

## ORDINARY PEOPLE:

### ORPAH

Ruth 1:1-18

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 1, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series entitled "Ordinary People."*

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*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.*

*But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.*

*Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.*

*But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.'*

*Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.'*

*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.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!'*

*When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.*

Prayer: *God of the universe, you have placed us under the necessity of decision in every concrete situation in life, in the here and now.<sup>1</sup> As we unfold the story of one person who made a concrete decision in the here and now, my lead us to consider decisions we have made or will make, and to make such decisions leaning on the grace you have give us in Christ and the wisdom you have provided through the scriptures. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

## I.

So in this sermon series on ordinary but sometimes obscure people in the Bible, we seem to start each week with something about the name of the person as it appears on the church sign at the corner of Monticello and Cameron Mills.

One staff member, having seen O-R-P-A-H this week, texted: “I hope people don’t read O-P-R-A-H; we might be overrun with visitors.” Raise your hand if you came today expecting to hear from Oprah Winfrey.

It is true, as many of us doubtless know, that Oprah was named for Orpah, the sister-in-law of Ruth, two of the three Biblical characters about whom we just read. If we were to take a poll of the most admired women in the *Bible*, Ruth would appear near the top, just as Oprah is often deemed one of the most admired women in the world. Orpah would register nowhere near single digits in either poll, if for no other reason than lack of name recognition.

One of my few claims to fame is that it was from a older woman carrying a covered dish into the Fellowship Hall of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, that I learned of the origin of Oprah’s name. I had been invited to speak at the congregation’s annual Lincoln/Douglass/Allen Fundraising dinner, and when I arrived and met the woman it somehow came up that she was Oprah Winfrey’s aunt.

When I asked if Oprah was related to the Orpah from the Bible, she smiled and said: “Yes, the family wanted to name her after a character in the Bible, but they weren’t sure how to spell it. It is correct on her birth certificate, but no one could pronounce ‘Orpah’ so they just started calling the baby Oprah. She’s gone by that ever since.”

The woman then set her casserole on one of those serving tables that every Fellowship Hall in America has, took her seat near the kitchen of the church in which she has worshipped for decades, under portraits of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Reverend Richard Allen, the founder of one of the AME church.

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I have no doubt that Oprah Winfrey has made Orpah better known than what she would otherwise have been. Orpah appears only in the Book of Ruth, and while she is named, not always a guarantee for women in scripture, she appears in only the first chapter and doesn’t have a speaking role.

Orpah and Ruth are Moabites, members of one of the smaller nations historically at odds with the Israelites, a nation that originated, along with Ammon, from the illicit union of Lot with each of his two daughters after the three of them escaped the destruction of Sodom in which Lot’s wife, their mother, had been turned into a pillar of salt for looking back.<sup>2</sup> Lot’s daughters likely assumed they and their father were the only survivors left on earth, and the daughters plotted to become pregnant by their father so that the human race would continue,<sup>3</sup> leaving the Moabites with a less than stellar reputation among religious people across the centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a paraphrase of what one theological giant of the twentieth century, Richard Niebuhr, said of another theological giant of that same time frame, Rudolph Bultmann.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 19:8-29.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 19:30-38.

In our story,

- Orpah and Ruth have both married Israelite brothers – Mahlon and Chilion – who had come to Moab with their parents Naomi and Elimelech because famine had struck their nation of Israel.
- In time, Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion all die in Moab, leaving Naomi, Orpah and Ruth as childless widows, Orpah and Ruth being *natives* to Moab and Naomi being a *foreigner*.
- Naomi receives word that “the Lord has had consideration for [the people of] Israel and given them food,” so she sets out to return to her native land, widowed, childless and bereft, but choosing to grieve *at home* rather than in hostile surroundings.
- Orpah and Ruth set out with her.
- Naomi pleads with them to remain in their home country. “Do I have sons in my womb who can become your husbands?” she asks.
- Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth, a solemn act done in Israel only at the anointing of a king,<sup>4</sup> after a long separation,<sup>5</sup> or upon a parting.<sup>6</sup>
- Both Orpah and Ruth weep.
- They say to Naomi: “No, *we* will return with *you* to *your* people.”
- “Turn back, my daughters,” Naomi says. “Turn back.”
- Orpah and Ruth weep again.

It is Orpah who breaks the pattern. She *obeys* Naomi and *kisses* her, while Ruth “*clings to*” Naomi. At this point *Orpah* presumably turns, walks away, wiping tears from her eyes, perhaps burying her head in her hands.<sup>7</sup>

*Ruth* then takes center stage, speaking to Naomi some of the most eloquent words in scripture or literature:

*Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.*

By the time the four chapters of the book that bears her name draws to its close, Ruth has accompanied Naomi back to Bethlehem; converted to Judaism; supported the two of them; taken initiative to marry and produce an heir through Boaz, a near kinsman of her late husband; presented the child to Naomi and to the women of

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<sup>4</sup> I Samuel 10:1.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 4:27.

<sup>6</sup> As in our text.

