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Introduction

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

Welcome to the conversation! The Bible study resources you are using are created to support the bold vision of the Book of Faith initiative that calls “the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.”

Simply put, this initiative and these resources invite you to “Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.”

We enter into this conversation based on the promise that exploring the Bible deeply with others opens us to God working in and through us. God’s Word is life changing, church changing, and world changing. Lutheran approaches to Scripture provide a fruitful foundation for connecting Bible, life, and faith.

A Session Overview

Each session is divided into the following four key sections. The amount of time spent in each section may vary based on choices you make. The core Learner Session Guide is designed for 50 minutes. A session can be expanded to as much as 90 minutes by using the Bonus Activities that appear in the Leader Session Guide.

• Gather (10-15 minutes)

Time to check in, make introductions, review homework assignments, share an opening prayer, and use the Focus Activity to introduce learners to the Session Focus.

• Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

The session Scripture text is read using a variety of methods and activities. Learners are asked to respond to a few general questions. As leader, you may want to capture initial thoughts or questions on paper for later review.

• Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Learners explore the session Scripture text through core questions and activities that cover each of the four perspectives (see diagram on p. 6). The core Learner Session Guide material may be expanded through use of the Bonus Activities provided in the Leader Session Guide. Each session ends with a brief Wrap-up and prayer.

• Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Lists homework assignments, including next week’s session Scripture text. The leader may choose one or more items to assign for all. Each session also includes additional Enrichment options and may include For Further Reading suggestions.

A Method to Guide the Conversation

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies has three primary goals:

- To increase biblical fluency;
- To encourage and facilitate informed small group conversation based on God’s Word; and
- To renew and empower us to carry out God’s mission for the sake of the world.

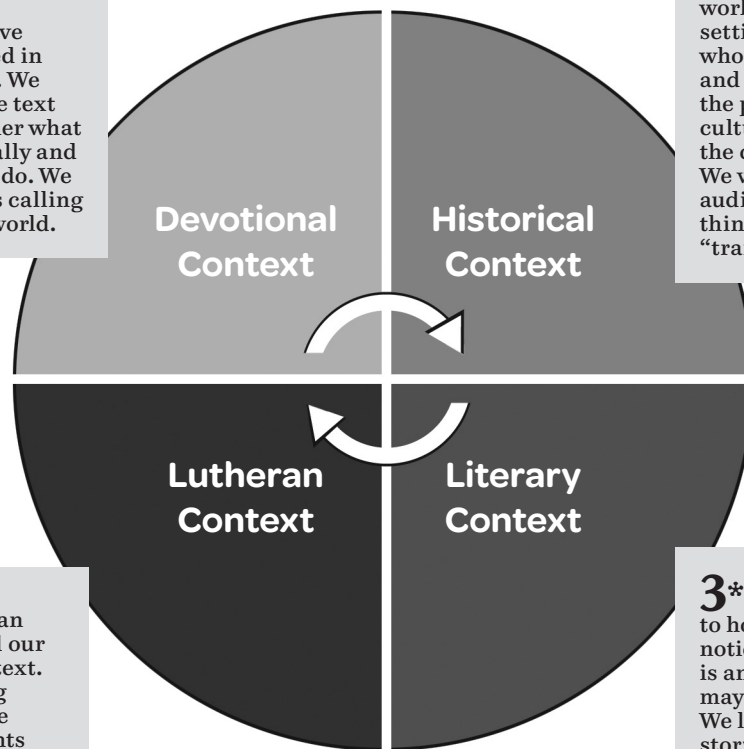
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience with the text.

Complementing this approach is a commitment to engaging participants in active, learner-orientated Bible conversations. The resources call for prepared leaders to facilitate learner discovery, discussion, and activity. Active learning and frequent engagement with Scripture will lead to greater biblical fluency and encourage active faith.

1 We begin by reading the Bible text and reflecting on its meaning. We ask questions and identify items that are unclear. We bring our unique background and experience to the Bible, and the Bible meets us where we are.

