

Ruth 2

To review a few points from last week's story: Ruth was one of the two women who embody the spirit of the founders of the Israelite nation. Ruth is the new Abraham. The Book of Ruth is also about exile and return, land and people. As with all the stories of the founding of the nation, in Ruth, the covenant theme pervades the book and is explicitly evoked in Ruth's words to Naomi: ... "your people shall be my people, and your God my God." The covenant – this oneness of God with the people and of God's people with one another – is the backbone of the Bible. We're never told what impelled Ruth's loyalty and courage, her desire to "go out to an unknown land to live as a foreigner among strangers." There must have been some experience of call, as with Abraham: just as he "went out, not knowing where he was to go," Ruth "left her father and mother and her native land and came to a people that she did not know before."

Abraham was the first Hebrew or Jew, and God's creation of his people is a major strand of the covenant theme. When Abram and Sarai were reborn as God's new people – Abraham and Sarah – they could become fruitful and multiply. Similarly, when Ruth entered the covenant she was blessed with goodness, plenty and fertility. Like Abraham long before, Ruth came as a foreigner and became God's chosen in the land of promise.

The first chapter of Ruth, which we read last week, set the story that

continues today. Ruth's story presents a deeply moving context in which this *hesed*, this lovingkindness of God, will operate in this situation of dislocation, loss and grief. Arriving in Bethlehem at the start of the barley harvest brought a glimmer of hope to the two women – a promise of fulness.

Central to the Book of Ruth is the institution of the *geol*, the “redeemer” whose duty, according to Leviticus, is to buy back any land sold by his kinsman out of economic necessity. Seen against this background, the references to land in the Book of Ruth not only provide the setting for a pastoral romance, they also link the story to the covenant theme of land – whether private or national.

At first it would seem that the ties that bind Naomi, Ruth and Orpah after the deaths of their husbands, do not make them a family in any customary sense. They have no legal obligation to one another and can offer each other no mutual protection or support. None of them seems to be able to restore the family by producing an heir.

The Book of Leviticus comes to life in this story, with its injunctions to leave part of the harvest for the needy and with all of its concern and compassion for the underprivileged within the society. The text contains complexities; yet these fade away against the simple message of a Divine plan fulfilling itself among decent people: Ruth, Naomi and Boaz all occupy the stage in turn, and God's purpose is fulfilled through their

actions.

But once in Bethlehem, Ruth and Naomi have to provide for themselves. Since it's time for the barley harvest, Ruth decides to glean the field. As the old saying goes, "A coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous."

In the second act of this play, Ruth goes out to glean barley to sustain herself and Naomi, and – **as it happened** – she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz. Boaz is a pillar of the community - his name is even attached to one of the pillars of the Temple - and he just happens to be related to Naomi's dead husband.

In Canaan, as Yahweh had promised, the aged Abraham and Sarah were miraculously blessed with fertility. For Ruth, the promise of a fruitful future is tied to the barley harvest; her good fortune as a reaper under the wing of Boaz and Yahweh, foretold her greater future happiness.

Widows and foreigners were allowed to glean, so Ruth goes out to the barley fields to provide for herself and Naomi. In Leviticus, it states: "When you gather in the harvest of your land, you must not completely harvest the corner of your field, and you must not gather up the gleanings of your harvest. You must not pick your vineyard bare, and you must not gather up the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You must leave them for the poor and the foreigner." This was not charity, but justice

according to God. This was a way to allow the orphans, widows, and foreigners to work for themselves.

God does not speak from burning bushes in this book; nor does God divide the sea. This story does not mention God, does not portray God as the primary acting character. Where is God's presence? Where is transcendence? In the story of Ruth, God acts through events - through the faithfulness of ordinary human beings. God's *hesed* is embodied in human action.

Not so long ago, not as long ago as the book of Ruth, a young man was travelling in then-Communist Czechoslovakia. He was travelling with Maria, one of the leaders of the underground church, and they were going to Pilsen – to meet with another family, leaders of the resistance in that city. Once in Pilsen, they got off the train, and Maria whispered to the young man, “I don't have their address.”

“But how will we ever find them in this great city?” he asked, totally befuddled and confused. She said, “All I know is that we take the streetcar number 7.”

They got on that streetcar. As it happened, he saw a young girl - a child - and said to himself (because they could not sit together on the streetcar), “I'll get out when she gets out.” And when the young girl stood up to get off, so did he and, to his amazement, so did Maria. Once in the street,

he said to her, “Why did you get out here?” and she said, “I saw that child and said: “when she gets out, I’ll get out.”

They quickly followed the young girl and Maria very cautiously went up to her and asked, “Do you know so-and-so?” And the girl responded, “they are my parents.”

As it happened. Is this not God’s moment in Ruth? Here God slips in, unnoticed, from the side, by way of a simple – “**as it happened**” - and God prepares a way. Faithfulness, *hesed*, springs up from the earth, a widow embracing a widow. It springs up out of what we might write off as just a nice story or just chance. God, though, uses this earthiness – this seemingly ordinary situation – to accomplish what God wishes to accomplish.

So Ruth **just happened** to end up in the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.” Ruth had no idea that Boaz was her mother-in-law’s relative. This ended up being an extraordinary circumstance.

So Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen carefully, my dear! Do not leave to gather grain in another field. You need not go beyond the limits of this field. You may go along beside my female workers. Take note of the field where the men are harvesting and follow behind with the female workers. I will tell the men to leave you alone. When you are thirsty, you may go to the

water jars and drink some of the water the servants draw.” So Ruth gathered grain in the fields with the women behind the male harvesters.

