

"WALK THRU THE BIBLE: RUTH."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Ruth 1:1-6; 1:22-2:3

The book of Ruth is a very old book, over three thousand years old. The oldest book on my shelves is from 1814. Can a book as old as Ruth still be relevant, can it still speak to us? That it can is a remarkable testimony to the power of the Word of God. These are God's Words, they never become old or outdated. It is unchangeable and unwaveringly true, eternally true. Remember that, take that to heart, return to it when everything else in our world is changing.

The book is named after the principal character, Ruth, a pagan Moabite widow who married the Bethlehemite Boaz and became an ancestor (great grandmother) of King David (Ruth 4:17, 22) and thus an ancestor of the Messiah (Matt. 1:1, 5–6).

We are told the story took place during the time of the judges. We are not told who the author is, but Jewish tradition says it was Samuel. It may have been written around the time of David's ascension to the throne, around 1000BC.

In terms of great literature, the book of Ruth is a masterpiece in storytelling. There is not a wasted word in this densely packed compelling drama and classic love story. It may be the most beautiful short story ever written.

It follows that classic path of great stories, stating the challenges and trials, descending into obstacles and potential danger and tragedy, before rising to a gloriously happy ending.

It is one of the few stories in the Bible written from a woman's point of view and revealing some of the particular challenges women faced in that day. It is the custom of the Jews to read this story at the time of Pentecost, which is the time of harvest.

It extols the virtues of the simple, pleasant aspects of rural and domestic life. It makes us long for a simpler, less complicated life. Yet it is real, not a fairy tale. Times were hard, there was famine, migration, relocation, early death and widowhood.

Boaz is one of the few characters in the Bible who displays no character flaws or moral failures. He is the embodiment of God's faithfulness and kindness to Naomi and Ruth.

As I ask each week, who is this book about? It is not really a book about Ruth or Naomi, but about God and His dealings with His world and His people. The hand of the living God is everywhere evident in life as illustrated by the presence of His hand everywhere in this story.

This story really starts with God. Actually don't all our stories start with God. Your story and my story and every story are all His Story, they all start with God, with the sovereign purposes of God moving mysteriously in time and space His will to perform, His grace to glorify.

As all of history reflects the redemptive purposes of God, so in this story we see a great redeemer bringing a disobedient daughter home with empty hands so that in her weakness and emptiness God can magnify His glory and grace by astonishing her with an abundance of provision and goodness.

From the mountains of Moab and the barley fields of Boaz in Bethlehem God speaks to us lessons from the life of Ruth. Note them well and they will serve you well.

Race.

Ruth was a poor, unclean, widowed Moabitess drawn into an interracial marriage. Ruth was ethnically an outsider to the covenant and the laws of Israel, like Tamar and Rahab before her. She speaks to us today. Race and ethnic diversity and immigration are the issues of our day.

The real issue is not race, but faith. God opens the door to those from every tribe, tongue and nation. Jesus had Moabite blood in Him.

Revelation 5:9 Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,

God magnifies His Son by making Him Savior to people from every tribe and language.

We are reminded we are all strangers, sojourners and exiles. We are Ruth, we are strangers to the covenant who have lost our inheritance and we desperately need a kinsman-redeemer. And while we are busy scratching out an existence consumed by the needs and demands of life, God in His grace sends us a redeemer who delivers us by His amazing grace at the cost of His own blood.

God loves to bring near those who were far away, and faith is the only thing that equipped these women to see what God was up to.

Manhood and womanhood.

Ruth extols the virtues of Godly, Biblical manhood and womanhood.

Our culture today has destroyed manhood and womanhood. Movies, the internet, TV and advertising have reduced manhood and womanhood, masculinity and femineity to the lowest forms, making everything about sex; demeaning and disparaging fathers and mothers.

We need stories that elevate the magnificent meaning of God's gifts of manhood and womanhood, we need heroes like this in a culture where our politicians and celebrities are terrible role models.

The more our culture minimizes the difference between men and women, male and female, the more our culture drifts into confusion and total chaos and rebellion. This powerful story provides a wonderful vision for mature masculinity and femineity.

A biblical vision where women are not sex objects or the same as men, a vision where covenant marriage is honored, where husbands model Christ and wives model the church, where men lead and protect and provide, and women come along side with their unique gifts and strength and help carry the vision forward.

Boaz is a true man among men. Just, honorable, upright, kind, generous, hospitable, temperate, chaste, pure, faithful, true to his word.

Ruth is a true woman among women, reflecting the glories of the Proverbs 31 woman, honorable, chaste, pure, faithful, hardworking, resourceful, loyal.

Sovereignty of God.

Are the calamities and sorrows and bitter realities of life under the sovereign providence of a good God? In just five verses, tragedy is heaped upon tragedy.

A famine forces Elimelech to move his family to the hated pagan land of the Moabites. Then Naomi is widowed. Her two sons marry Moabite women, and then both of them die.

