

Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday

March 8, 2026

Creating Home and Places of Possibilities

Women of Determination and Faith

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Image courtesy of Havenlight

Whither Thou Goest, Sandy Freckleton Gagon

Growing up I understood the story of Ruth as a story of loyalty, friendship and love. It's all those things, but it's also more. This four-chapter book speaks to the challenges of making one's way when there seems to be no way forward. It shows the impact of displacement, religiously sanctioned gender inequality, male power and privilege. Ultimately, however, it speaks to the kind of courage and determination women embody when seeking to rebuild their home and lives as strangers in strange lands. These challenges are as real today as they were thousands of years ago.

Framing the movement of this story in a three-act play, we're introduced to Naomi and her daughters-in-law

Orpah and Ruth. With each of their husbands deceased, what would they do? Their value and survival in society was directly tied to the men in their lives. Without protection of men "women had no rights and no stable means of survival."¹

Act 1: Escaping Death and Hunger

Naomi and her husband Elimelech had moved to Moab from their home in Bethlehem some years earlier. Although the Moabites were descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew, the relationship between the Moabites and the Israelites was complicated. Life would likely not have been easy.

Ruth journeyed to Bethlehem with Naomi, where she became an immigrant and stranger. They had to find ways to survive as widows, but they were in this together and that bond was noted when they arrived (Ruth 1:19).

What compels someone to leave their homeland, to become a stranger in another land—a land of different customs and languages?

My parents left their homeland of Puerto Rico to come to the mainland, where they would ultimately meet and build a life of possibilities. They were met with barriers of language and economic challenges. They experienced cultural assumptions and biases consistent with being “different” in a new land. But there was something else—a combination of courage and desperation that outweighed the fear of the unknown.

I often think about my 20-something-year-old mother, working in a factory in New York City, saving her pennies to bring each of her three sisters to join her. What determination! So what drives one to leave home? In her poem entitled “Home,” Warsan Shire poetically answers the question with “You only leave home when home won’t let you stay.”²

In the case of Naomi and Elimelech, they fled their ancestral homeland to escape a famine. In essence they left “home when home wouldn’t let them stay.” To them, things at home likely seemed riskier than the risk it would take to start over. The Book of Ruth then is a story of diaspora, “the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland.”³

Historically, diasporas have been prompted by people’s desperate need to flee poverty, war, political or religious persecution, violence.

While in Moab, however, a different tragedy would strike them. Elimelech and both his sons Mahlon and Chilion died. The women—all three childless—were caught in a difficult cultural reality. What would home look like as widows? What options were before them?

Act 2: Courageous and Desperate Decisions

Throughout biblical times, the status of women, children and widows was largely determined by their relationship to men. Without that relationship, they could be subject to a life of poverty. It was an uncertain existence, dependent on the generosity of others.

Yet throughout the biblical narrative, we witness God’s concern for the most vulnerable. God reminds us how to treat those who’ve suffered great loss. The psalmist proclaimed: “The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow” (Ps. 146:9a). Throughout his ministry Jesus reminded his followers to heed the call to care through acts like feeding the hungry, offering drink to the thirsty and providing welcome to the stranger (Matt. 25:35–36).

Notwithstanding this biblical understanding, societal and even religious systems often don’t allow for fruitful possibilities, economically or culturally, for all people. Although women are not technically viewed as property today, widows and orphans are more prone to live in poverty. According to some statistics, “widowhood remains an important risk factor for transition into poverty. Faced with the loss of resources in widowhood, women have only a few options available to improve their economic status.”⁴

Naomi was aware of what widowhood meant in her culture and with a sense of some bitterness (Ruth 1:13) and love for them, sought to release her two daughters-in-law. She wanted Orpah and Ruth to return to Moab where they might have new lives, with the possibility of marriage and children. Naomi determined it best to return to Bethlehem where the famine was over. Perhaps she was prompted by the familiarity of the laws and rituals of her faith, willing again to leave her “home” in Moab to return to her “home” in Bethlehem. Again, consider the refrain “You only leave home when home won’t let

you stay.” For Naomi, death had taken away her connection to her home in Moab.

Urged by Naomi to return to Moab, Orpah chose to go to Moab and Ruth chose to stay with Naomi. We really don’t know why Ruth made this choice, but the words of her commitment reverberate across centuries: “where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Today her words are often recited at weddings as they capture a fierce loyalty that brings people together. Ruth journeyed to Bethlehem with Naomi, where she became an immigrant and stranger. They had to find ways to survive as widows, but they were in this together and that bond was noted when they arrived (Ruth 1:19).

Act 3: Claiming Dignity

Religious traditions are intended to instill in people the tenets of a faith requiring justice, mercy and humility. By our standards today, some of the earlier traditions of Judaism and Christianity seem oppressive, sexist and imposing of additional pain on the most vulnerable. This was true for Naomi and Ruth. To avoid being subject to a life of dependence, they would need to be married to a next-of-kin.

Notwithstanding the cultural restrictions of women throughout history, women have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to turn male power and privilege into opportunities that could enhance their God-given dignity. Naomi understood the practices and laws of her homeland and her faith. She used that knowledge along with the wisdom of her years to create conditions that could bring Ruth “some security” (Ruth 3:1). That security could only be achieved by engaging Boaz, who fortunately had heard of both Ruth’s faithfulness and her generosity towards Naomi. He saw that immigrant widow in a favorable light.

