

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost - June 21, 2026

Ruth 4:1-22

Last week we left off with Boaz accepting Ruth's proposal, after she lay at his uncovered feet, on the threshing floor while he slept. Upon waking, he was surprised to find Ruth at his feet. He then covered her with a corner of his shawl or blanket. This was an acceptable way for a single woman to propose to a man.

Boaz was related to Elimelech's widow Naomi, and was the *gaoelim*, that is the redeemer. Naomi offered to sell her husband's land, and as a kinsman- redeemer, he could purchase it. However, Boaz told Ruth that there was a closer kinsman who would have first pick at the purchase. He had to check with him first. Chapter four described what Boaz said and did, but no dialogue was recorded for neither Ruth nor Naomi. Boaz was a skilful negotiator who presented the facts to the nearer family member in such a way that he was not willing to act as Naomi and Ruth's kinsman-redeemer. Boaz however, was willing to risk everything he owned to be their redeemer and ensure Elimelech's name would never be forgotten.

Since Boaz was not Elimelech's son, he did not have to marry Ruth or provide Mahlon, Naomi's son, with an heir. However, this child would inherit Elimelech's legacy. In addition, becoming the redeemer would include supporting Naomi. He loved the two women enough to ensure they would never face homelessness or starvation again.

Since the family's land still belonged to Naomi, she needed to sell it to support herself and her daughter-in-law. A widow was not able to sell her late husband's property. She needed a man to represent her. The *gaoelim* (kinsman-redeemer) had the first opportunity to buy the land.

It was customary for business transactions to take place at the city gates. At the city gate, where people gathered every day, there would be many witnesses. Elders governed ancient cities. We don't know how many elders served in Bethlehem. Since Boaz took "ten of the elders of the town," there must have been more than ten men performing that duty. A quorum of ten men was needed to conduct legal business. They acted as the town's council, and decided issues affecting levirate marriages and the duties of the kinsman-redeemer as well as other business.

And so, here we are. It's morning in Bethlehem, and a late night of celebrating at the threshing floor has not made Boaz forget his promises to the bold woman who proposed to him the night before. It's true, he is a *gaoelim*, a kinsman-redeemer, to Ruth and Naomi, but there is one man who is more closely related, who has both the right and the responsibility (according to Israelite law) to redeem these two widows from their poverty, the right and the responsibility to marry Ruth and to raise up children to perpetuate her dead husband's name. And so the scene shifts from the threshing floor to the village gate.

At first the relative agreed to redeem the land. Then Boaz explained the kinsman would also have to marry Mahlon's widow, Ruth. Although he wanted the land, he did not want to marry a Moabite widow or support her mother-in-law. Any child he had with Ruth would become the heir, the owner of the land.

The scene at the city gate (where legal proceedings are conducted) is a humorous one. The nearer relative, the potential *gaoelim* with whom Boaz speaks, is never named, which is entirely appropriate since he refuses to carry on the name of Mahlon (Ruth's dead husband). He is enthusiastic about acquiring more land but suddenly remembers a previous appointment and makes himself scarce, when Boaz says that marrying Ruth is part of the bargain. So, having fulfilled all righteousness, Boaz receives the community's blessing on his marriage to Ruth.

There was a custom in former times in Israel for redeeming and purchasing: to confirm a transaction, one would take off a sandal and give it to the other; this was the manner of attesting or confirming in Israel. In this coming together of family and peoplehood, we are again reminded of the stories of the patriarchs, in which the family represents the people. In the patriarchal stories, the main concern was the establishment of the family line – the quest for an heir whom God will designate as the one through whom the people of Israel will be born.

The amazing thing about these accounts is that, although lineage is defined through the males, it is the women who take responsibility for the continuity of the family and the guardianship of its lineage. It is the women who often, despite their husbands, ensure the birth of the next generation and who direct the proper line of inheritance. Sarah, at first barren, provides a surrogate mother (Hagar) for Abraham, and later, when she bears her own son, Isaac, sees to it, with God's approval, that Isaac – not Ishmael – is the designated heir. Isaac's wife Rebekah also guides the line of descent away from Esau and toward Jacob, as God had wanted.