Boaz was providing her with space - so she would not be harassed. Ordinary acts of exclusion, harassment, small acts that show contempt - are the most cutting and painful. Yet here, a few small gestures have a cumulative effect. Looking out for someone’s basic dignity, basic safety, are graceful acts of creating space so someone can get their work done. It does everything in terms of changing the climate, changing the equation here, with something as simple as insuring ready access to drinking water.

It is so ordinary. It isn’t cosmic. It is a way in which compassion takes the ordinary forms – in which to find a great theological idea of what compassion might look like. But if it doesn’t come down to the kind of level that Boaz is taking it, then compassion remains just a noble ideal. Boaz is enacting compassion in small ways that we’ve all at some time experienced. As stated in 1 John, love is NOT an ideal. Love is an action. Here is a picture of what love in action looks like.

Don’t forget that Ruth is a young woman alone. This is a dangerous situation. She is doubly vulnerable being both a widow and a foreigner. For Boaz to do these seemingly simple things to protect her is a big deal. Ruth is perceived as an outsider. She didn’t look like everyone else and had a different speech pattern, making it evident that she wasn’t from

Bethlehem. Those who are not from here are easy prey for the bullies. By staying with the women, following behind the men, Ruth was safe. She gleaned from dawn to dusk.

Boaz praises Ruth for her loyalty to her mother-in-law and then enacts through his generosity the blessings of God that he calls down upon her: “May the Lord reward your efforts! May your acts of kindness be repaid fully by the Lord God of Israel – from whom you have sought protection!”

Ruth ate the meal offered by Boaz – but only until she was satisfied, bringing the rest to Naomi so she could eat. Naomi sees the astonishing amount of barley that Ruth has gleaned - something like thirty pounds – and finds out that it is Boaz who has helped Ruth. And it is only then that Naomi begins to move from despair to hope. She recognizes in this turn of events the hand of God and she is quick to name God as the source of blessing: “May he be rewarded by the Lord because he has shown loyalty to the living on behalf of the dead!” Naomi sees the *hesed* of the Lord lived out.

Ruth’s generosity, hard work, and care for Naomi, are further examples of love lived out in action. Naomi has come a long way since she described her emptiness despite Ruth’s presence. Feeling full at last, Naomi connects emotionally to the daughter-in-law who long ago declared allegiance to her. At last, Naomi recognizes Ruth as family – when she informs her that Boaz is “our guardian” and when she

commands Ruth to cling to Boaz, Naomi's - and now Ruth's - kinsman. This recognition marks a shift in Naomi's gratitude and obligation; their fates and their identities have become fused.

Those who gathered to fulfill the covenant responsibilities for widows significantly demonstrated that Ruth was now fully within the covenant circle. Later, with her marriage to Boaz, Ruth entered the most intimate covenantal relationship of God's people.

Now the tide is turning. Emptiness is being filled. Hope is born. And it is an old widow (one who has seen more than her share of sorrow), who recognizes the hand of God in these seemingly happenstance circumstances. Perhaps it is often this way: Those who have had long experience of seeing God at work can recognize and name those times in our own lives, when miracles begin to happen. Naomi starts to transform from Mara, a name meaning bitterness, which she gave herself upon their arrival in Bethlehem, to Naomi, meaning pleasantness.

The faith of both Abraham and Ruth was ultimately rewarded with blessings both spiritual and material. Both had the courage and took the initiative to set out for the new land.

In Ruth's bold faith, in her journey to the new land, in her embrace of the covenant, Ruth was the New Abraham of her generation.

The significance of these women, Ruth and Naomi, for the era in which the sign of the covenant was circumcision, cannot be underestimated. If a woman, and a “foreign” woman at that, could be, for their generation, the new Abraham under the old covenant, what possible barriers of gender, nationality, race or class can stand under the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ?

Jesus Christ fulfills God’s promises to every generation of covenant people. He reveals the truly redemptive pattern of sacrificial love. On the cross Jesus incorporated the suffering of all victims of the world’s oppression, while completely repudiating the tempting solution of retaliatory violence. In Christ’s gospel of love for the enemy and of God’s overarching plan of salvation, we “latter-day Ruths” may find grace for ourselves and a future for this earth. God calls us to the task, like Ruth, but in a Christian framework, of leading others toward liberation, the blessings of covenant, and the promise of security and peace on our planet.

Ruth clothed herself with the qualities of Abraham. Now, as Paul put it, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.”

The promise, toward which Ruth, Abraham, and the entire “cloud of witnesses” in Scripture, is the consummation of the covenant; the final, complete unity of God and God’s people in the “new heaven and new earth” of Revelation. The Book of Ruth, with its tales of suffering, crisis, and eventual triumph, testify that we are not trapped helplessly in a destructive global fate. With bold faith, Ruth took events into her own hands to secure the future of the covenant. Her story shines as an example of the human side of covenant responsibility, as well as revealing the divine side of protection and blessing.

Ruth, read through the prism of Christ, points us beyond global fatalism toward the hope for the earth. It is into suffering - the suffering of death, nothingness, separation – the suffering of the world, taken on in the suffering of God, that the church is called. We – the church – are called into this way – just like Ruth, Abraham, the disciples. We are called into a covenant relationship with God by living a life of *hesed* that God desires from all of us.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Merciful God, we boldly pray to you, confident that you will not reject us. In spite of our human failings, your love continues to draw us together. Be with us today as we rejoice in the power of your love. Sing with us today, as we proclaim the good news of your grace. Dance with us today, as we celebrate the unity we share in Christ. How good it is to be together! Hallelujah!. **Amen.**