

One of the things I love most about the narrative lectionary is the summer opportunity to look at books of the Bible that ordinarily don't get much attention. A variety of summer series created by the Narrative Lectionary team offer that opportunity. I've also made up some series of my own.

This summer our first series covers the books of Ruth and Esther.

Ruth and Esther aren't the topic of very many Sunday sermons although we did a summer series on women in the Bible quite a few years ago that included them. And verses 16-17 in today's reading are often used in weddings.

They're two very different books set in different times, but they have in common a strong, courageous woman as the main character.

In the books of Ruth and Esther, God never speaks. In fact in Esther, God is never even mentioned. But that gives us an opportunity to think more about how God works through ordinary people in the every day stuff of their lives.

Ruth is short – only four chapters. It's one of the few books we can actually read in its entirety during worship.

So let's dive in.

The first seven words of the story are important. In the days when the judges ruled. The judges were essentially tribal rulers who governed the people of Israel before there were kings. Most of them were corrupt. The land was relatively lawless and the often repeated phrase in the book of Judges is "everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

The nation was a dumpster fire.

But this story is not about any of that. The story of Ruth zooms in on a slice of ordinary life in a time of chaos. It's in part a love story, in part a glimpse of ordinary life in a chaotic world, and in part a story of loyalty and faithfulness.

The story does not begin on a happy note. There's a famine which forces Elimelech to migrate with his family to Moab where there is food. At first things go well in Moab – Elimelech and Naomi's sons find wives in Moab. This is already a bit scandalous – the Israelites generally did not marry outside their people.

But then before a next generation can be born, the men all die. In a society in which economic well-being for a whole clan rests on the eldest male, Naomi and her daughters-in-law are in trouble.

The famine in Judah ends and Naomi decides to return home. There she may be able to reconnect with relatives and be taken care of.

The sensible thing for Orpah and Ruth is to stay in Moab. They're young, they'll find new husbands and life will go on for them. Going to Judah will be a complete unknown. They would be foreigners. They won't have family to support them. There's no guarantee they would find a husband among the Israelites. It makes much more sense for them to turn back to their own homeland.

Orpah makes the sensible choice. She is sad to leave her mother-in-law, but back she goes.

Ruth does something different. She chooses to stay with Naomi...to leave behind a much better prospect for a secure life and head into the unknown. And there appears to be no other reason for her to make this choice other than her faithfulness to Naomi.

So, time for our Hebrew word of the day – Chesed. It's a word that doesn't really have an English equivalent. It usually gets translated as steadfast love and kindness, or just lovingkindness.

Sometimes the term covenant love is used. Mercy is another. A perhaps more contemporary one that I really like is Love in action.

Chesed means willing the good of the other really for no reason except that that's who you are. In the Old Testament it's used most often for God's love for humanity. God's chesed for us is all for our benefit, not God's.

But when it is applied to humans, it represents what Ruth does here – she shows chesed to Naomi. Ruth has no guarantee this will work out for her. In fact lots could go wrong. But she will remain steadfastly loyal to Naomi. It's just who she is.

And ultimately, Naomi accepts that love. Sometimes that's almost as hard as giving it.

This is just the beginning of Ruth's story. Maybe some of you know how it ends. Maybe some of you who don't are curious and will go home and read the whole story.

But the best message for us today comes from just letting the story up to this point sit with us...for us to sit with Ruth in the uncertainty.

This story begins with a time of pain, of grief. For Naomi there is bitterness from having lost all of her hopes and dreams for her future.

For Ruth, there is also grief...probably also some fear. After all she's left behind everything familiar to her. She left her own family, she left her people.

It's the time of the judges and it is not a great time for the Israelites as a people.

In the midst of all that, Ruth shows us that sometimes the best course of action when everything seems off...when things haven't worked out...when chaos surrounds us... is to just show chesed to those in our lives. And to receive it from others.

As a nation right now, it feels like we too are living in a dumpster fire. Amidst the communal dumpster fire we all have our own personal battles. Bills to pay. Cancer diagnoses in ourselves or a loved one. Bitter divorces in our families. Fractured relationships...job insecurity...or struggles with finding purpose in retirement. Adult children who are struggling. Grief as we adjust to life without someone we loved.

It's easy to get overwhelmed...to want to return to a place that seemed more secure.

I remember back in 2020 as the pandemic ground on and one thing after another seemed to be going wrong. In a social media meme, someone made the comparison to the movie Groundhog Day.

In Groundhog Day, a cynical, selfish news reporter gets caught in a loop where every day is Groundhog Day all over again.

He keeps killing himself, but no matter what he wakes up every morning alive and it's February 2 all over again.

2020 sort of seemed like that – every day we woke up and were still in the pandemic and the world was still a dumpster fire.

The question with the meme was So how did Bill Murray's character in Groundhog Day finally get out of that loop? Maybe we should do that.

And then came the response – he ended it by using the loop to change himself and using it to help others. And yes, that's exactly how we get out of this.

Showing chesed to one another is the way through the worst of times.

In the midst of pain and uncertainty, Ruth shows us the way. She reminds us of the steadfast love...the love in action God shows to us. And she shows us that the way through our own trials...our own uncertainties...is to show that same kind of love to those in our lives.

To tend to our little part of the world. To show love that is purely for the sake of another and not our own selfish interests.

God works in the background in Ruth and Naomi's story. We're invited to follow their story...to pay attention to how God shows chesed to the two women.

But here's a little spoiler alert – the story is lovely just on its own merit. But through Ruth and the way her story unfolds, God will bring salvation to the whole world. Because this foreign woman, this woman from Moab will become King David's grandmother.

And, generations later she will become an ancestor to none other than God made flesh, Jesus Christ. Over the next three weeks, we'll find out how that comes about and we'll see what other wisdom we can glean from this beautiful little story.