5 We return to where we started, but now we have explored and experienced the Bible text from four different dimensions. We are ready to move into the “for” dimension. We have opened Scripture and joined in conversation for a purpose. We consider the meaning of the text for faithful living. We wonder what God is calling us (individually and as communities of faith) to do. We consider how God’s Word is calling us to do God’s work in the world.

2* We seek to understand the world of the Bible and locate the setting of the text. We explore who may have written the text and why. We seek to understand the particular social and cultural contexts that influenced the content and the message. We wonder who the original audience may have been. We think about how these things “translate” to our world today.



4 We consider the Lutheran principles that help ground our interpretation of the Bible text. We ask questions that bring those principles and unique Lutheran theological insights into conversation with the text. We discover how our Lutheran insights can ground and focus our understanding and shape our faithful response to the text.

3* We pay close attention to how the text is written. We notice what kind of literature it is and how this type of literature may function or may be used. We look at the characters, the story line, and the themes. We compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life. In this interchange, we discover meaning.

*** Sessions may begin with either Historical Context or Literary Context.**

The diagram on p. 6 summarizes the general way this method is intended to work. A more detailed introduction to the method used in Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies is available in *Opening the Book of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

The Learner Session Guide

The Learner Session Guide content is built on the four sections (see p. 5). The content included in the main “Join the Conversation” section is considered to be the core material needed to explore the session Scripture text. Each session includes a Focus Image that is used as part of an activity or question somewhere within the core session. Other visuals (maps, charts, photographs, and illustrations) may be included to help enhance the learner’s experience with the text and its key concepts.

The Leader Session Guide

For easy reference, the Leader Session Guide contains all the content included in the Learner Session Guide and more. The elements that are unique to the Leader Session Guide are the following:

- **Before You Begin**—Helpful tips to use as you prepare to lead the session.
- **Session Overview**—Contains detailed description of key themes and content covered in each of the four contexts (Historical, Literary, Lutheran, Devotional). Core questions and activities in the Learner Session Guide are intended to emerge directly from this Session Overview.
- **Key Definitions**—Key terms or concepts that appear in the Session Overview may be illustrated or defined.
- **Facilitator’s Prayer**—To help the leader center on the session theme and leadership task.
- **Bonus Activities**—Optional activities included in each of the four sections of “Join the Conversation” used by the leader to expand the core session.
- **Tips**—A variety of helpful hints, instructions, or background content to aid leadership facilitation.
- **Looking Ahead**—Reminders to the leader about preparation for the upcoming session.

Leader and Learner

In Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies, the leader’s primary task is facilitating small group conversation and activity. These conversations are built around structured learning tasks. What is a structured learning task? It is an open question or activity that engages learners with new content and the resources they need to respond. Underlying this structured dialog approach are three primary assumptions about adult learners:

- Adult learners bring with them varied experiences and the capability to do active learning tasks;
- Adult learners learn best when they are invited to be actively involved in learning; and
- Adults are more accountable and engaged when active learning tasks are used.

Simply put, the goal is fluency in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture. How does one become fluent in a new language, proficient in building houses, or skilled at hitting a baseball? By practicing and doing in a hands-on way. Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies provides the kind of hands-on Bible exploration that will produce Bible-fluent learners equipped to do God’s work in the world.

Books of Faith Series

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies includes several series and courses. This Ruth unit is part of the Books of Faith Series, which is designed to explore key themes and texts in the books of the Bible. Each book of the Bible reveals a unique story or message of faith. Many core themes and story lines and characters are shared by several books, but each book in its own right is a book of faith. Exploring these books of faith in depth opens us to the variety and richness of God’s written word for us.

Ruth Unit Overview

Whether following a dream or leaving behind a difficult situation, humans throughout history have followed the pull and push of migration. The incredibly rich story told in the book of Ruth captures the fears, challenges, and hope of those who find themselves pulled away from home and of those who are there when they return. In this book we are invited into the deep emotions and conversations of the three central characters involved in this migration.

