

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
Des Moines, WA  
Epiphany**

**Ruth 4:13-17**

**Light Shines in an Unlikely Place**

- 1. *Situation without Hope***
- 2. *Light Shines in an Unlikely Place***
- 3. *Another situation without Hope***
- 4. *Light Shines in an Unlikely Place***

**Hymns: 80 – 91 – 90 – 569**

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She was a woman living in a dark, dark world. Listen to her story. I'll tell the good part first. She had a husband and two sons. Now, here is the bad. Though this woman and her family were faithful believers, God seemed to have abandoned them. Though they lived in a town that was nicknamed the "House of Bread," they struggled day after day to find even a bite to eat. And so, though it pained them to leave their home, and all they knew, they knew that they needed to leave if they were going to survive. They knew of a place where things would be different, but moving there would come with a price. In this new place, they would be outsiders. They would face discrimination and hate, they would live in danger. But the family had no choice; hope, just like food, was severely lacking in their current home. So, they left everything, and they moved away, this woman with her husband, and their two sons.

In this new land, where they went searching for a glimmer of hope, they found more hardship instead. Though they found food and though they found love, the two sons married women in this foreign land, the happiness was quickly snuffed out. This time, death would be causing the destruction. First, the woman's husband died, and then she lost both of her sons. This woman, who came to this land with her family searching for food, was now even emptier than when she arrived.

She had no future as a widow in this distant land, so she decided she would travel back to her hometown, to the people that she knew. There, she would live the hard life of a widow, with no way to claim her husband's land and no men to support her

for the rest of her days. Not surprisingly, the many events in this woman's life had an effect on her. She would return bitter and destitute. Before she left her hometown years before, she was called Naomi, which means one who is pleasant. But as she returned to her people in Bethlehem, the people who once knew her as pleasant questioned whether this could really be the same woman. The pain and the loss had taken their toll on this woman. She, herself, knew that her old name no longer fit her, and with the pain of her life fully on her mind, she had a new name for people to know her by. She said, "***Call me Mara, because the Lord has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.***" And it would be hard to argue that there was a more fitting name for that woman.

That woman and her story are found in the first chapter of the short book of Ruth in the pages of the Old Testament. The pain and the loss that we hear of rivals that of Job. It is very difficult to find any hope in the dark situation that was that woman's life. But look closely at this seldom travelled book of the Bible and you will see something more. Look closely at the journey of life that Naomi went on. Look closely and see... there is light in this seemingly dark story, and that light shines in an unlikely place. Though Naomi would travel back to her hometown without any of the family that she once left with, though she would travel back broken down and in pain, she would not travel back alone. Though that is what she wanted, she had a partner on her journey back to Bethlehem. It was her daughter-in-law Ruth, and Ruth is where we look and see the first glimmer of hope in this story.

See, if Naomi had no hope for the future in Bethlehem, Ruth had even less. She was from Moab, a long standing enemy of the people of Israel. If she went to live in the land of Israel with her mother-in-law, chances were good that her life would not be pleasant. She would have no rights as a foreigner, and finding a husband was highly unlikely. There was nothing to be gained and Naomi knew that. She pleaded with Ruth to remain in Moab. Why allow another life to be filled with bitterness if it didn't need to be that way?

But Ruth saw things differently. Her unlikely connection with this immigrant Israelite family had changed her. Listen to her words to her mother-in-law, "***Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. 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.***" Ruth loved Naomi. Ruth loved the true God. She was committed to both in every way. We see and hear that in these familiar

words of commitment. For the first time in this story, we see a glimmer of light.

However, though there was that great pledge of love and devotion, the facts remained. The situation was still dark. Two widows together didn't have much different of an outlook than one widow on her own. As Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, there would've been great uncertainty ahead. How would they survive? Where would they stay? The law said that without a living male in the family, rights would be hard to come by.

But once again, if we look closely, we can see the light of hope in the smallest of ways. When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, it was the time of harvest. This was the Lord providing directly in Naomi and Ruth's lives. According to the Law of God, as widows, these women could go in the fields and collect grain that was leftover. As a young woman, Ruth had a way to care for her mother-in-law. She went out in the dusty fields and worked tirelessly, gathering grain. Though the fields held promise, they were not filled with joy. As a foreigner, Ruth was mistreated and she was quickly filled with despair. The hopelessness of a dark situation was now creeping into Ruth's life as well.

