

“Whose Story is This?”
Sermon for 22 January 2017
Texts:

Why is this book entitled Ruth when the story line is about Naomi, an unfortunate widow, who turns out to be the great grandmother of King David? And how is this story “our story?” And what, if any, significance does this narrative have for my New Year’s focus: indispensability of the church? The first sermon in this brief series will only cover the separation, departure and return of Naomi. We might have entitled this message: homecoming, or the return of the native (only Thomas Hardy has the copyright on that one!). I will defend my position that this book is actually more about God and Naomi than is generally taken. I will cover the five chief mechanisms by which God planned and intends to rescue, protect and deliver the poor (the heaven-sent anti-poverty program). I hope to show that the role played by tribe, clan and family has been assumed by the church (at Christ’s direction) *which claim undergirds the indispensability of the church for us, for our time!* And I will point out at least two ways that Naomi’s story is our story, a story that we can own because of what it demonstrates about genealogy, the faithfulness of God, marriage and family. I will return to these emphases down the line. However, under these four headings (homecoming, divine provision for the poor, genealogy and promise, and marriage and family) I hope to organize today’s message, with the last, the indispensability of the church being the application of our reading of the text.

To the first: is this story about Ruth, the love interest and typical approach, or, more profoundly and centrally about Naomi? She is the widow of Elimelech and the great grandmother of King David—Naomi’s son, Obed, born of the union between Boaz and Ruth fathered Jesse, who fathered David. Boaz being a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech. Obed came about through God’s provision of levirate marriage (one of the five anti-poverty institutions of God) and through Boaz’s assumption of the role of “kinsman-redeemer” (a second divine provision for the deliverance of family members from destitution). The seed of promise (made to Eve) was conveyed through Boaz and Ruth from Elimelech into the line, or genealogy of David. *This speaks of a mightier deliverance than the little family crisis detailed here.*

Homecoming:

What about Naomi and Elimelech’s marriage? Do we even need to go there? Well, I think so. Here’s what happens. Ruth is written about the events that occurred in the later times of the judges in which **everyone did what was right in his own eyes.** (Judges 21:25) Why? Well, first because there was no king. There was a famine of authority as well as of food, and in the moral and spiritual vacuum that resulted, people like Elimelech chose to act independently (to walk away from God, turn apostate, take up idolatry. God did not send him away, he walked away! **In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. . . they were Ephrathites** (that was their clan, Bethlehem was their territory as assigned by God in the occupation of the Promised Land). Ruth 1:1-3. Elimelech’s pragmatic decision had a spiritual downside. That happens sometimes. What Elimelech did was to remove

himself from the land of the covenant promise! He did not trust in God to provide for himself and his family where they were situated.

They remained there. (v. 2) It is apparent that they *assimilated* to the culture around them in Moab. *They revolted from true religion and ran to a false one—people do that even today.* (Naomi's two sons **took Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth**, and took on their religion v.4) Perhaps they went so far as to abandon the God of Israel because the next thing we know, the two sons also die and despite the years of occupation, they are issueless, or barren marriages. If we interpret this as a judgment of God upon the sins of the father, Elimelech, we would stay within the orbit of the tale. Radical stripping down of Naomi, apart from reminding us of the tale of Job, lends itself to the conclusion that Elimelech's pragmatic move (a separation from God, family and faith) was rebellious, apostate . . . and, as a result, a costly error. The journey home would be challenging.

Genealogy:

Now, it is this biological trace of the seed of promise that accounts for the inclusion of the book of Ruth in the Bible! It is the preservation of that seed despite the death of Elimelech, and the decease of his two biological children! This is not a case of two strikes and you're out which might suggest that God tried a couple of options (namely Mahlon and Chilion through Elimelech) and, oops, they just didn't pan out. No, rather it is by the predetermined plan of God that Boaz, a relative of Elimelech, should carry the seed of promise and through the impregnation of Ruth have a son, Obed who then fathered Jesse who subsequently fathered David. We should observe that Ruth transitions us, in the biblical narrative from the time of the judges to the dawn of the Davidic monarchy—established in the wake the rejection of King Saul's line.