Naomi is the Israelite widow who first migrates from her home in Judah and then returns bereft of husband and sons. We hear her moving lament and watch as she rediscovers God's presence in her life through her deeply committed relationship with her Moabite daughter-in-law. Ruth is the young childless widow who migrates from her home country of Moab to the enemy territory of Judah out of a remarkable commitment to her foreign mother-in-law and the bond that has developed between them. We watch as she enters into difficult work and then ever riskier behavior and is rewarded with both the love of a husband and the admiration of the community she has claimed as her own. Boaz is the Judahite landowner who sees beyond the surface appearance of a suspect foreign woman in the midst of his community. We watch as he proves himself a person of worth, living into the spirit of the law and making choices that both serve the community and bring him personal fulfillment. The actions of these three faithful people together make possible the birth of David's grandfather and ultimately the Savior of the world. Through creativity, humor, surprise, and deep challenge, the book of Ruth invites us to realize that boundaries—of creed, space, or culture—are no limit for God's faithfulness.

Session 1 (Ruth 1:1-18) asks, "Where Does Loss Push Us?" and tells of Naomi's migration with her family in a time of famine to the enemy territory of Moab. Through her story, we confront issues of death and life, family and foreigner, abandonment

and the determination of loyalty. This story can speak deeply to us as we seek to live faithfully in an increasingly mobile world.

Session 2 (Ruth 1:19—2:23), which begins with return and the lament of Naomi's loss, asks, "Where Does Loyalty Pull Us?" This session illumines Ruth's commitment to pull her "family" through their poverty. We are introduced to Boaz, the man of worth who watches after the interests of Ruth, and we learn how God works through both happenstance and commitment to doing the right things.

Session 3 (Ruth 3:1-18) asks, "Where Does Risk Take Us?" Through humor and a steamy midnight encounter, we see how the risk Ruth takes in appearing to be a prostitute instead leads to Boaz's recognition of her loyalty and worth. This session invites us to ask both when risky behavior is warranted and how such behavior ultimately serves the larger society.

Session 4 (Ruth 4:1-22) asks, "Where Does Hope Lead Us?" The passage leads us to the courthouse scene at Bethlehem's gate and into a brighter future filled with promise. At the gate we discover ways in which Naomi's courage, Ruth's faithfulness, and Boaz's worth together become the channels for marriage, birth, blessing, acceptance of the stranger as family, and God's amazing social transformation.

The materials in this study are intended to help spark conversation in your group. We, the writers of this study, invite you to be in prayer that the Holy Spirit will use both the materials offered here and your group's own reflection to speak words of comfort and challenge that enrich your ministry together. As we think of the challenges and opportunities we are facing today as communities and as congregations, may this story inspire us to action!

Ruth 1:1-18

Leader
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

Focus Image



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

Where Does Loss Push Us?

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

Migration is at the core of the biblical narrative. Adam and Eve are forced out of the garden; Abraham and Sarah leave what is familiar in search of a better future; Moses leads his people in search of a Promised Land; Jesus himself, whose public ministry is marked by a constant invitation to go “to the other side,” starts out his life as a refugee running away from governmental persecution under Herod. These stories speak profoundly to our own stories of change—migrations across national or physical boundaries or beyond personal boundaries of belief and experience. While conversations about change and migration can be difficult, as a leader you can provide space for participants to engage this conversation in the context of the marvelous story we encounter in the book of Ruth.

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you’ll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.
4. Read all four chapters of the book of Ruth. You might also want to read the last three chapters of Judges, the first chapter of 1 Samuel, and the last chapter of Proverbs in order to set this book in its biblical context.

Session Overview

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 is a story of two migrations, first to Moab and then back to Bethlehem. In the midst of these migrations, they confront issues of death and life, family and foreigner, abandonment and loyalty. Their story can speak deeply to us as we seek to live faithfully in an increasingly mobile world.

