

“The Story of Redemption”

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New Testament Lesson: Luke 1:46-55

Old Testament Lesson: Ruth 4:1-22

That Ruth, that's quite a story! Does everyone know who David is in the reading of this family line that we just heard? None other than King David, from whose line Jesus was born.

So, here we have a foreigner from Moab, a county despised by the Israelites, becoming the great-grandmother of King David, in the town of Bethlehem, no less. That's where all this takes place! It's quite a story.

Biblical scholar Kathleen Robertson Farmer points out that the Israelites had such contempt for the Moabites that their encounters with them were usually hostile or shameful.¹ And in the book of Deuteronomy, God actually bans Moabites from entering the assembly of the LORD, which is the Israelites and their Covenant with God—that is the assembly of the Lord (23:3). What is God up to?!? Having banned interactions between Moabites and Israelites, only to bless the marriage of Ruth the Moabite and Boaz the Israelite, giving them a son in the family line of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

There's obviously more to this story than meets the eye. There's more to most stories than meets the eye. Each of us has a family story. We all have personal stories, encounters with others that feel like they're made in Heaven and encounters we suspect might be leading us in the other direction. And sometimes we're not sure which is which. Sometimes what look like sinful actions turn out in the long run to not be sinful at all. Take the case of Ruth.

According to Holy Scripture, Ruth ought to be rejected as wrong and sinful based on the past actions of people like her. Deuteronomy 23:3 says, “No ... Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord ..., even to the 10th generation.” What's more, says Deuteronomy, “You shall ever promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live,” period. That sounds pretty final to me.

And then God goes and does something like this in the Book of Ruth, using Ruth the Moabite as an instrument for the salvation of us all! It's right here in the Bible. It couldn't be clearer! Even though by all rights someone like Ruth ought to have no place in God's covenant with Israel, here she is.

¹ Farmer, Kathleen Robertson. "The Book of Ruth." *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, 901.

What are we to make of that?!? I guess one thing we can say is that God is God, the Almighty, and we ought not presume to constrain God's actions based on our values, even if they have Biblical warrant! And if that's true, then there must be a law higher than Deuteronomy. And of course there is. And that law is embodied by Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.

Jesus, who proclaimed the reign of God, preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

Jesus was unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal. That Jesus!

That is the story of Jesus (so to speak) – a story that has its roots in the story of Ruth, who herself was poor, condemned, brokenhearted, an outcast and a sinner. If God can raise up Jesus through the life and story of Ruth the Moabite, what might God be able to do in and through the stories that make up our lives. In his essay titled "The Story,"² Frederick Buechner writes: "The story that each of us has to tell is the story of a sacred journey, in the sense that if I believe anything in this world, I believe there is no place where God speaks more eloquently to us than through what happens to us, and therefore our stories are sacred stories. And I think our stories are sacred also because they are, in a way, the biblical story, which is a story that can be simply stated: God creates the world, the world gets lost, and for the rest of the time, God tries to restore the lost world to himself. That is the story of Israel," says Buechner, "and it is also the story of you and me."

For those of us who live a life of faith, our personal story is but one page out of a much larger story, a story stretching all the way back to Adam and Eve and extending throughout time to an eternity in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we are bound together in the pages of time with all those who have given themselves in service to Christ, in devotion to God, by the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

And this is true whether we agree with and accept how God writes this story, or not. God's story does not play out only in the lives of those we consider to be saints, as if we can constrain and direct God's divine will using our moral compass.

No, God's story plays out – is playing out – how God would have it be written, with all the familiar twists and turns that make up our ordinary, complex, messy and uncertain lives.

² Frederick Buechner, "The Story," *Voices of Many Waters*, ed. Kay Snodgrass, (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000), 142.

In God's story, as written in the Book of Ruth, Jesus the Messiah, the redeemer, comes from a mixed line of the chosen and the rejected, the Israelites and the Moabites.

So you see, even though in our sinful nature we all deserve to be rejected by God, in Christ God finds a way to use us to personify and channel his redemptive and transformative love. You might look at it this way, that our interactions with each other become a parable telling the story of God's love, if we are open and receptive to God's leading.

We see this in the Book of Ruth, which can also be seen as a parable of God's love. The parable says that Ruth persisted in offering Naomi love and support even in the face of Naomi's initial rejection of her, just like God persists in loving us, even in the face of our rejection of God's leading, and not only loving us, but redeeming us and transforming us as instruments of God's will.

And the awesome thing about it is that God works through all people who open themselves to God's leading. Ruth did not have to denounce or give up being a Moabite to be instrumental in the family line of Jesus. God takes what was once rejected, transforms it, and uses it to raise up his kingdom.

Did you notice – those of you following the sermon series over the past few weeks that every blessing the Lord gives comes from human interaction – permission to glean from the field, a heap of parched grain, full measures of processed grain, and now in today's reading the conception of Boaz and Ruth's child – they all come through human interaction.³ As today's reading says, "Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they (were) together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son," a son in the line of Jesus. God's love embodied in humankind gives birth to Jesus.

Thought of in that way – that our lives are an embodiment of divine love as God works out the redemption of humanity and all the world – thought of in that way, the story of our lives becomes much richer and more promising than we could ever imagine. Our lives are important to the story of redemption.

Every choice we make, every decision we come to, every action we take serves as punctuation in God's story of redemption. Our challenge is to not put a period where God would put a comma.

In other words, we can't assume to know the extent of God's love – where it begins and where it ends – and God's power to redeem and transform and make holy. We can't even look at a citation of Holy Scripture and just assume we know what's right and what's wrong.

In the pages of the Old Testament, a Moabite like Ruth is sinful and accursed – period. But in the love of Christ, she is redeemed, transformed, and made holy, to become an instrument of the hope of us all. God invites us to be coauthor with God in writing the story of his love for creation, his work of redemption for all humanity.

³ Farmer, 901.

But that does not mean we can take literary license, at least not when it flies in the face of who Jesus is. If the stories we write in living out our lives are to be true to the primary author, the Author of Creation, then they also must be true to the nature of Jesus.

While on earth, Jesus was the embodiment of unbridled love and forgiveness, inexhaustible grace and mercy. And now that his spirit is in us, we are called to show each other the same unbridled love and forgiveness, the same inexhaustible grace and mercy.

And this is true even if it's not how we would write God's story of redemption. God is longing to write his story of love, forgiveness, grace and mercy through you – and me – if we would only accept his leading. So let us be partners with God as God goes about the work of redeeming and transforming all humanity, to his glory. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy Spirit, what beautiful gifts you have given us! We are a diverse-but-unified body of believers. We are unique, yet even in our differences, we are one.

Let us celebrate the gifts you have given each brother and sister here. We need each other, and so we ask you to help us love and support one another.

Use each person here to further your kingdom and the gospel. We are your hands, feet, head, heart and more. Let us serve, walk, guide, love and follow.

Lord, one way we follow you, one way we love as you loved is by praying for each other and supporting each other in times of need.

We pray for those who are suffering specific needs this day, whether in the areas of health and wholeness, possessions or property, hopefulness or faithfulness.

(Prayer requests)

Give to each person a word of encouragement, promise and direction that leads to a fuller and more blessed life in Christ Jesus.

For you are a giving God, O Lord, and your giving is most often received through us by those in need. Help us to channel your gifts to build up the Kingdom of God, even as we join together in prayer, using the same words prayed by Jesus, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**