

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Tempe, AZ
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 13, 2025

The most unlikely!

During the days of the judges, a famine occurred in the land. So a man left Bethlehem in Judah to stay awhile in the territory of Moab—he, his wife, and his two sons. ² The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were from the clan of Ephrath from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and remained there.

³ But Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, so she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They then married Moabite wives. The name of the first was Orpah, and the name of the second was Ruth. They lived there for about ten years. ⁵ But Naomi's sons, Mahlon and Kilion, also died. So the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.

⁶ Then Naomi set out with her daughters-in-law to return from the territory of Moab, because while she was in the territory of Moab, she had heard that the Lord had graciously visited his people by providing them with food. ⁷ So she left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law left with her. They set out on the road to return to the land of Judah.

⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Both of you return to your mother's house. May the Lord show you kindness as you have shown kindness to the dead and to me. ⁹ May the Lord grant that each of you finds security[□] in the house of a husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept loudly.

¹⁰ But they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."

¹¹ Then Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Am I going to give birth to any more sons who could become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters. Go! For I am too old to be married to another husband. Suppose I say, 'I have hope, and I will be married to another husband tonight, and I will even give birth to sons.' ¹³ Would you wait for them until they grow up? On the basis of that hope would you give up the chance to marry another husband? No, my daughters. It is much more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has reached out against me."

¹⁴ They once again wept loudly. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth would not let her go.

¹⁵ Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods. Go back! Follow your sister-in-law."

¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Because wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you make your home, I will make my home. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely and double it if anything but death separates me from you."

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. ¹⁹ Then the two of them traveled until they arrived at Bethlehem.

—Ruth 1:1-19a

What happened 17 months ago in February 2024 was so unusual that it will always make history in the National Football League. A most unlikely person quarterbacked the San Francisco 49er's to the Super bowl. His name is Brock Purdy who had played high school football at Perry High School in nearby Gilbert, and then played for Iowa State. What made him so most unlikely was that he was the final pick in the NFL draft. 261 college players were drafted before him. Over the years the last person drafted is known as Mr. Irrelevant. Very few even make the team. Brock Purdy did. Due to injuries of several quarterbacks Mr. Irrelevant became the starter. This most unlikely person ended up guiding the 49er's to the Superbowl.

Most unlikely! Those words fit a woman who lived at the time of the judges in the Old Testament era - over 1000 years before Christ.

1. She was not a Jew
2. She did not live in the land of Israel but in Moab.
3. She was not raised as a believer in the true God.
4. She had some very difficult and tragic times in life – her husband died and left behind no children

She seemed to be the most unlikely person to have the following things.

1. She became a believer in the true God and His promises to send a Savior
2. She, a most unlikely person, became an ancestress of Jesus – Her name is in the genealogy in the Gospel of Matthew.
3. She became the great grandmother of King David
4. She has a Book in the Old Testament named after her
5. The words of commitment she spoke are sometimes used in Christian wedding services
6. There are many women today and over the centuries who are named after this woman from Moab

Most of you know who this woman is. In fact, there are people in our congregation named after her. Her name is Ruth.

The incidents in the most unlikely and amazing story of Ruth were not a coincidence, not a chance happening. It was brought about by our Lord. He chose her to be His own and to carry out His mission for her life. Ruth's story started out in the Bethlehem area. There we meet Naomi and her husband and two sons. The name Naomi means pleasant but things for Naomi were not always pleasant. However, as the Bible teaches, even unpleasant things can serve a good purpose. There was a weather problem – not like the terrible flood that Texas experienced in which over 100 lost their lives including young children and girls. It was a severe famine that struck the Bethlehem area. It caused Naomi and family to move from Bethlehem to Moab where things were better. But sadness came again as Naomi's husband died. But there followed some pleasant things as the two sons married Moabite women. Their names were Orpah and Ruth. No doubt that Naomi and her sons told these Moabite women about the true God. By the work of the Holy Spirit they were brought to faith.

