

A New Lease on Life
Ruth 2:1-13
(Naomi begins her new life in Bethlehem and meets Boaz.)

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I knew a married couple who would describe a year of their life, almost 9 years ago, as “going through hell.” They were desperate--they separated for a few months to gain space, and they were unsure what to do. They both cared to work things out, so they went to hours of counseling and talked for hours with each other, until with baby-steps they could finally trust each other again. They moved back together and made a large number of changes in the way they related to each other. They had been stuck, but they learned satisfying ways to relate, with a lot of help. *Now* they laugh and enjoy each other immensely. They probably seldom think of that difficult time. I’m sure they would agree that their marriage took on a new life.

A minister colleague shared with me that after her grown daughter was married, the year of preparations over, and her grown son, who had been living with her, healed from several surgeries so that he was able to be independent again, the colleague discovered something that surprised her: a new lease on life!

My sister had lost enthusiasm for her job as a Medical Technologist. She had hoped that things would be somewhat different for her professionally. She had even gone back to school when she was 50 years old to get an M.B.A., and though she enjoyed the classes and learned a lot, it did not become an avenue for a major change in jobs. Then she became a grandmother--suddenly it seemed like work was a smaller part of her life. She willingly began using her many days of accrued vacation . . . to do what? Care for her grandchild. She had gained a new lease on life!

Before we moved to California from Dayton, Ohio, eight years ago, I attended a few churches there where friends of mine would be preaching. One church we went to was small, in a poor section of town. Their worship was almost three hours long. The congregation took plenty of time to introduce their guests, so John and I were greeted graciously. Then a gentleman stood up and said he was there to thank the congregation and the pastor. Two years earlier he had been on his way to jail. His wife was allowed to accompany him, but she did not have a ride. He had stopped at several churches, and finally the pastor of *this* church had agreed to drive the couple to the jail, and then to drive the wife back to Dayton. This gentleman announced that he had vowed to himself that day that when he was released, he’d go straight to the church to tell the congregation what the pastor had done, and to thank him. This man announced to the congregation, “I have a new lease on life.”

I used to say, as a young adult, “I’ll afford that when I get out of school. I’ll have time to go to the movies when I finish school. I’ll get exercise when I’m finished studying.” Finally finishing school came as a new lease on life for me.

Our Scripture passage today is about a new lease on life for a woman named Naomi, and a few other people, too.

Because there was a famine in Bethlehem, Naomi and her husband and their two sons decided to leave Bethlehem, to go to a foreign country, Moab. They hoped for a better life someplace else, even as immigrants.

This family traveled to Moab and did find food. They settled down, and when the sons grew up, they married, not too surprisingly, Moabite women. Then Naomi's husband died. Over the years, so did Naomi's two sons! Naomi was now in the land of Moab, an immigrant, with her two daughters in law, who were Moabites. Naomi was the lone foreigner.

Naomi decided that the right thing to do was to go "home." Bethlehem was probably fertile again, for it had been a decade or so since the famine. The daughters in law would be welcomed back into the families they grew up in, with their own parents, so Naomi expected to return to Israel alone. But, and this is the most famous section of this book, Ruth insists upon going with Naomi. **Daughter-in-law Ruth even declares, "Where you go, I will go, and your Gods shall be my gods."**

The two women--mother and daughter-in-law--return to Israel. You can imagine various reactions from Naomi's old community: "Naomi! *How* have you been? *Where* have you been? *Who* is this young Moabite woman?"

Because they didn't have any money, Ruth was willing to "glean" in the fields. To explain, there was a custom that allowed poorer persons to pick up the left-over wheat that was left in the field after the major harvesting was done. It would be like helping yourself to some oranges in our orange groves, after the major orange picking had been done.

The younger woman, Ruth, is gleaning in the fields, when Boaz enters the story. Boaz was a distant relative of the mother-in-law Naomi. Boaz notices Ruth and likes her.

Because of certain laws about who steps up to marry a woman when the woman's husband dies, Boaz needed to check with another man who was closer in line to marry Ruth. That man indicated that he was willing to pass to the next man with that responsibility--Boaz!

So Ruth, who was grieving her husband's death, who left her country of Moab to accompany Naomi, who was willing to glean in the fields for food, who had no children, married Boaz--evidently a man of good standing whom she did seem to like.