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Pull and push:

Migration scholars refer to factors that motivate people to migrate as either pull or push factors. A **pull** factor is something that attracts a person to a new location, such as an opportunity for work, study, or adventure. Abraham and Sarah, for example, were motivated to migrate by the “pull” of God’s promise. **Push** factors are those that force someone to move, such as the loss of a job, a difficult economic circumstance, political violence, and even the threat of death. Naomi and her family migrated to Moab “pushed” by famine and political chaos.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Understanding place and time is crucial for grasping the historical context of Ruth. The two highlighted places are Bethlehem, a village in the country of **Judah**, and its bitter enemy, the country of Moab. The country of Judah is always associated with King David and his successors. While the capital city of the Southern Kingdom is the all-important Jerusalem, with both the temple and the palace, Bethlehem (significantly called “the city of David” in Luke 2:4) is the village to which the Davidic kings trace their lineage. And it all begins with this story of Naomi and her family.

The kingdoms of Judah and Israel had many enemies, including the big powers of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia, and the smaller neighboring kingdoms of Syria, Philistia, Ammon, and Moab. Moab was hated in particular because during the period of the desert wandering after their escape from Egypt, when the Israelites marched through Moab on the way to the Promised Land, the Moabite king refused them access (see Numbers 21–23, summarized in 23:3–6). In biblical tradition, Moab’s origins are traced to Lot’s incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter (Genesis 19:30–38).

The book of Ruth is set in the period of Judges and is the transition book to the period of kings. In the Old Testament, no single sort of governance was deemed perfect. Rather, through the many stories, we are shown how each form of governance can be either reflective of God’s rule or deeply problematic. In the period of the Judges, Israel was ruled by charismatic leaders who are pictured in the book of Judges as strong and noble in the beginning but quite problematic by the end of the period. Kingship, representing the rule of law and the promise of the Messiah, in many ways solves the problem of the final anarchy of Judges. Still, kingship shows its own propensity for corruption in the books of Samuel and Kings.

While Ruth was set in one period, it was probably written and certainly read in another period, the post-exilic world of Ezra and Nehemiah. This time of reentry—of rebuilding homes, temple, and community—caused many folks in that period to “circle the wagons” and be wary of any outside influence that might threaten the fragile community. Note particularly Ezra 9:1–2, 12 and Nehemiah 13:23–27, which speaks against marrying Moabites.

Have available a short timeline of biblical history for reference either as a handout or on a whiteboard. Or draw attention to the timeline in *Lutheran Study Bible*, pp. 30–32. Here is a summary of key dates relating to the historical settings of Ruth.

Period of Biblical History	Approximate Dates
Exodus	1290 B.C.E.
Period of the Judges	1250–1000 B.C.E.
United Kingdom (called Israel) of David and Solomon	1000–922 B.C.E.
Divided Kingdoms of Israel (north) and Judah (south)	922–721 B.C.E.
Fall of Samaria, Israel’s capital city, to Assyria	721 B.C.E.
Fall of Judah (capital city, Jerusalem) and Exile to Babylon	598/7 B.C.E. 598–538 B.C.E.
Post-exilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah	458–445 B.C.E.

LITERARY CONTEXT

The book of Ruth is beautifully written. The author made generous use of repetition, contrast, word plays, humor, tension, and development of character to bring the story home. Through these good storytelling techniques we are invited to consider such matters as what choices the three main characters make, what motivates them, the impact of context and circumstance, and how God acted in their lives. Through their story, we learn much about our own lives, including how God acts in and through us.