In the stories of Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, the issue is no longer which son will be the heir, for they are all "the children of Israel." Rather the emphasis is on the accumulation of progeny. Rachel, initially barren, is jealous of Leah's ability to bear children and supplies her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob for this purpose (as Sarah had done for Abraham). Leah, during a hiatus in her childbearing, does the same by giving her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob as a concubine. Leah and Rachel's eagerness to bear children for Jacob is again emphasized when they argue over who shall use the aphrodisiac mandrakes found by Leah's son. In all, Leah and Rachel provide Jacob with 12 sons (and one daughter), who will in turn father the 12 tribes – the people of Israel.

Ruth's explicit link to Rachel and Leah occurs in the blessings of the

townspeople as they witness Boaz's redemption of Ruth and the land of Elimelech and Mahlon. In the blessing, the townspeople add a specific reference to Judah, the founder of Boaz's tribe: "May your house be like the houses of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah."

The story of Tamar and Judah is also a story of family continuity achieved by the determination of a woman. Tamar bears twins, Perez and Zerah, after she masquerades as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law, Judah, who had failed to fulfill his promises to give her his youngest son Shelah as a husband after his two older sons had died while married to her.

The references in the Book of Ruth to Rachel, Leah and Tamar serve not only to welcome Ruth into the Judahite community by linking her with the mothers of that community, they especially lead us to view Ruth in the mold of the heroic women who ensured the preservation of the people of Israel. Thanks to Ruth, the family of Naomi survives. The child born to Ruth and Boaz is a "son to Naomi" ... born to Naomi who will "renew her life." For Naomi, Ruth is better than seven sons for she produces what Naomi's sons failed to do, an heir.

An heir implies an inheritance, and in the Bible that means land. At the end of the Book of Ruth, the themes of land and family come together. Boaz reunites the family with its land by redeeming Elimelech's land and by marrying Ruth, the widow of Elimelech's son Mahlon. The story

comes full circle: the family that left its land and had no descendants returns to its homeland and acquires an heir and a patrimony. The welfare of the dead depended upon descendants retaining ancestral property, and the unknown, closer kinsman, had no desire to raise a son who would continue Mahlon's name.

The brothers Mahlon and Chilion, are still paired against one another. Mahlon's name will survive through Ruth; Chilion disappears from view. Even then, rabbinic imagination makes Orpah (Ruth's sister-in-law) the ancestor of Goliath who will meet Ruth's descendant, David, in a final confrontation of these branches of the family. The rabbis see the death of Elimelech and his sons as caused by their leaving of Canaan. In this they touch on a clear theme within the book: the love for this land, a rich and sensuous feeling rising out of the story and out of the loving descriptions of the land at harvest time.

That would be uplifting even on the level of an individual family; but like the patriarchal stories, the Book of Ruth speaks to the national level as well. This is no anonymous family that is restored— this is the family into which King David will be born. Just as Ruth's adoption of both Naomi's people and God raises their return to Bethlehem from the personal to the national level, so the genealogies at the end of the book of Ruth lift the story to the national level. One genealogy begins with Obed, son of Boaz and Ruth, and culminates three generations later in David; the second goes back to Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar, then leads to Salmon,

father of Boaz, and after ten generations also culminates in David.

David, as Israel's greatest king, founded the Davidic dynasty, the one to which God promised an eternal kingdom. David represents both the United Monarchy at its height and the promise of its eternal existence. The covenant with David, like the covenant with Abraham is an emblem of God's promise to Israel. The story of Ruth provides for David the same pattern that produced the patriarchal line and the line of Judah – namely, the perpetuation of the family through the deeds of women – and it thereby joins the covenant with David to the covenant with Abraham. The promise to Abraham of progeny and land, is renewed in the promise of David of the dynasty and the kingdom. The theme of family continuity becomes the theme of national continuity. The Book of Ruth is the bridge between the era of Israel as family or tribe and Israel as nation. Far from being peripheral to the main narrative sequence of the Bible, Ruth dramatizes its principal theme: the continuity of this people in their land.

So here we are. It is morning in Bethlehem. And here at the end of our story the fruit of the earth now gives way to the fruit of the womb. For ten years during her marriage to Mahlon, Naomi's son, Ruth's womb had been empty, but now with Boaz, she conceives a child and bears a son. Ruth's love and loyalty for her mother-in-law transcended boundaries of nation and custom. Ruth, was the embodiment of God's faithful love (God's *hesed*) for Naomi, even when Naomi did not yet have eyes to see

it. But the women of the village see it, and they name it: “This child shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age.” In the end, it is not barley or wheat, but love that fills Naomi’s emptiness, and love that did so from the beginning.

