



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 18

October 12, 2025

The Outside View

Ruth 1:1–19a

¹ Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. ³ Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. ⁴ Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. ⁵ Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread. ⁷ Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."

So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people."

¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, ¹³ would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!"

¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said:

"Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;



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*Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.*

¹⁷ *Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me.”*

¹⁸ *When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.*

¹⁹ *Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem.*

“What is going on here? What do you think you’re *doing*?” Words of fear, anger, discouragement, perhaps even despair. Words spoken by someone whose life seems unfair, out of control, and filled with pain. Words at times spoken *to* God, spoken *at* God. Words that could very well have been Naomi’s words.

This is the view from within, the inside view of Naomi’s life and existence, the inside view in today’s Old Testament. I admit, the words I have used are not explicitly the words of our text, but we do have these words from Naomi’s mouth: “The hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” And later on, we hear her voice again: “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me home again empty.” The name “Naomi,” by the way, comes from the Hebrew word for “pleasant,” while the name “Mara” means bitter.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Naomi and her husband left the Land of Israel, and they traveled with their two sons to dwell in the fields of Moab . . . with idolaters. While they were there, her husband died, and as the text poignantly declares, “she was left with her two sons.” Then her sons got married . . . to idolaters. And then the sons died. Widowed, bereft of her offspring, with two Moabite daughters-in-law. Yes, there was a wonderful love between Naomi and Orpah and Ruth. Yes, we have that moving scene where Ruth says, “Where you go, I will go . . . your people/my people. . . your god/my god.” But that leaves us with a question. Does a deep love between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law – wonderful as that is – [does that] justify switching religions?

The inside view of this text is not pretty; Naomi has no idea what’s going on. She can see that her life is hard and filled with sadness and loss, but she doesn’t know why.

And that’s where the text ends, with the inside view. Is that a view you can identify with — either by personal experience or through the lens of someone you know and love? Thankfully, the story does have a happy ending: Boaz comes into the picture to play the part of kinsman redeemer, Ruth marries him, and so it goes — but even at that, Elimilech,



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Naomi's husband, still died. And Mahlon and Chilion, her sons, died. The inside view doesn't give us a story where God makes it all better. It doesn't always make sense, when you view your life from the inside.

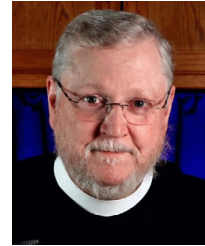
Your life – or the life of someone you love – might be like that. It doesn't always make sense. You can't always tell what is going on. The story doesn't always have a happy ending. Because sin really is sin. And sickness really is sickness. And death really is death. And we don't know why a loving and almighty God allows such things to happen. The view from the inside . . . you can't ignore it or pretend it's not there or that it's not real. If you would live amongst other people – and you do! – you have to be willing to be with them when all they can see is the view from the inside. The perspective of Naomi. And you can't judge it and you can't deny it, and sometimes you can't explain it.

But, thank God, it's not the *only* view. Not in this text, not in our lives, and not in the lives of those we love. It is *not* the only view. These events in the life of Naomi, are being told by someone after the fact. His voice is directing us as we read and as we hear them. He knows more than Naomi may realize. His is the view from outside. It's not simplistic, and it doesn't guarantee a happy ending. But listen to what he tells us. Listen, so that when those who suffer come to the place where they have ears to hear, you can tell it to them.

“Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled.” Judges – looking back on it, a time of chaos and disorder in Israel, a time when even the divinely appointed deliverers of God's people were confused and double-minded and inadequate. But it would not always be so — there's a view from the outside.

“A certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab.” “They were Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah.” Why bother saying the name of the town? And not once, but twice? No real reason . . . yet . . . and no reason of which Naomi could be aware. But Naomi returns with Ruth from the land of Moab, and she returns to . . . Bethlehem.

And there the story plays out and you know how it goes and we could dwell on the inside view. But let's stay with the outside perspective, the very outer frame of this little Book of Ruth. Because the power doesn't come from the inside view, even when it's a happy one. The power and strength come from the end of this little book. At the very end, Boaz and Ruth have a son, and they name him Obed. He is the father of Jesse. And Jesse is the father of David. David of Bethlehem. But it's not enough for the narrative to say it once. Let's say it again and give a little genealogy just so we can offer again that outside view. The final verse of the Book of Ruth: “And to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse was born David.” David the king. David, to whom God would give a promise and through whose line God would be at work in Israel. Even as the Old Testament story plays out and according to the inside view there is sin and rebellion and idolatry as Israel and her



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kings fall away from their God and death and judgment come upon them — even then God is at work in Israel.

That's the outside view. God is at work. Not nearly always to rub away the effects of sickness and death. No, the inside view may very well be a harsh one, a sad one, a heart-breaking one. But it's not the only view and that's the point. God was at work . . . for Naomi. For the God of Israel is Yahweh, the covenant God, whose name is really understood only when He comes down to rescue His people from slavery in Egypt. Yahweh was Israel's God even during the period of the Judges, when each man did what was right in his own eyes, and your run-of-the-mill god would have just written these people off. But no, God was at work in Israel, and He would give them a shepherd king who, sinner though he was, did not lead them into idolatry — David led them to the worship of the only God whose mercy is for a lifetime . . . even for a lifetime filled with sadness. God is at work, He has a plan, and He is carrying it out all around Naomi as the plan leads to David.

God was at work in David . . . but His work was far from finished. The promise continued to echo through the years as the fortunes of Israel waxed and mostly waned and sadness and destruction and exile and punishment for sin gave an inside view that broke the heart of the prophets and broke the back of the nation. But God was at work. God's promise of a faithful shepherd king to rule over His people cannot be taken away because it's the outside view, it's God's view, and God is at work in Israel and the promise comes true . . . in the city of David. In Bethlehem, Ephrathah, in the land of Judah, in the days of Herod the king, when wise men came from the East. God is at work in the one acclaimed as the Son of David. In Jesus.

Jesus is God's bigger picture, God's outside view, and in Him God was at work — in the Shepherd King, the Good Shepherd. He went about doing good and healing many, for God was with Him. And when He dealt with the brokenness and the sin and pain He did not take it all away — though there are days and weeks when we wonder why and we cry out. He did not take it away. He will, one day, but not yet. No, He took the sin and evil upon Himself. He entered it — for us, in our place. So He understands and He can comfort us in our distress. But more — the ultimate power of sin and death and sickness — their ultimate power is gone. Because of Jesus, God's own Son, we will not be condemned, and because of Jesus, God will always be our faithful and loving Father.

Nothing can separate us — that's Paul's outside view. Oh, he knew the inside view, just read the Book of Acts! But even when the inside view is tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword, the outside view is this — neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord [Rom 8].

This, beloved, is true faith. Not superficial faith or pretend faith, and certainly not blind



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faith — but faith that can see two views at the same time. Oh, Christians! When the inside view is fearful and strong, may your God give you hearts that are stronger still, to hold fast to what is always true: Jesus Christ for you, and no suffering can take that away. He purchased you with His own blood! No matter what may come, God in Christ is still at work on your behalf. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen