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SESSION ONE

Ruth 1:1-18

Learner Session Guide

Focus Statement

Throughout history, humans have followed the pull and push of migration—following a dream or leaving behind a difficult situation. The story of Naomi and Ruth can speak deeply to us as we seek to live faithfully in an increasingly mobile world.

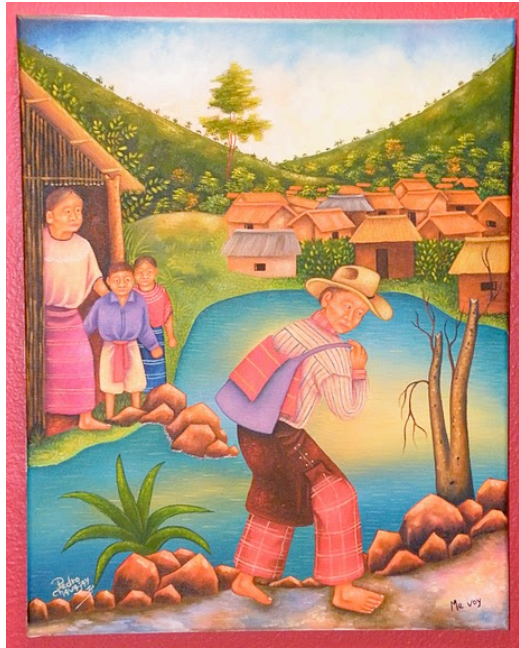
Key Verse

“But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! 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

Where Does Loss Push Us?

Focus Image



Me Voy by Pedro Chavajay Toc. Used by permission of the artist.

Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

Gracious God, as you accompanied Israel through the desert, by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day, so you have accompanied your people in every generation. May we know your presence as we reflect on our own journeys. In your name we pray. Amen.

Focus Activity

The Focus Image for this session is titled “Me Voy.” A literal translation would be “I leave,” but a more accurate title may be “Leave Taking.” Created by Pedro Chavajay Toc, a Guatemalan artist who recently migrated to the United States to work in the tomato fields in Florida, this painting captures the moment when he first left his homeland. Look at the picture. What emotions does it evoke for you? What do you notice? Does it capture the ambivalence you may have felt about a move you have made or about the migration experience of an ancestor?

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Open Scripture

Read Ruth 1:1-18.

- What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out for you?
- What might have been going through Naomi's mind as she first migrated to Moab and then as she decided to return home to Bethlehem?
- If you have at some point lived in a place other than where you were born and raised, what motivated your decision to move, and what was the experience like?

Join the Conversation

Historical Context

1. Two significant places in the ancient Near East and two time periods in the history of Israel help set a context for reading the book of Ruth. The first place is Bethlehem.

- What is the first thing that jumps in your mind when you hear "Bethlehem"?
- Places embody significant moments in our history. Think about the role of Plymouth Rock in the history of the settling of the United States. How might that be similar to the role of Bethlehem?

The second important place is Moab. Note where it is located on the map. Moab was among the most despised of the foreign nations. Read Deuteronomy 23:3-6.

- How might the original hearers of the book of Ruth have reacted when they heard that Elimelech and his family sought refuge in Moab, in enemy territory?

2. The first significant time period is highlighted in the book's first verse, literally "in the days of the judging of the judges." The days of the judges were a sorry time in Israel's history, as profoundly illustrated in the final chapters of the book of Judges when society deteriorates into the violence of rape and murder. Read the repeated refrain in Judges 17:6; 18:1; 21:25.



Notes

- Imagine what a society needs to do to move from chaos to productive community.
 - What is the connection between political leadership and social well-being?
3. Though the story of Ruth reportedly happens in the time of the judges, the book of Ruth was probably written and most certainly read over six centuries later in the period after the people of Judah have returned home from the exile in Babylon, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The returnees found folks from other countries

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living in their homes who had intermarried with the remnants of the people left behind. The returning exiles wanted to reorder society, to rebuild the temple, to read their Scripture, lead holy lives, and to get rid of foreign influences, including foreign wives. See Ezra 9:1-2 and Nehemiah 13:23-27.

- How might folks in these days have reacted to the beginning of Ruth, particularly to Elimelech's sons taking Moabite wives?
- What country or group of people would be the equivalent of Moab in your context? How would intermarriage be viewed by your community?

Literary Context

1. Attending to repetition often helps us mark what is important in biblical narrative. Two repeated items are particularly worthy of note in Ruth 1:1-18. The word repeated most often in these verses is "return, go back, turn back." In Hebrew this word, *shuv* [shoov], also refers to repentance.