<sup>7</sup> See Katharine Doob Sakenfield, *Ruth* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 21-35; and Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, “The Book of Ruth: Introduction, commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume II*, 903-912.

Bethlehem; and become remembered as grandmother to King David and ancestor to Christ. Ruth becomes one of four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy paving the way for Mary, the mother of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

Orpah on the other hand disappears from the narrative and from historical memory, until the family of an infant girl born into poverty in Kosciusko, Mississippi, in 1954 chose her name for a child who would grow up to become one of the most admired and recognized women in America.

## II.

As Jewish scholars over the centuries have speculated about the Biblical Orpah, some of their admiration for Ruth has led them to *negative* and even *demeaning* conclusions about Orpah.

- Based on one translation of her name, Orpah has been condemned as one who “turned her back” on her mother-in-law.
- Based on the scandalous origins of her people, Orpah has sometimes been depicted as returning to the wanton ways of the Moabites.
- As a result of her own *presumed* scandalous ways, Orpah has even been thought by some to have given birth to Goliath, the giant who would seek to kill David, and that she herself was later killed by one of David's warriors.

All of these are legends that grew up about Orpah outside the Bible. But these associations perhaps reveal something about a human tendency that remains with us today that when two Biblical characters appear side by side, we must assume that one is good example, the other, not; that one is to be followed, the other rejected. These associations may also reveal a tendency since the Fall of Adam and Eve to see sexual inappropriateness behind the actions of many women who don't fit the expected mold of monastics, heroines or saints.<sup>9</sup>

## III.

But our interpretations of Orpah need not be critical or denigrating. If we read the story plainly and simply, we soon notice that:

- In presenting both Orpah and Ruth, the narrator *describes* the decisions each makes in light of the same tragedy, without *prescribing* either choice as being *universal* or *absolute*.
- The narrator holds up the life Ruth led following her choice as being one that leads to *blessing*, but the narrator does not explicitly criticize Orpah for the equally difficult choice she makes.

In this regard, the story reminds us that even as Ruth's choice to “cling to” Naomi is indeed as heroic as it is presented, Orpah's choice to remain at home is not necessarily misguided or wrong.

Orpah's story can also remind us that as outsiders, we are rarely equipped to know – and therefore often ill advised to judge – whether the choices people make are wise, heroic, and faithful to God, or whether they are frivolous, cowardly, and self-focused. “Judge not, that ye be not judged,”<sup>10</sup> the descendant of Ruth would later say. Perhaps he had the response to Orpah in mind.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 1:1-17, especially verse 5.

<sup>9</sup> See Tamar Meir, “Orpah: Midrash and Aggadah” in Jewish Women's Archive, available at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/orpah-midrash-and-aggadah>.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 7:1.

#### IV.

My wife Maggie was raised in El Paso and has been away from its vast skies since she graduated from high school over forty years ago. Even though she has no remaining family in El Paso, and the Presbyterian Church her minister-father founded and in which her Christian faith was formed was closed a few years ago, she would go back, go back home, go back to El Paso in an instant.

The late Tom Wolfe was famous for saying “You can’t go home again.” I *know* he was right; I *know* he was right. Yet in this larger story told so beautifully in the Book of Ruth, Naomi *goes home again* and finds blessing; Ruth *leaves home* and finds blessing; and I am led to ask: “Is it possible that Orpah *remains at home* and finds blessing?”

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat has written a poem entitled “The One Who Turned Back (Orpah).” In the poem, she directly addresses Orpah, asking her a series of questions concerning why Orpah remained in Moab and what she did or experienced in her native land. Barenblat collects all the negative myths and legends that grew up around Orpah over the centuries, including those about her being promiscuous, abused, and in pain. But Barenblat doesn’t necessarily accept such speculation as true.

Speaking to Orpah, she writes:

Maybe you envisioned  
your husband's grave  
choked with weeds...

...did you bathe  
your aging parents  
and die a quiet spinster

comforted by the scent  
of the wild rosemary  
outside your childhood home?!<sup>11</sup>

Barenblat seems to conclude that what Orpah finds in remaining at home is the quiet dignity of memory, intimacy, solitude, and nature:

- Remembering the husband who came into her land for another country, married her, and then passed away much too early
- Caring for her parents in the most intimate ways as they had cared for her as a child
- Living her remaining years in solitude, and dying with “the scent of ...wild rosemary” wafting through the open window in the bedroom of her “childhood home.”

Is there good news in returning home? Maybe “good news” needs to be more than memory, intimacy, solitude, nature. Maybe it doesn’t. Orpah doesn’t really tell us, and neither can I.

But the fact that Orpah remains at home and was not – contrary to legend – denigrated by the narrator of the Book of Ruth for her choice, the fact that the narrator includes her alongside the more dramatically heroic and blessed stories of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, leads me to think that in the providence of God, some of us can *go home, remain at home, and flourish*. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Rachel Barenblat, “The One Who Turned Back (Orpah),” available at <http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2012/05/a-poem-about-orpah.html>.