However, it was in those fields, in an unlikely place for a woman to be, that the light of hope shone once again. The owner of the field was a relative of Naomi's husband, and he noticed Ruth and took care of her. As a relative, he could serve as a kinsman-redeemer for Naomi and Ruth. This meant he could buy back what once belonged to Naomi's husband and he could ensure that Naomi and Ruth's family line would continue. This man's name was Boaz, and it was in him that the light of God's grace for Naomi and Ruth shined brightly.

As we are told in the words of our first lesson, Boaz took Ruth as his wife, and they had a child. And it was through this child that God would bring amazing fulfillment to the words spoken by the women to Naomi. Listen again to what they said, ***"Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."*** I doubt those women knew how true their words would be. Not only would this son born through Boaz serve as a personal kinsman-redeemer to Naomi and Ruth, allowing them to regain what once had belonged to their husbands, we are told that this son would also have an important role in God's great plan of salvation as well. At the end of the verse 17, we are given the start of a genealogy. It says, ***"They named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of***

***David."*** Naomi's great-grandchild and Ruth's grandson would be named David. That David would be the famous King of Israel, the forefather of Jesus, the true Redeemer, the true restorer of life, the Light of the World.

It is hard to imagine that from a story that was filled with such darkness, such great light would be revealed. God had taken a life that was filled with darkness and he had filled it with light. Think of the joy that must have filled Naomi's heart as that child, savior sat on her lap. She could have never imagined. But that is the wonder of God's light. It shines where we think it can't. It shines where we think it won't. It shines even where we think it shouldn't.

And we can see proof of that in another unlikely place where the light has shined in the darkness. To see it, just look around you. (Go ahead, you can look.) Look to the left and to the right. Look to the front and to the back. Wherever you look, you see the light of God's grace shining in unlikely places.

Each of us was once in a dark, dark place. It was a place without a glimmer of hope. It was a place without any kind of future. The darkness that surrounded us was the result of our sin. Sin that we were born with and sin that we lived in. It threatened to ruin our lives and also our eternities. And on our own, there is no way that we would have ever found the light.

But by God's grace, the light of the Gospel shined in unlikely places. It shined on our hearts which were darkened by sin and it filled our lives with the Light of the World. Through the work of Jesus the Savior, through the message of that work, the Holy Spirit has carved amazing stories. Stories about real people who were in the darkest of situations, places where we would think that light couldn't shine, and places where we would think that light wouldn't shine and, because of our guilt, places where we would think that light shouldn't shine. And yet it has and it does, the light of hope, peace, love, the light of God's incomparable grace shines brightly in all these unlikely places.

That is the story of Epiphany, God's light is revealed; and it is revealed to people of all nations in the unlikeliest of situations. Naomi and Ruth each had an amazing story about the light of God's grace shining in an unlikely place. So, too, did the Apostle Paul, called from persecutor to preacher to the Gentiles. The Magi from the East also had an amazing tale. They each came from very dark places and the light shined brightly in their lives. And each person around you also has a story about the light of God's grace shining in an unlikely place. Do you know the story of the person next to you, behind you, across from you?

“Stories,” people say, “like the ones you hear about in the Bible never happen anymore.” Look closely, and you will see the results of miracles all around you. Places where God has worked in marvelous ways, places where his love brings light to the darkness of despair. What a blessing we have! Give thanks that the light of God’s grace never stops searching, that it continues to shine brightly, always in unlikely places. It shines in you.

And now, as those who are privileged to be living in the light, you also have the privilege of taking the light of the Gospel into the dark places of this world. Certainly, those dark places are not difficult to find. You will find them in the cubicles next to you at work. You will find them standing next to you on the bus going down the street. You will even find those dark places under your own roofs. As you wonder whether it could really work to speak a word, remember this: The light shines in unlikely places. You, yourself, are proof of that. Amen.