The book of Ruth begins with irony. There was a famine in Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means “house [*beth*] of food [*lehem*].” This causes us to wonder if the famine is deeper than food, to wonder what is needed to address the deep famine of the Spirit at the end of Judges. The repeated terms of returning/repenting press this question further, and the plethora of family terms gives us a clue as to how this deeper famine might be ended. At the end of Judges, “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). The book of Ruth will show us a better way in which the key individuals reach out to one another and include them in their family, thus transforming the community. In biblical narrative, one finds out about characters by noticing:

? Judah:

This term is used to designate a person (one of Jacob’s twelve sons), a tribe (one of the twelve tribes), and the name of the southern kingdom ruled by the Davidic dynasty. This term also stands at the root of “Judaism.”

Tip:

For a more complete list of tips for reading Hebrew narrative, see “Narrative Tips” at <http://luthersem.edu/djacobso>.

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Tip:

Below is a table of the names in the book of Ruth and their meanings in the original Hebrew:

Elimelech	God is King
Mahlon and Chilion	sickly person and frailty
Naomi	pleasantness
Mara	bitter
Ruth	friendship; refreshment
Orpah	obstinate
Boaz	strength; liveliness



hesed:

One of the principal Hebrew words defining the love between God and humans as well as that between humans. It can be translated as steadfast love, covenantal loyalty, or perhaps, loving kindness.



stereotypes:

American journalist Walter Lippmann was the first one to use the word “stereotype” (originally a reference to a technique for making impressions) as a metaphor. In *Public Opinion* (1922), Lippman called a stereotype a “picture in our heads” saying, “whether right or wrong . . . imagination is shaped by the pictures seen.”



Tip:

In traditional Judaism, people considering conversion to Judaism must be discouraged at least three times. Some Rabbinical literature sees Naomi’s three-fold encouragement to her daughters-in-law to turn back as fulfillment of that requirement to discourage Ruth from following Naomi and adopting her people, culture, and God.

- names, which often have meaning;
- who speaks and what they say, because all biblical narrative is drawn toward dialogue;
- who gets to act and what they do, because actions often speak louder than words;
- what the one telling the story wants us to think through various ways the characters are presented; and
- what we don’t know or are not told.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

As the characters in the book of Ruth cross physical boundaries of states, they also push the boundaries sometimes set for where God is to be encountered. Ruth 1:6 indicates that Naomi “had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food.” Even in enemy territory—a place where Naomi’s family has only encountered loss and distress—Naomi hears rumors of God’s activity on behalf of God’s people. More importantly, Naomi encounters faithfulness (*hesed* in Hebrew) one of God’s very attributes, in a surprising place—in Ruth, one of the foreigners whom the larger culture has sought to belittle.

A key portion of the understanding of Lutheran theology is the principle of *finitum capax infinitum*—that the finite is capable of holding the infinite. The good news of the incarnation is that humans encounter God in the stuff of daily life. In fact, since we cannot make our own way to God, the only way for us to encounter God is when God comes to us in the midst of our world—sometimes in quite surprising ways. By challenging a variety of **stereotypes**, the book of Ruth challenges the reader to be open to the surprising ways God comes to us in the stuff of everyday life. It challenges the pictures we may have in our heads about how God is active in the world!

Ruth’s stirring words of commitment to Naomi in 1:16-18 come completely unbidden. She didn’t *have* to follow Naomi. She had a choice. She could instead have listened to Naomi’s insistence to return “to her mother’s house.” In fact, her sister-in-law Orpah’s decision to return to her father’s home would have been the more acceptable choice in the cultural context of the story. Ruth’s decision to remain faithful to her mother-in-law was quite counter-cultural and exemplifies *hesed*. While good works cannot save us, Lutherans understand the importance of good works for the benefit of the world and as a way of responding to God’s loving acceptance. Like Ruth’s actions on behalf of Naomi, our actions are not done out of obligation but motivated by relationship and thanksgiving.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Like many stories that capture our imagination, the book of Ruth names our very human fear of being alone in the world. Because of our own losses, we can relate to the grief of Naomi and Ruth at the death of their loved ones. Increasingly, because of the high mobility of our modern world, we can also relate to the sense of isolation that sometimes comes from moving to a new place—whether across the state or across the world. However, even as it tells a story of loss and isolation, the book of Ruth also provides an alternative vision of commitment in spite of difference and grief. In fact, the strongest relationship at the end of this section of text is the unexpected relationship between Ruth and Naomi. How might this story encourage participants to find room to name their own fears, losses, and feelings of isolation, while also looking to faithful relationships with God and with others as the grounding for our lives' experience?