- Underline the occurrences of this word in today's text. How does this word tie into issues of immigration, home, and repentance?

2. The other significant repetition is terms relating to family.

- Circle all of the different family terms in these verses.
- What constitutes family? Is Ruth a part of Naomi's extended family? Are there ways in which your family is this complicated?

3. The book of Ruth centers on characters. What do we learn about the two main characters, Naomi and Ruth, in these first few verses?

- What do we learn about Naomi from her speeches to her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:8-9, 11-13)?
- Listen to the law of the levirate in Deuteronomy 25:5-6. How does this help us to understand Naomi's words to her daughters-in-law?
- What do we learn about Ruth from her actions and her words in Ruth 1:16-18?
- If you were casting and directing a movie of Ruth, who would play Naomi and Ruth, and why? What stage directions would you give them to show their feelings and character development? How should they read their lines?

Lutheran Context

1. *Finitum capax infinitum* is a principle in Lutheran theology that points out that common (*finitum*) elements like bread, wine, and humanity itself are capable of facilitating an encounter with the divine (*infinitum*).

- Where in your life have you encountered God (or been encountered by God) in or through another person, experience, or even a tangible object?
- How might have the original hearers of this story reacted to the surprising ways that Ruth, a Moabite, is portrayed?

2. While Lutherans emphasize that good works cannot save us, we are called to respond to God's love through our actions. This is a response to the love we have experienced from God.

- What motivated Ruth to bind herself to Naomi as she does in 1:16-18?
- Ruth's words of commitment to Naomi are often used in wedding ceremonies. How do these words capture the kind of relationship God desires between humans and between humans and God?

Devotional Context

1. The book of Ruth challenges a variety of stereotypes.

- Do you know any mother-in-law jokes? How does humor both reflect and challenge stereotypes?
- How do Ruth and Naomi challenge the stereotypes about the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law?
- What other stereotypes are challenged in this first section of Ruth?
- Based on your conversation in the Historical Context above, what do you think might have been stereotypes about Moabites in ancient Israel? What groups may be viewed in a similar way in our culture today?

2. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law find themselves alone.

- What challenges does a person encounter today when he or she loses a life partner?
- How might that experience of loss be different for men than it is for women?
- Talk in pairs about a situation of loss or a significant "migration" in your life.

3. Naomi was a foreigner in Moab, and later Ruth will live as a foreigner in Bethlehem.

- What might be some of the particular vulnerabilities that they, as women and as foreigners, faced in the culture of their time?
- How might those be similar to the vulnerabilities faced by immigrants today who find themselves living away from their family, traditions, and other support systems?



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4. Levirate marriage laws were intended to provide protection for women who would end up without the protection afforded to them in their culture by male relatives.

- What resources are available to protect those who find themselves on the margins of our society today?
- How does your congregation respond to those who find themselves on the margins?
- How might Ruth's exemplary commitment to Naomi encourage or challenge the church's response to those on the margins?

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 317)

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Ruth 1:19—2:23.
2. Explore your own migration story or that of your family of origin. Talk about it with older relatives, do a genealogy search, or visit a town, home, or place that has special significance to your family. If you are willing, share some of what you discover with a friend or someone in the group.
3. When Naomi packed to go to Moab, and then when Ruth packed to go to Bethlehem, what do you think they would have wanted to take along? If you were moving to a new country, what is an item you would want to be sure to take along that represents your family's history or culture? Or, what would you want to send to school with your child or grandchild when it's "show and tell" time and they need to talk about what most matters to their family?

Enrichment

1. Explore area resources or search the Internet to learn more about immigrant communities in your town, city, or state. Where do recent immigrants to your community come from? Are there stores, cultural events, or resource centers in one of those immigrant communities that you could visit? What kinds of work are attracting immigrants

from that community to your area (pull), and what might be motivating their migration away from their country of origin (push)?

2. Look at your evening news, read through newspapers or other local or regional publications, and be attentive to what stories are being told about new immigrants to your community either through feature articles or news stories. Do you think the stories accurately portray your new neighbors?

For Further Reading

Two Commentaries

Ruth by Katharine Doob Sakenfield. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999.

Ruth: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources by Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz and Rabbi Nosson Scherman (Designer), ArtScroll Tanach Series (Mesorah Publishers: 1976).

Two Web sites

<http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=28>

http://www.textweek.com/joshua_judges_ruth.htm



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