In the time frame of ten years in Moab, the two sons also died – and then there remained three widows. Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, but she urged her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab. But Ruth would not stay in Moab. She was determined to go with Naomi to Bethlehem. Here are her words – and you can understand why her words are used in some wedding services as husbands and wives make their marital vows to one another. "Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Because wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you make your home, I will make my home. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely and double it if anything but death separates me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17) So the two of them came to Bethlehem.

Now for the rest of the story! It was in Bethlehem that Ruth ended up marrying a gentleman by the name of Boaz. Among their children was Obed; he had a son named Jesse who in turn had a son named David, the great King David, from whom Christ some thousand years later would descend. Ruth was a great grandmother of David and an ancestress of Jesus.

Another most unlikely! I could point to myself – a farm boy in a very rural area of Wisconsin. All eight years of grade school were in a one-room school. Our farmhouse was a log house. There was no indoor plumbing. We still had a team of horses. I did all sorts of farm chores. To me it would have seemed most unlikely that someday I would be in Arizona and be a pastor in a very exciting and dynamic area and congregation to very wonderful people of different backgrounds. And most unlikely that I would be privileged to be a pastor here for over 55 years. Most unlikely but this message is not about me.

It is about you. You are among the most unlikely. What is meant by that? You are most unlikely to have ended up being a follower of Jesus, to be hearing God's Word, to be serving the Lord in many ways, to be using your time and talents and offerings to glorify the Lord. You would have been most unlikely to end up in heaven as you shall. Why do we say that? Brush everything aside and look at your default condition. You came into this world as a sinful human being. You were not a believer. We also are aware of how we have sinned against the Lord. Earlier in this church service we confessed "Almighty God, merciful Father, I confess to you that I have not loved you with all my heart, and I have not loved others as you command.

For this I deserve your punishment now and forever. I am sorry for my sins. I repent of them. I beg for your mercy.”

There is nothing we could have done to earn heaven. It would be easier for a cricket to run your computer than for us to earn heaven, more likely for us to jump across the Grand Canyon than for us to gain heaven by our works.

But now entering the scene is another most unlikely. His name is Jesus who came to save us. Let me explain – most unlikely from our human point of view but not from God’s perspective. That God would love us and care for us that he would send His Son to redeem us goes beyond our understanding. That our sins are totally forgiven – that seems most unlikely but it is real. It is like news that seems too good to be true.

Why did God do this most unlikely thing by sending His Son? There was not a coin flip. There was not a staff meeting between the members of the Trinity. The answer? A favorite hymn of many is the answer. AMAZING GRACE. Words of another favorite hymn, How Great Thou Art, put it this way.

*And when I think that God His Son not sparing
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin*

Most Unlikely – Let’s return to you and to me again. Most Unlikely that we would be going to heaven! Yes, Jesus suffered and died for us and He declared that whoever believes shall not perish but have everlasting life. But you and I don’t have the ability or desire to believe. It would take a miracle for us to believe. The Bible says, “No one can say that Jesus is the Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3) That miracle happened in your life. The Holy Spirit brought you to faith through His Word and Baptism. Maybe for some of you, the circumstances are similar to that of Ruth. Her first husband and Naomi, her mother-in-law, were instrumental in bringing the Word of God to her. Perhaps the Lord also led someone to be a positive spiritual influence in your life. It could have been a spouse, a relative or a friend. And as the Lord in Ruth’s case used an adverse event as a famine which turned out to be a blessing, so also, He might have used difficult times on your life such as sickness and turned them into blessings.

For many of us it was that we were blessed to be born here in America rather than in a Muslim nation or an atheistic country. Being here in America is a blessing in many ways including that there are many Christian people here. Many of us were blessed by God as He had us born to Christian parents. Many of us as little children had the miracle of baptism. Let’s not take these blessings for granted. Most unlikely though we are, the Holy Spirit has kept us in faith through His Word and communion.

The names on the list of most unlikely would include Ruth, Rahab, David, Bathsheba, the penitent thief, the Apostle Paul. Add your name on that list next to mine. By the choosing and grace of the Lord you are going to heaven

How should we respond? There are many ways to respond but. in summary, just thank and praise the Lord!