Boaz was clearly a businessman. As we read in Ruth 4, a nameless next-of-kin had the first option to purchase the parcel of land being sold by Naomi, the widow of Elimelech. Boaz presented that next-of-kin with the possibility adding, “The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance” (Ruth 4:5). The next-of-kin wasn’t willing to jeopardize his own

inheritance and responded by taking off his sandal (as was tradition in Israel), securing the transaction that allowed Boaz to acquire “from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon,” further announcing that Ruth would become his wife (Ruth 4: 9–10).

The rest is history. Naomi was blessed. Boaz and Ruth had a son. That son would be Obed, the grandfather of David the king. The widowed, immigrant woman who left home and traveled with her mother-in-law to a strange land would now be one of only five women mentioned in the lineage of Jesus, along with Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba (wife of Uriah) and Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matt. 1).

Finding Hope and Power

We are reminded that the God of creation uses individuals viewed as invisible, unworthy or marginalized by society as vehicles for redemptive hope and possibilities. God lifts them up from the margins and claims them as protagonists in the story of salvation history. This was embodied throughout the ministry of Jesus who challenged the cultural and religious assumptions of his time. From his birth to his death, his life reflected the understanding that true power comes from a place of vulnerability.

As you consider the multiple themes of this narrative, I invite you to consider three questions: Where in your life, in the life of your congregation or your community do you recognize the poet’s claim “You only leave home when home won’t let you stay”? How do religious institutions support traditions and practices that don’t honor the dignity of each individual? In what ways are we, the church of Jesus Christ, called to be a voice for the stranger in our midst, creating conditions for a dwelling place—a place to call home?

Notes

1. Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 13.
2. Warsan Shire, “Home,” *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (New York: Random House, 2022), poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-30925_HOME.
3. American Immigration Council, “Diaspora and development: Immigrants are economically invigorating,” August 20, 2012, americanimmigrationcouncil.org/in-the-news/diaspora-and-development-immigrants-are-economically-invigorating.
4. Centre for Family Health Initiative, “*The Financial/Economic Challenges of Widowhood*,” June 30, 2021, cfhinitiative.org/speak-wednesday-48.

A Service for the Worship of God

(As attendees enter, provide each with a strip of ribbon roughly 8 inches long.)

Call to Worship

One: We gather today, aware of our weariness. We are wanderers and seekers, longing for a place where we are home.

All: We gather, moved by the stories of Ruth and Naomi and finding our own stories in their journeys of loss, diaspora and redemption.

One: We gather before the God of creation, whose love defies all human borders, limitations and biases.

All: We gather to worship in the promise of that redemption.

One: Let us lift our voices to the one who lifts us from the margins, emboldening us to be ambassadors of hope in this world; to the one who prepares a home and place for us at the table.

Opening Prayer

Lord, as we gather in this space, we are humbled by the boldness of Ruth's loyalty. We stand in awe of words that continue to challenge the bonds and strength of our relationships. "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). May your spirit renew our commitment to step beyond our own limited human boundaries. May your presence in our lives allow us to be a presence of welcome in the lives of others.

Hymn

"For Everyone Born" (GtG 769)*

Prayer of Confession

Lord, notwithstanding your presence of hope in our lives, we acknowledge that we often ignore the cries of voices around us. We close our hearts and eyes to the pain of others. We feel exhausted and we disregard those who don't feel welcomed in our midst. Forgive us. Help us to be like Ruth, open to bonds beyond blood; to be like Naomi, determined and wise; to be like Boaz, compassionate and just. May we lean into our call to embrace the most vulnerable among us. We pray this in the name of the one whose life embodied this commitment, Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

One: Friends, God journeys with us in the wanderings and wonderings of diaspora. God breaks down walls that separate us from one another. Our God meets us where we are and invites us into the story of salvation. Believe the good news, in Jesus Christ we are a forgiven people. Amen.

People: Thanks be to God.

Scripture Readings

Select the scripture (and thematic approach) that feels appropriate to your context.

- Ruth 1:1–19a (loyalty)
- Ruth 1–4 (three-act story)
- Psalm 146:5–10 (God's concern for the oppressed)

Sermon

Reflect on the scripture and theme, including:

- *What does "home" look like?*
- *Cost of leaving home*
- *God's presence throughout diaspora*
- *God's call to the most vulnerable to bring about redemption*

Prayers of the People

Include themes of diaspora and displacement; immigration; gender inequality; creative wisdom and courage; resilience.

Invite worshipers to respond with "Hear our prayer."

Invitation to Offering—of Our Treasures and Ourselves

As we prepare to share the gifts of our treasures, you will find two baskets. One is for your offering. In the other—we invite you to bring up the ribbon you received and place it in that basket as a sign of belonging and being bound to one another in Christ.

Prayer of Dedication

God of welcome, receive these gifts as a sign of our commitment to be bound to one another and to you as we create spaces of hospitality toward the stranger and the most vulnerable in our midst. May we be bearers of gospel hope in spaces where the light of hope is but a distant dream.

Hymn

"We Are Marching in the Light of God" (GtG 853)

Charge and Benediction

One: May we march into the world remembering that the creator marches with us.

All: May we remember that Jesus redeems our stories with his life, death and resurrection.

One: May we remember that the breath of heaven binds us in love, encouraging us forward.

All: May we remember and go in peace. Amen.

Note

* Hymns marked "GtG" are from *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013).

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