Okay, that genetic plan is important to us because 1. it is the genealogy of King David and 2. this fraction of the family tree from Adam to Jesus represents how the promise of God to Abraham (**though your seed all nations will be blessed-** Gen. 22:18) is genetically mapped. So, genealogy is not simply some odd Jewish, or Mormon fascination, not some incidental piece of human history of descent. It is the biological trace of the "scarlet thread of redemption" run through time and human experience, our story—from the Fall to the Cross, from our defeat by Satan in the Garden, to Satan's defeat at Golgotha! The genealogy of David is the genealogy of Jesus is our genealogy, making it our story in a gripping manner. And this family tree is something very, very important that God has revealed to us because 1.) it is something that He wants us to know, and 2.) something to be grateful for and to worship God for. Apart from this DNA strand, we would actually be totally lost.

So, what about this being Naomi's story? She makes no *biological* contribution to this chain at all. Ruth carries the child who bears the seed who is the promise bearer. Obed is Naomi's child through the divine provision of a modified levirate marriage¹.

¹ Levirate marriage—yibbum—is a marriage between a man and the childless widow of that man's brother, with the goal of producing a child. It is a paradoxical kind of marriage— under normal circumstances, such a marriage between in-laws would be forbidden. It is confusing—to

Levirate marriage was an arrangement by which a widow, being issue-less, might obtain a male heir and so retain a claim to the land, property and inheritance of her deceased husband. God has particular concern for the widow, the fatherless (orphans) and strangers and He established certain conventions to insure for their provision *that they not be destitute of property, poor, or without legal right and standing in Hebraic culture—or even now in our day.*

Provision for the poor (our second heading):

If this “levirate” provision were not in place, and if God had not also instituted the role of “kinsman-redeemer” (a second divine provision for the poor), Naomi would have had no hope, no future and the family name of Elimelech would have perished from the face of the earth! Buried with his bones in the land of desertion, Moab. Therefore, we may propose that Ruth is about God’s relationship to Naomi (and, secondarily, also to Ruth as both a foreigner and a widow herself). Out of the ruins of Naomi’s and Ruth’s marriages to Elimelech and son, God rescues his daughter, showers favor upon her, protects and provides for her *as a good kinsman-redeemer ought to do!* God cares about family, about widows and the poor and commands us to be concerned likewise as a community.

Naomi is turned by these deaths, or losses in her life experience: **she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from Moab, for she had learned that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.** (v.6) Apparently the famine had been of some years duration, and the Lord ended that famine with a visitation of bounty. We note that neither the initial decision to flee Judah, nor the decision to return is a solely a “pragmatic” decision based on climate change. There is a spiritual component to it. *I would suggest that this decision is repentance, a return to the God her husband had unwisely chose to abandon many unhappy years prior.* Going back to the land of Judah then is in actuality a gesture of trust, a return to faith, to God—as well as a form of repentance. It is springtime. There is food.

Now about marriage:

The themes of famine and barrenness are related metaphorically. Barrenness symbolizes that the marriages involved were not blessed. Naomi’s daughters-in-law were, most likely, still of child-bearing age (and perhaps Naomi, too). But Naomi would be some twelve to thirteen years ahead of them and therefore less of a marriage prospect. *They would have to wait another fifteen years for her to have a male child for either of them to marry!* Therefore, she selflessly encourages her daughters-in-law: **Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with dead and with me. The Lord grant you rest, each of you in the house of her husband.** (vv. 8-9) I want to glean something here about biblical marriage—our story! This is not because her daughters in law have no fathers (2::11

what degree is the dead brother still a part of this relationship? Is the child his? It is disturbing—in principle, the marriage can be consummated against the will of the woman. Deut. 25:5-10

As a point of clarification, Ruth acts as a surrogate for Naomi so this birth is not, strictly speaking “levirate.” Naomi would have to be the mother for that. However, Obed is declared to be “her son,” or heir. (4:17) **The women of the neighborhood gave him a name.**

proves that: **you have left father and mother and your native land and came to a people you had not known before.**) Naomi's suggestion that they return to their mothers may simply register female sympathy in general. Perhaps Naomi is motivated by the knowledge that becoming Jewish would be difficult and it would entail giving up their idols *and her daughter-in-laws should know that and count the cost. There may even have been prejudice in Judah against marrying foreign wives.* Ruth's choice of Naomi's God is implied here.

