

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA January 4, 2015

Epiphany Lessons from Ruth

1. *The mercy Boaz displayed*
2. *The greater grace God displays*

Hymns: 550 (1,3) – 79 (vv. 1-4) –
Distribution: 87, 314 – Closing: 79 (v. 5)

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Ruth 4:13-17 – So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

"And they lived happily ever after."

I'd imagine that you're quite familiar with that line. Having a few children around the house down through the years, I've seen my fair share of "happily ever after" books and movies. You know the plotline. There's a virtuous main character that runs into some sort of evil or misfortune but in the end, good wins out and they live happily ever after. Whether it's dogs or princesses or mermaids or deer or clownfish or toys that come to life, it's essentially the same.

One would wonder how Disney, Pixar, and the Hallmark Channel can get away with it time and again. How can a publisher or movie company keep writing the same story and just change the characters and the settings? I'll tell you why. It's because that's exactly what we like and want. We love "happily ever afters."

As we worship on this first Sunday of the new year and celebrate Epiphany Day today, we focus on the Old Testament reading where it appears the same concept has happened. Our text that we read before from the end of the Old Testament book of Ruth certainly has the feeling that "they lived happily ever after." **Let's examine this account closely this morning in the light of Epiphany, and learn two things:**

1. **First, the mercy of a man named Boaz.**
2. **And secondly, let's see a foreshadowing of another true story from history, our own.**

1. The mercy Boaz displayed

To understand the lessons that God would have us learn this morning, we need to go back in time in this account and see how Ruth's whole situation developed. As we do that, realize that this is no fairy tale or book where the happy ending was assured. It was a dire, depressing situation that truly appeared as though it would have a tragic end.

The story of Ruth in the book that bears her name goes back ten years to the time when an Israelite couple named Naomi and Elimelech lived in Bethlehem. It was the time period of the judges in Israel. Naomi and Elimelech were blessed with two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. In Ruth 1 we hear that a severe famine occurred. It was such a severe time in the land that Elimelech made a move that surprises us. He decided to move the family to Moab.

We truly wonder what Elimelech was thinking when he did this. Moab was the nation located to the southeast of the Dead Sea. They actually were distant cousins to Israel. They were descendants of Lot's older daughter (nephew of Abraham). But Israel's history with Moab had not been smooth. When the children of Israel were coming up on their stretch run to enter the Promised Land, the Moabites opposed them. They did not fight them at the time, but they hired a sorcerer to curse them and they made their women seduce the Israelite men into immorality and worship of their false gods, which was sadly successful in the book of Numbers. More recently, toward the beginning of the book of Judges, Moab was one of the first nations God raised up to

oppress his idolatrous people. Despite all this, for some reason Elimelech chose to relocate the family outside of the Promised Land to Moab.

Things did not go well. Elimelech and Naomi allowed their two sons to intermarry with Moabite women, one of them being Ruth. After a time, Elimelech died. And after more time elapsed, the two sons died. This left Naomi and the two daughters-in-law as widows to fend for themselves. In this dire situation, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem alone. Ruth then makes the surprising decision to return with her mother-in-law rather than remarry in her own country, telling her, *"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."*

This situation was indeed dire, even life-threatening:

- These two women had no source of income or food. There were no "job opportunities" for women in their day, and the hard work of cultivating or herding would not be to their advantage.
- Later we hear that in their desperation, their land was going to be sold.
- The welfare program at the unorganized time of the judges was simply to walk behind harvesters and pick up (glean) what they dropped.
- It seems that there was an indifference to their plight by Naomi's relatives. Later in the book, the closest relative is not willing to follow through in helping the family.

In our country of great wealth and programs to take care of just about anyone in any situation, perhaps the closest we could get to understanding their situation is if you:

- Became disabled and lost your ability to work
- Lost your car
- Lost your home
- Did not have family willing to help you

- Lost most tangible government programs to help you

It was truly a dire situation, and the **People's Bible** commentary states that Naomi probably would not survive a year.

This is the situation that Ruth attached herself to. And with her being a Gentile, unmarried foreigner from a country that was competitive with Israel, her prospects for success were dim at best. Her best prospects were to marry a citizen, and being a widow attached to a widow would not help in making that a reality.