The women of the village name him “Naomi’s baby.” “Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and she became his nurse.” The rabbis, noting that the Hebrew word translated here often means “wet nurse,” said that a miracle happened, that Naomi’s old and withered breasts were suddenly plump and round with milk, and that she nursed the child herself.

Wet nurses were not unusual throughout ancient and even modern history. Moses, left in the bull rushes, is rescued by the Pharaoh’s sister and is nursed by his own mother, the wet nurse Moses’ sister finds for him. Throughout Europe, rich women often used wet nurses. Even in more current times, we experienced the legacy of slavery and forced wet nursing of white babies while black babies were left with homemade gruel.

It is morning in Bethlehem, and the house of bread is full to overflowing. Into the ordinary lives of two widows and a farmer, the faithful love of God, the *hesed* of God, has overflowed. And that love has come not in a burning bush or a voice from heaven, but through the ordinary lives and the extraordinary love of human beings, one for another, called forth

and undergirded by God's love for them.

Just as the book of Ruth began with a note of promise, so now it ends with another note of promise: the promise of God's faithful love, God's *hesed*, overflowing in the lives of all Israel and through David's greater Son, into even our own lives. The child of Ruth and Boaz, Obed, will be the grandfather of David, Israel's most beloved king. Blessing upon blessing, heaped up, overflowing.

The Book of Ruth is a story about "the birth of the monarchy" and a fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that would eventually be a blessing to all humanity. In a nation where bloodline was important, the book may have served to validate the Davidic line which included "foreign ancestry" and/or "function as an apology for non-Israelites as a whole." The subtle message is not so subtle, for "even Israel's greatest king is descended from a poor, vulnerable woman from a despised foreign nation." Ruth's inclusion in Jesus' lineage enlarges the message even further. If God is the God of all humanity, why would not all humanity have a role in the lineage of the Incarnate Jesus?

In contrast to the anti-foreign-women polemic found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ruth highlights the heroic contributions of a Moabite woman to the well-being of Israel, the one who became the great-grandmother of David, God's chosen and favoured king of Israel! In Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, Ruth – along with two other Canaanite

women, Tamar and Rahab – is explicitly named as an ancestor of David and thus, of Jesus.

The theme that unites the books from Genesis through Kings, and informs much of the Prophets and the Writings, is the land and the people. God's covenant with Abraham lies at its heart. Land plays a large role in the Book of Ruth. An heir implies an inheritance, and in the Bible that means land. At the end of the Book of Ruth, the themes of land and family come together. The story comes full circle: the family that left its land and had no descendants returns to its homeland and acquires an heir and a patrimony.

The lesson this book teaches is as valid in the twenty-first century as it was thousands of years ago. We must trust God even in times of grief and suffering. He has a plan for our lives that will be revealed in God's own time. Pray and study the word of God rather than depend on the advice of friends. No matter how good it may sound, not all guidance is godly.

The story began in sorrow, but ended with great joy. The lessons we can learn from Ruth's story are important today. Obviously, we do not have to worry about levirate marriages or sandal ceremonies, but we still face many of the problems they did in Ruth's day. Trials and temptations, famines, poverty, death, and childlessness are just as great in our day as they were thousands of years ago. We may even be tempted to follow

the practices of godless people because they are easy or fun. God still uses adversities to train and shape us according to his will so that we will bring glory to His name. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. God is worthy of our trust and praise.

Boaz and Ruth entered into their marriage covenant to serve God, not each other. Had Ruth chosen a younger husband, she might have had fun, but she would not have fulfilled the will of God. Nor would she have been the ancestor of our Lord Jesus.

Even the most faithful believers face misfortunes. Do we trust God, or do we do what is right in our own eyes and take the easy way out? Trusting in ourselves and our opinions can lead to disaster.

The “Field of Boaz” lies east of Beit Sahour, a Palestinian town south of Bethlehem. According to tradition this is where Ruth gleaned grain. Everything recorded in the book of Ruth pointed to the birth of Jesus Christ, our redeemer.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Loving God, call us together as your people; transform us with your love. Transform our hearts, that we may love generously. Transform our eyes, that we may see your grace. Transform our hands, that we may serve others. Transform our spirits, that we may be the body of Christ, gathered to worship and sent out to serve. **Amen.**