Something beautiful resides in Naomi's wishes for these two women, her daughters-in-law. **Rest . . . rest in the house of her husband.**

Naomi is realistically concerned that they might have no hope of love, marriage and offspring—or of security, provision, appreciation and protection—if they return with her to Israel, and to Israel's God. That meaning is behind her use of the word **rest** and "**rest**" is the **biblical purpose of marriage for women.** Naomi isn't wishing trouble and strife, or fear and contention on them! Love, marriage, offspring, a place of acceptance, of fulfillment and value. as a woman; rest, not distress and tribulation! The covenant of marriage is a divine provision for the blessing of women as women. It is not a paternalistic, or chauvinist form of exploitation, not Western, American or even cultural institution but a divine institution, a blessing and not a curse!

Would you wait? Would you refrain from remarrying? (vv.11-13) It is rather refreshing to have positive talking points for our biblical view of marriage—by which I mean the "rest," or coming home to one's own husband: where one is valued, provided for, protected. And the link between love, marriage and offspring is bracing; a welcome change from personal happiness, companionship and fulfillment of sexual needs for intimacy. A spiritual institution that transcends various social ends, such as rights, privileges and prerogatives so that coming home is coming home to God as well as to one's spouse and family!

After Ruth's stirring choice to "convert" to Naomi's God, the covenant God of Israel and to trust in his promises, we note that the return of these two widows really stirred things up in Bethlehem. **The whole town was stirred because of them.** There was some agitation about how to assimilate them, to welcome Naomi home along with the beautiful young Moabitess, Ruth. This dilemma is a subtext in the larger narrative of restoration and return. Naomi expresses her belief that the Lord God has dealt with her—albeit **very bitterly**, or harshly. *She doesn't see her difficulties as arising from any other source, or as anything other than a chastisement, or disciplining. **I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.*** (vv. 21-22) Both forlorn and desolate!

Family:

So the two women appear to have discussed their family predicament financially, familial-ly and theologically. Chapter 2: there appears to have been a barley field in Bethlehem owned **by a relative, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech** and this gentleman had a distant relative named Boaz **who was** (also) **part of the clan of Elimelech.** Boaz owned **a portion of that field.** It is not clear, from the passage, that the man from whom Ruth hoped to find favor was not the first gentleman. But as it is, Boaz upon returning from town notices Ruth and inquires as to whom she is. The

servant in charge of reaping responds that she is Ruth, **who came back with Naomi from the land of Moab.** (v.6) Now it is important, I think, to stress that both men are related. They are family to each other within the clan of Elimelech. A blood tie that we see subsumed under faith in the family that is the church.

So Naomi has come home. Her relatives by marriage and her in-laws are constrained to deal with her Ruth is about how that transpires. The foreign woman? Well, that's another story. Ruth is a stranger, but she has distinguished herself as a kind, selfless and hard working woman. She is no slouch in the barley field. And she is taking advantage of another divine provision in the Law for the destitute and poor; some grain was to be left behind so that those who were willing to gather it, might have something to eat—some fruits of their own labor so to speak. This practice along with the Levirate marriage were divine institutions for the protection of the most vulnerable segments of Hebraic society: widows, orphans and strangers. There was provision for these folk and, together with the third year tithe God constrained those who happened to be more prosperous to not exclude those who happened to be poor from the blessings of God's provision and bounty. I think this means that God was concerned that poverty only be a temporary condition—the poor were not to be kept poor artificially, by caste, or assignment to the lowest station of life arbitrarily. Land could not be alienated forever and debt was not permitted to be perpetual, or strictly tied to ownership. In this way, God insured that justice remained in the land, that everyone had a way out and up! Anyway this is where we must pause for now.

I have covered the matter of Naomi's homecoming—those who choose to desert God need to repent and return. They need to be restored because they have repented. God has made at least five provision for dealing with the poor, widows, orphans and strangers—God has not designed for poverty to be a persistent condition. I will list the five provisions: levirate marriage, the law of gleaning, the kinsman-redeemer—all of which I have touched upon—and the third year tithe and the year of jubilee (which I will cover next time). Care for the poor is our Christian concern, consider James 1:6 **If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not bridle his tongue, he deceives his heart and his religion is worthless. 7 Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.** I addressed the seed of promise and the importance of genealogy in this regard. And I set forth the biblical purposes for marriage and family according to scripture. We will pick up next week about half way through Ruth 2:12ff.

Amen.