Then a miracle happens, and it is truly a miracle! Our reading identified Boaz as the one whom the Lord used to change their situation. Let's take a look at the mercy that he displayed in saving their lives. To understand this, you need to know a Hebrew word: **GOEL**. The person who served as a GOEL in the Old Testament was very important. In the book of Ruth, he was called the "kinsman-redeemer." This position, established in the Law of Moses, was held by the closest relative and served to fulfill many needs. It was usually a brother or cousin:

- This relative was responsible for buying back the family home and property if a family had to sell it in their dire straits.
- He was supposed to take care of the needy individuals in the family.
- If any of the family had to sell themselves into slavery, he was supposed to buy them back.
- If any of the family were murdered, he was responsible for tracking down and killing the murderer. In those cases the word GOEL is translated "avenger of blood."
- And in a connected law called the law of the levirate, if a young widow was left without a son, he might be responsible for producing an heir to be the new leader of her family and take care of the clan.

Boaz was the second-closest relative to the family of Naomi. In a situation that only the Lord could lead, Ruth ended up gleaning in the

fields of Boaz, and he showed kindness to her. When Naomi heard that, she was encouraged and told Ruth to go at night privately to Boaz and request that he would “spread his garment” over her, in essence serve as the kinsman-redeemer of their family of two.

Boaz agreed to do this. It might seem like a simple act of charity that he was doing, but this would mean:

- He would buy the property of Elimelech and Naomi.
- He would marry Ruth and have a son that would be the heir to Elimelech and Naomi, in order to provide a lasting line first and foremost for them.

In the context of all that, we read, *“So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: ‘Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.’” Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, “Naomi has a son.” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”*

It’s clear that this story was more about the redemption and saving of Naomi than Ruth. **This son, whom she treasured on her own lap, was her physical “salvation.” He would renew her life and sustain it in her old age. And he would be the legacy through whom her line would continue.**

2. The greater grace God displays

The New Testament never calls this story a direct “type of Christ,” but we certainly see similarities in the account of Ruth and the account of our Savior on this Epiphany Day:

- A story occurring at Bethlehem
- The line of David
- Saving of lives through a son
- A kinsman-redeemer

Let’s take a look at the greater grace and salvation that has been shown to us, which this account has a connection to. The place where

we must start is the plight that we were in. Some of the words that we use to describe the ancient situation of Ruth and Naomi fit us so well spiritually: Destitute, homeless, poverty-stricken, helpless, childless, unprovided for.

Have you encountered or talked to any homeless people lately? We have folks who come into the church office occasionally who are looking for help. If you’ve ever taken the time to talk with someone who is homeless, it’s always a sad conversation. The story of how their luck has turned bad and their fortunes went sour is always tragic. It can leave a person asking questions like:

- Don’t you have any opportunities to find work?
- Don’t you have any monies to fall back on?
- Aren’t there any family members that can help you?
- Isn’t there somewhere you can go?

But there are usually no answers; the situation seems hopeless.

We must face the fact that in our standing before God, this is our story. By our sinful condition and the sins we commit, we have abandoned our Father’s home. By our own fault we are out on the streets, broke, without hope, and foreigners. By ourselves we have a dead-end lineage that will only end in hell where we inherit our just desserts.

To prove this, we can even see where our sad situation is of our own making. Just like we would question Elimelech’s decision to move out of the Promised Land and geographically away from his homeland, we can see ways that we have fallen short of God’s commands by our own fault. We have chosen our own rebellious ways many times. We have moved away from him. We have decided that we “know better” or that we simply want to do what we want to do, despite God’s commandments telling us the right thing to do. We have made our own bed.

That’s when we see the miraculous appearance of an individual who can change our situation and who is even willing to do so! It is a kinsman-redeemer!

It’s interesting that the same word, GOEL, is used for the individual that God the Father

promised throughout the Old Testament who would come to serve as the Messiah of the human race. Listen to some verses about him:

- *Psalm 103 – “Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—³ who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion...”*
- *Isaiah 43 – “This is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”*
- *Hosea 13 - “I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?”*
- *Job 19 – “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”*

Because of Obed, the descendent that came through Ruth and Boaz and also through the line that led through King David, we have redemption and a home! Christ would be born through that line. This Epiphany, even we Gentile foreigners see a Savior for ourselves who came to earth to live for us and to die on the cross for our sins. **We see One who came willingly as our Redeemer and who saved us by serving as our Messiah, our Savior!**

Therefore, this Epiphany Day we Gentiles can kneel with the Wise Men to worship him. We can bring him our gifts for his use. We can rejoice in our lasting home in heaven because he has saved us from our poverty-stricken condition!

And... we can live happily ever after. It's no fairy tale that we read in Scripture this morning. It is a story of redemption through which we see a foreshadowing of the true story of Jesus redeeming us.

May we rejoice that we can live happily ever after, both in the life that God gives us now and in the place in heaven that he has prepared for us through our Kinsman-Redeemer. Amen.