

"Hungry in the House of Bread: Fullness"
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
December 22, 2019-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Ruth 4

The book of Ruth is a great story, isn't it? Many Bible passages need an explanation before you can understand them and apply them to your life, but not Ruth! I could just read this story, close the Bible, say amen, and you would be blessed. (Don't get your hopes up. I still have about 20 minutes of material here). What is it about this story that makes it so great? Why do we like it so much? There are multiple reasons, but I think the main reason is that Ruth feels like real life. We read the book of Ruth and we think, "Yes! that's how life goes!" We love the book of Ruth because somehow we see our life in the lives of these two women.

Which is strange on one level. The events of this story happened 3000 years ago! We live in a modern technological culture. In some ways, our life experiences are completely different from Ruth and Naomi's. I've never had to glean for my supper. We don't have guardian redeemers. We don't live in a culture where people enter into binding contracts by exchanging shoes! So how can I see my life in the life of these two women?

And yet we do see ourselves in this story. We do resonate with their experience. What is it about this ancient story that feels familiar? There are a number of resonances, but one of the clearest is that Ruth is honest about the muddle in the middle. What do I mean by that? In the middle of life, in the trenches of life, things can feel muddled. Life is full of beautiful and terrible things. And they all mix together in a way that is both wonderful and confusing. In the middle of it all, it's very easy to lose your sense of direction.

Maybe a person feels this more strongly when they work at a church, because a church is a place where news tends to collect. In the span of a typical week people can come by my office door and tell something wonderful. "My daughter is finally pregnant! I'm going to be a grandpa!" And then later the same afternoon someone else comes by and says, "My daughter refuses to go to church anymore. I try to talk with her but she won't listen." The next day, "My test results were clean! No cancer! The doctor says I don't have to go back for tests for another year!" And then 10 minutes later, "My dad has dementia and he's only in his 70's. My Mom is overwhelmed, I think she might be depressed and I don't know what to do." That's life. Terrible and wonderful things coming at you in waves. All of them mixed together. It makes your head spin. Sometimes the spinning gets so bad you lose the sense that any of this is going anywhere. "Lord are you seeing this down here? Is there a purpose in this? Because we're all getting dizzy. We're tired and perplexed." That's the muddle in the middle.

Ruth definitely gives us a sense of the muddle in the middle. This story too, has the best and the worst of life right next to each other, swirling around together. Terrible things happen to Ruth and Naomi: famine, hunger and homelessness. Death and loss and ragged tears. Shame, anger, and what looks like depression. All the stuff we pray will never happen to us or the people we love, happens to them. But beautiful things happen too! Naomi and Ruth experience love, loyalty and surprising kindness. They experience laughter, unexpected romance and wedding bells. They experience second chances and new beginnings. The best of life and the worst of life all mixed together in one story. The muddle in the middle. We look at Ruth and Naomi trying to navigate their way through this muddle and we say, "Yes. That's how life goes. That's how life feels!"

Here's another way in which the story resonates. As these women stand in the middle of their muddle, how easy would it be for them to find God? How easy would it be for them to know that God was there with them? Well how many times did God speak to them in this story? God often spoke to the patriarchs to help them along. God spoke to Moses in a burning Bush. Abraham had visions. Jacob had dreams of angels going up and down ladders. How many times does God speak in the book of Ruth? Zero. These women go through life without hearing the voice of God. Not even a dream or a vision. Well okay, what about miracles? How many miracles in this book? Did God give Ruth and Naomi some miracles to prove that He was there? Was there a supernatural sign in the middle of the muddle to encourage them and keep them going? Nope. No miracles in this book either.

In the book of Ruth, God is the subject of only two active verbs. The first verb is in chapter 1:6, where it says that the Lord comes to the aid of His people by bringing the barley harvest. The second verb is in 4:13 where we're told that the Lord enables Ruth to conceive a son. Notice that both these things—the baby and the

barley harvest—are relatively subtle acts of God. They could easily be attributed to natural causes. A cynical person could easily look at both the baby and the barley and say, “Well, that’s just how nature always works.”