Because of the globalization of our economy and the huge strides we have made particularly in transportation and communication, there are more people on the move today than at any other time in human history. Whether we have moved recently because of a change in employment or have lived with the stories of migration of our ancestors, we are often surrounded by stories like those of Ruth and Naomi: stories that challenge the stereotypes of newcomers to our communities as well as the boundaries of where God is to be encountered. Like Ruth and Naomi, recent immigrants live daily with awareness of how loss and change shape our lives. What might we learn from conversations with those who have recently experienced loss through the death of a loved one or a major transition in their lives?

The two stories below may provide some openness for others to connect the story of Ruth and Naomi to today's world. Encourage participants to open up and share their own experiences of transition and loss and the ways that they have learned and grown from these experiences.

Luisa is in her forties and works as a manager for a fast food chain restaurant in the state of Washington. She has made her way from the bottom, starting years ago by doing custodial work at night at the store she now manages. She came to the United States as a single woman, following the death of her father. His death placed many responsibilities on Luisa as the oldest daughter in a large family. In addition, she felt quite limited by the expectations placed on her as a woman (expectations not placed on her male siblings, even when some of them were older). Years after arriving in the United States, she married and had two children. Both of

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her kids are U.S. citizens by birth, but she remains undocumented. Her husband, who was abusive in their relationship, was caught by immigration and deported to his native El Salvador. Alone in a community far from home, she has found support in her church and through an immigrant women's cooperative sponsored by area congregations.

Drawing on her own experience, **a woman widowed in her late sixties** commented about this text: "Ruth and Naomi had to become assertive. I just lost my husband earlier this year. The man who was supposed to provide for me was absent, and I have had to become so much more assertive to be able to do the things that I relied on him to do for me."

Facilitator's Prayer

God of our Ancestors, you know the ebbs and flows of our lives and have committed yourself to accompany us on our journeys. May we be open to encountering you in the stories we read and their reflection in our own story. Amen.



Gather (10–15 minutes)

Check-in

Take time to greet each person and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another.



Tip:

Be sure to welcome all participants to the study, particularly any newcomers to a group that meets regularly for study. Unless you are sure that everyone knows everyone's name, it would be good to ask everyone to go around and say their name.



Tip:

You may choose to lead the opening prayer yourself, or ask a participant to read the prayer that is provided or offer one of their own.

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?

Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

Ask someone to read the text out loud for the group or, preferably, ask for three volunteers to read the parts of narrator, Naomi, and Ruth. Since movement is such a central part of the story, consider also having other participants enact the story as it unfolds, identifying one side of the room as “Bethlehem” and the other as “Moab,” and having actors play the various roles as they move across the room.

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 (25–55 minutes)

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?

+ Bonus Activity:

Obtain a large map of the world or draw one on a chalkboard or on chart paper. As participants arrive, ask them to place an “x” in three places on the map. If possible, provide a different color marker for each. Have them place an “x” on (a) the place where they were born; (b) what they identify as their “ancestral home,” which could be a specific place in the United States—like a hometown or family farm—or could be another country or tradition that is significant to the family; (c) where they live now. Invite the group to reflect on what they see on the map. Notice any patterns and invite people to share any details or stories behind some of those “migrations.”

Tip:

If group participants have not experienced much mobility in their lives, encourage them to talk about the mobility experiences of others in their families, either ancestors or children and grandchildren. Be sure to help participants think broadly about the experience of “migration” and to include ideas such as time spent away in college or a move because of a job or retirement.