Ruth had a new lease on life.

This whole book of the Bible, a very tiny book, **is about reversals!** The Israelites start out with famine, but eventually good harvests return. The older woman, Naomi, is without a husband and has lost both sons, and then she becomes a grandmother!¹

Naomi's name literally means "sweet" or "pleasant" in Hebrew. But when she returns to Bethlehem, she tells the women there her name is Mara, which means "bitter," since her life has been so full of bitterness.² In other words, she makes a pun on her own name.

Look what happens: *her bitterness is transformed by the story's end.*

From famine to plenty, emptiness to fullness, death to new life.

Notice that each reversal begins with an act of loving-kindness . . . the word "hesed" for loving-kindness is used throughout this little book of the bible. As Darcie pointed out, when she read the Scripture, **loving-kindness, is thought to be an essential part of God's nature.** Hesed is not a legal term; it's not something someone is *supposed* to do. **It is kindness beyond the law.**³

Today when we still focus on how to welcome--or not--people who immigrate, it does not take much imagination to realize how crucial this act of hesed, this being welcomed with loving-kindness is.

Have you thought to yourself, “What I need is a new lease on life”?

Have you thought that for another? “He needs a new lease on life.”

When the one who has an addiction to something unhealthy declares she or he needs help, that one does not *at that time* feel that they have a new life. He or she just knows that life at that moment is the pits. He or she is *willing* to try something else.

If changes are made and they begin to feel healthier, relationships are better, and work is feasible, their “new life” often seems to come as a gift--sometimes it seems more than they could have asked for!

When one is in pain and relief or healing finally comes, that “new life” seems almost startling. We might think “I had forgotten how good it’s possible to feel.”

The couple who went through hell, desperately trying to figure out how to relate to each other, just kept working. They could not visualize exactly what a new life would look like. They didn’t know. They just kept going. Lo and behold, eventually, with more and more trust, they learned how to love.

I’m going to share a well-known poem. I’m sure most of you have heard it in a sermon or read it from a forwarded email. I’m sharing it because it captures both the **perseverance and the surprise** that accompany new leases on life.

Two frogs fell into a pale of milk, or so I’ve heard it told.

The sides of the can were shiny and steep; the milk was deep and cold.

“Oh, what’s the use?” said Number One, “It’s plain no help’s around.”

“Good-bye, my friend. Good-bye, cruel world.” And weeping still, he drowned.

But Number Two, of sterner stuff, dog paddled in surprise.

It kicked and kicked and swam and kicked and rubbed its creamy eyes.

“I’ll swim a while, at least,” it thought (or so it has been said),

“It really wouldn’t help the world if one more frog were dead.”

An hour or more it kicked and swam, not once it stopped to mutter,

It kicked and kicked and swam and swam, then hopped out, via butter.

There are times when we might feel bitter like Naomi, lost, or estranged. This can occur even when we seem to others to be just fine. During these difficult times, we might long for “a new lease on life.” We **can hope**, for new life often **does** emerge.

It did for my sister, who could put work in the background, no longer foreground.

It does for graduates and those who finally find jobs after searching for a long time.

New life emerges in so many surprising ways, but it often comes after a very very long time of perseverance in a predicament that is certainly less than optimal.

What can we do, what is best to do, during those times of perseverance? The very best thing to do—for ourselves as well as for its effect on others—is to seek to experience and to express **loving kindness**. *If we carry on, if we do what seems “hesed-like,” as Ruth did, filled with whatever loving kindness we can muster, not only for others, but also loving kindness for ourselves, and if we keep putting one foot in front of the other, swimming and kicking and kicking and swimming, then eventually, when we*

may have almost forgotten that it is even possible, it seems to happen as a gift, as it did for Ruth—a new lease on life, a surprise that lifts us to a better situation.

¹ In fact, the traditionally-named lineage suggests that Ruth and Boaz are the great-grandparents of David, the key person in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.

² Ruth 1:20-21

³ There was disagreement about what to do with wives who were "foreign." In the book of Isaiah (56:1-8) it is argued that foreign wives and their children are to be sent away. However, in the book of Ruth, like Joshua and Judges, prophets are arguing that foreign wives are welcome, if they "join themselves to the Lord." In this case, we see Ruth has already said that she will take on the God of the new land.