She returns to Israel, broken and empty and changes her name to Mara, meaning bitter.

Is Naomi right to say, “The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. ... The Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:21-22).

Is God the author of life’s bitter providences? Can we trust and love the God who deals us painful hands in life?

Notice what a good theologian Naomi was when she first returned from Moab: She rightly acknowledged that all that had happened to her was from God's hand. But she succumbed to bitterness against Him because she did not trust in His goodness, as well. Even believing in God's sovereignty, she had turned it into a "horrible doctrine" by divorcing it from other truths about Him.

This is no doubt the most prominent purpose of this book. The book of Ruth pulls back the curtain to reveal the hidden, good hand of God in all the circumstances of life, especially in the bitter experiences.

God is sovereign and God is good and all His purposes are good. There is nothing accidental or by chance or out of God’s control in His universe.

Behind the seemingly random and varied events and circumstances of every day is a very purposeful providence. The overriding theme of Ruth’s story is that life is all about glory and grace. Glory because the providence of God governs every facet of life for the glory of His name; and grace because the providence of God causes all things to benefit and bless His children. His providence extends from the White House to your house, from prison cells to cancer cells, from the heads of State to the hairs of our heads and if the hairs on our heads have His attention then so does every other small detail of every day.

Sometimes God’s grace is disguised, sometimes His mercy is severe, sometimes His providence is painful, bitter to taste and hard to swallow. Psalm 34:19 says, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all.” Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament promises that believers will escape affliction in this life.

Scripture is clear from beginning to end that we will face and experience all the effects of sin and evil. Romans 8:35 says we will have tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. Those things don’t come just because we lack faith; they come because of the purposeful providence of God.

The book of Ruth is a graphic illustration of the famous line from William Cowper’s hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face.*

His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.

God makes it plain that both sweet and bitter providences come from His wise hand.

The stories in the Bible of Joseph, Job, Esther and Ruth are there to prepare us to deal with God's bitter providences with faith and hope. They all show us God is always up to way more than we can see or imagine.

The 19th-century Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once said in regard to hardship and pain. He said that if he were to take all the good that he received from the easy times and sunny days in his life and put it together, it would fit neatly into a thimble, but if he took the good that he received from the hard times and stormy days and put them all together, they would be altogether incalculable. Spurgeon knew that God really does have far more good planned for us in and through difficulty than we realize.

Our own Heidelberg Catechism says it so well:

Q.27. WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND BY THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD?

A. Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty - all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand.

Q.28. HOW DOES THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S CREATION AND PROVIDENCE HELP US?

A. We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from his love. All creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.

“Faith sees the good hand of God at work in all things, in every circumstance, and His power is made perfect, not when we discover our inner strength, but when we are at our weakest and most helpless. You never know how strong God is until being weak is your only choice” (Hannah Grieser).

Lean to read by faith the handwriting of God's hand on your own life experiences. We do not have God's blueprints, we can't second guess His purposes. By faith we must trust and obey on the basis of His Word and His character.

Ruth "happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz" who just happened to be a relative, and just happened to be single and willing to marry a barren, widowed Moabite immigrant woman.

As one great pastor put it, the providence of God is like a Hebrew word – it can only be read backwards! You can only understand it with hindsight, sometimes the hindsight of months or years and sometimes only the hindsight of heaven.

At the end of the book much comes clear. On this side of the NT we have an even clearer understanding and perspective of what God was doing.

Learn from Naomi who told Ruth to sit still, to trust, pray and wait.

Jesus.

The book of Ruth prepares us for Jesus. God is at work all through history and in the darkest of times God is preparing the world for the glories of Jesus Christ and His cross.

This story is a direct link to the ancestry of Jesus. Ruth ends looking forward and pointing forward to David and the messianic line of David which is fulfilled in Jesus.

The book features a kinsman-redeemer, a savior. This prepares us for the reality that we all need a Savior and Jesus is ours. As Naomi was powerless to affect her redemption, so are we. We were empty, now we are full. While we are without hope, God works.

Ruth is a testimony to the promise of God made to Abraham in His covenant, that Abraham would be a blessing to all the families of the earth, including this Moabite gentile convert.

This inclusion of a Gentile foreshadows the message of the Gospel, which is for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike breaking down ethnic and cultural barriers.

We need to preach Ruth because it shows us a picture of the redemption and adoption we have in Christ.

In the animated movie *Antz*, we see a drama that plays out in a little ant hill. It isn't until the very end of the movie when the camera begins to pan back revealing an ant hill in a park, and then not just a little park, but Central Park in the middle of New York City.

Our little stories are part of something much larger, much greater, much more significant than we can see or imagine. We are part of God's redemptive story, and our lives touch other lives in ways we may never see or imagine.

We are all part of a glorious genealogy as children of God, as adopted sons and daughters of a very great King in a very great Kingdom. And He promises us a very good and very happy ending, to live happily ever afterward in all eternity.