Do you see how that too feels like real life for many of us? There are maybe a couple of people here who may have had an experience of God’s direct speech to them. Blessed are you. There are a few more who’ve experienced a genuine miracle. How wonderful! But most of us here don’t have that. Most of us here try to keep going as people of faith in the middle of the muddle, without ever hearing the direct voice of God or without any personal miracle sign to encourage us.

Ruth has wisdom for us here too. We’ve already talked about how this story teaches us to live in the middle of the muddle. Through making and keeping promises, through kindness that does a little extra, and through redeeming love. But Ruth also gives us a hint about where to find and see God’s presence in the midst of our stuff. The place where God’s presence is clearest in this story is not in the middle of the muddle, it’s in the fullness at the finish. When you are in the middle of the muddle, look to fullness at the finish.

We have to talk about this wonderful ending. Up till 4:17, this story of Ruth has been small and self-contained. A nice little tale about a couple of plucky women who lived a long time ago. We see their emptiness at the beginning, we see their resilience, we see Boaz come into their life, we see the tension on the threshing floor turn into wedding bells, and now we see Naomi holding a grandchild! Up to now all we’ve been conditioned for is a little self-contained story of these plucky women overcoming their troubles. If Ruth were a movie, we would see the baby on Naomi’s knee, we’d get that warm fuzzy happy ending feeling and we’d figure that was the end. We’d expect the music to swell, the voice over to say, “And so they named him Obed and they lived happily ever after. The end.” The credits would roll and we’d leave the theater.

But the movie is not done. Without flourish or fanfare, the last half of verse 17 announces to us “He was the father of Jesse, the Father of David.” In one sentence the whole frame of this story has completely changed. The camera pulls back and now you’re not in Boaz’s living room anymore; now the angle of vision is as wide as redemptive history. It only takes 10 words in the English, 5 in the Hebrew. Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the Father of David. Wait, what!? This baby is David’s Grandpa? Ruth is David’s Great-grandma! The child on Naomi’s knee is in the line of the covenant! This little baby who comforted Naomi is the ancestor of the child in the manger, Jesus who is my hope, my comfort!/? The last sentence of verse 17 completely changes the story’s dimensions.

What’s this like? It’s like someone told you a story about a young married couple who lived in Holland during world war two, who bravely endured hunger and deprivation, who resisted the Nazi’s despite terrible danger, and who saved the lives dozens of people through their kindness and their bravery. You hear the story of this couple and you think, “What a nice couple! They sound like amazing people.” But then at the end the storyteller says, “By the way, those two people were your grandparents.” Boom. It changes everything.

“Obed was the Father of Jesse, the father of David.” So it wasn’t just Naomi and Ruth’s life hanging in the balance in the fields of Bethlehem, it was my life and yours. It wasn’t just Naomi’s tears that were dried, it was my tears. It wasn’t just Naomi’s hopes and fears, it is the hopes and fears of all the years that were on the line. Because the child on Naomi’s knee, the one who fills her emptiness, is the ancestor of the child in the manger, our Lord Jesus Christ, the one in whom all God’s fullness dwells.

From the perspective of the fullness at the finish, we realize that even though God never speaks in this story, He was never absent. He was everywhere. His hand has been on everything! He was there on the road from Moab with the weeping women. He was there in the fields while Ruth gleaned. He was there on the threshing floor when Ruth lay down at Boaz’s feet. He’s been there in the middle of all the muddles: protecting his people, preserving his promises, taking hold of the tragedies and bending them towards the light. The author of Ruth doesn’t have to spell all this out for you, as soon as you read about David your heart leaps and you say “O my goodness it was God the whole time! It’s been God’s story all along.”

It’s true that in the middle things get pretty muddled. It’s true that in the middle of our troubles and our tears, in the middle of all the beautiful and terrible things, we can lose our sense of direction. But I promise you that at the end, at the fullness of the finish, your frame of reference will suddenly change and you will say, “O my goodness, Lord you were in all of it. This has been Your story all along.” Until that day, as we continue to muddle along, let us keep our eye on the child in the manger. Because He’s the one in whom all God’s fullness dwells (Colossians 1:19) And He’s the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). So in Bethlehem, at Christmas, the fullness of the finish has come into the middle of our muddle. He’s come to take

hold of us. He's come to save us. He's come forgive our sins, fill our emptiness and bring us into the light. So let your heart prepare him room and let heaven and nature sing!

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