Tip:

In addition to looking at the map on p. 7 of the learner guide, you may want to review the historical table of events on p. 11 of this leader guide in order to place this story in its historical context.



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Tip:

Ruth is a transition book from the perils of deteriorated society to the promise of orderly rule.



Bonus Activity:

One of the very important contexts of the book of Ruth is the whole of the law, which would have been very important in the post-exilic days of Ezra and Nehemiah. At different times throughout this study, participants will want to reflect on portions of the laws proclaimed during that period. You can share these readings by pretending that you are (or a designated participant is) Ezra reading to all the gathered people from the book of the law (see Nehemiah 8:1-9). You might want a special stole or hat to help the drama and a special place or platform in the room. Have “Ezra” read Deuteronomy 23:3-6. (The reader might practice ahead of time because of the tricky names.)



Tip:

The Hebrew word *shuv*, translated as return, go back, or turn back, appears in Ruth 1: 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, and 16 (also in 21, and twice in 22).



Tip:

In the beginning we think the major character will be Elimelech, whose name means “God is King,” or maybe his sons, though their names, which mean “sickly person” and “frailty,” hint at their early demise. We quickly discover that the major characters are Naomi and Ruth, later adding Boaz.

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.

- 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 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?



Tip:

We often discover a great deal about characters by their actions and by what the narrator tells us about them. We learn about Ruth by contrasting her to her sister-in-law, Orpah. In biblical stories, we often learn most about the characters by listening to how they talk and what they say.



Bonus Activity:

Have someone read Ruth's speech in 1:16-18. Often folks have heard this read at a wedding. Help folks to discover this speech as a loyalty oath by having different people read 2 Samuel 15:21 and 2 Kings 2:2 and then compare them.



Tip:

Throughout the study, you may find it helpful to have identified answers for some of the questions for yourself. During your preparation, jot down some words that may help you remember how God has been active in your life in surprising ways so you are ready to share with the group to get the conversation going.



Tip:

The Bible often compares our relationship with God to a marriage relationship. Like other comparisons of God to human attributes, these comparisons can be helpful when our experience of those attributes in people have been helpful. Be mindful of the way that challenging experiences may affect some participants' reflections around this comparison.

SESSION ONE



Tip:

Humor by its nature pushes boundaries. The book of Ruth often uses humor in this way. You will know your class best, and will need to decide whether joke-telling may be appropriate in your context. As you keep that in mind, be creative in ways that you can encourage an honest conversation about stereotypes and ways in which humor can help us challenge them. If you choose to invite the group to offer jokes, you may want to have identified one ahead of time yourself to get the group going.



Bonus Activity:

Visit the Web site for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (www.lirs.org) and follow links to “People We Serve.” Review and select a story of a recent immigrant that you could discuss with the group.



Tip:

One of the great gifts of the biblical story is that it honestly addresses challenging moments in our lives. Be intentional about respecting the vulnerability of participants as they share difficult experiences in their lives. Depending on the nature of what is shared, you may want to remind participants to refrain from discussing what is shared in the group with others.



Tip:

Invite your pastor or a member of the congregation’s social committee to visit the class and share ways in which your congregation reaches out and the reasons for those commitments. Alternatively, you could have that conversation with them ahead of time and share some of their insights with the group.

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?
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

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a white board. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.
2. Point the group back to the map you used in the opening activity and the migration journeys that they highlighted. Having spent the last hour or so in conversation around a biblical story of migration, ask participants to share any additional thoughts or insights about the connections they may have made between their own stories and the biblical story.

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 (5 minutes)
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?

**Tip:**

Invite someone to close with the prayer provided or offer one of their own.

**Tip:**

Point participants to the opportunities offered in Extending the Conversation and offer your support as they explore some of those options over the week. Provide contact information for yourself or others who can be resources. Also, remind participants of the time and location of the next session and encourage them to invite others to participate.

SESSION ONE

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?

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Ruth 1:19—2:23.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.

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