and a lot of bad luck. She has a dear friend (Naomi) who is older and wiser, but their bond is secure. New in town, the woman gets a job for a man of integrity (Boaz). He makes sure she is safe and shows he cares about her with little gifts and benefits. Eventually, the older friend arranges a romantic setting for Ruth and Boaz to take the next step in their relationship. They fall for each other, but they have to conquer one more obstacle (the unnamed redeemer). In the end, Boaz and Ruth marry, have a child, and Naomi joins their household. They live happily ever after as the snow falls in town square and the Christmas lights twinkle.

This could honestly be the next Hallmark movie, but there's one more character who isn't named in the story. He casts a pall over the entire story, revealed not by any charac-

ter, but by how Ruth is described.

Over and over she is called Ruth the Moabite. The reader cannot forget where Ruth came from. Like all the women in this Advent sermon series, she is called righteous. Her integrity, friendship, courage, and loyalty leads to the joyful climax of the story—King David is her great-grandson. The righteousness of the Moabite wife leads directly to the birth of King David.

And this stands in direct tension with the other unnamed character—Ezra. The work of Ezra-Nehemiah was probably written at about the same time as Ruth. Though the story of Ruth takes place far before Ezra, they stand as contemporary voices from post-exilic Judah. As the exile ends and the people return to Judah from Babylon, they have a problem. How to rebuild? How do they put life back together. Some have been there in Judah the entire time.

Ezra-Nehemiah poses the twin projects of rebuilding the city wall and the Temple. They are also adamant that the only way to restore the people to their former greatness is to close ranks, stick to their own, and be pure. Among these purity laws is the ban of marrying outside of Israel. Moabites are among the groups specifically named to avoid.

Ezra-Nehemiah and Ruth pose competing understandings of how to move forwards as a people. Ezra-Nehemiah reminds the people of the Law, the rules they must follow, the duty they have to worship, and to protect themselves. Ruth tells a story of love, friendship, and embracing "the other."

Ruth is more than an a Hallmark Movie. The story is a reminder that when people are in relationship, walls are broken down. Divisions that we put up to protect ourselves crumble. Relating to outsiders is a more fruitful way to be a people of God. "The other" will always be among us. Ezra-Nehemiah thought the answer was to avoid and isolate. Ruth comes back saying love and embrace.

When the writer of the Gospel of Matthew decided to tell the story of the savior of the world, he reminded us of the women that made it possible. He reminded us of Ruth the Moabite. He reminded us of a Hallmark-worthy story of friendship, courage, loyalty, and love. He reminded us that the path to the Kingdom runs through a love story. It seems appropriate that Jesus, the one who told his disciples to "make disciples of all nations," had a Moabite Grandmother.

December 24

9:30 a.m.—Fourth Sunday of Advent, Bathsheba

4:00 p.m.—Christmas Eve Communion and Candles