

“Ruth and The Redeemer”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Ruth (July 16)

Primary Texts: Ruth 1:1-19a, Ruth 4:13-22, St. Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for today, the Commemoration of Ruth, are all three of the lessons printed on the back of your bulletin. A central theme of the Book of Ruth is “redemption” and the Hebrew word for redemption is used 23 times in this small book of 4 chapters. Today, we will hear 3 main ways that Ruth intersects with redemption. Thus, the title of the sermon is, “Ruth and the Redeemer”.

The Book of Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible that bears the name of a woman, the other being Esther. Ruth is one of the great heroines of the Bible. That being the case, many women have been named after her throughout history. The Book of Ruth is still read by adherents of Judaism today during the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, as there is a focus on harvesting wheat in Ruth and Pentecost is a harvest festival. The context of this relatively short biblical book is the time of the judges, and the Book of Judges directly precedes Ruth in your Bibles. Many of the things in Judges are rather dark and it was a time of much rebellion of Israel against God. In fact, the last verse of Judges right before Ruth begins is, *“In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”* Ruth offers a compelling story of light in these dark times. Although the human author is unknown, scholars agree that the Book of Ruth is a masterfully crafted and structured piece of Hebrew literature.

Now on to the book itself. The first lesson that we heard was the first 19 verses of Chapter 1. At the beginning of the book, we are introduced to the “backstory.” We are told, as I told you moments ago, that this takes place in the time of the judges. A famine struck the land. As people often do when famines hit, they are willing to move to try to find food. A man named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their sons Mahlon and Chilion left Bethlehem in Judah and moved to Moab, which was east of the Dead Sea. Moab was not Jewish territory, but home to pagans who worshipped multiple gods. They were distantly related to the Jewish people as they were descended from Lot, but if we had to classify them as “Jew” or “Gentile”, they would be much closer to gentiles.

While they were sojourning in this land to obtain food during the famine, Elimelech died. His sons married Moabite women. This was not forbidden under Jewish law, but was not normally common and the children of such a marriage had certain restrictions placed on them. The names of the wives taken by Elimelech’s sons were Orpah and Ruth. Interestingly, the famous “Oprah Winfrey” is actually named Orpah on her birth certificate after this Biblical figure, but she said people were always misspelling it and she became “Oprah.” Back to the Bible, in that the husbands of both Orpah and Ruth also died.

When the famine was over in Judah, Naomi was set to return to her homeland. She urged her two daughters-in-law to stay. This was out of care that she had for them. At first both Orpah and Naomi both wanted to go with Naomi. Then Naomi explains her reasoning. It is because she wanted them to be able to remarry and have husbands and hopefully children. Naomi understood that things would not be easy for a widowed Moabite woman in Judah, where they would be in, in effect, second-class citizens. And, as many of you know, life

was very difficult for widows in Biblical times. Few opportunities were available for women to earn money at the time, thus having a husband to support them was ideal. This is why the Bible speaks so much of caring for the widows and the Old Testament Law created provisions for them. If Naomi had sons they could marry them, but she is too old. So, she wants them to stay in Moab as she sees this as the best chance for them to prosper.

After this second round of urging them not to go to Judah with her, Orpah agrees, kissing her mother-in-law goodbye. However, verse 15 said, *“but Ruth clung to her.”* After even more urging by Naomi, Ruth makes her final stand. She is going with Naomi to Judah, and that is final. Verses 16-17 are a profound confession by the Ruth whom we remember today. These verses are still often heard at weddings.

Ruth says, *“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. When I die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”* Wow! What a confession. You will notice that verse 17 contains Old Testament covenant language. When a covenant was cut an oath was sworn, an animal was sacrificed, and the covenant parties walked in between the split dead animal. The statement is essentially if I break this covenant, this promise, then may God do to me what just happened to the animal. And what had Ruth promised? She would go wherever Naomi went. She would return with her to the Jewish homeland of Naomi. And very importantly, she would continue to serve the one true God, the God of Israel. In fact, in verse 8, what is translated as “Lord” there is “YHWH”, the personal name for God used by the Hebrews.

How had Ruth and Orpah learned of the true God? From the family they married into, of course. Let this be a lesson to us they we can be a powerful influence on those that we encounter. Now we have seen the first interaction between Ruth and The Redeemer. She has come to have faith in the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord that freed His people from slavery in Egypt and thundered from Mount Sinai. The God who promised to send the Messiah. Ruth's faith is genuine and real. Orpah would turn back and go back to the false gods, sad indeed. But Ruth would not. The God of Naomi was her God and she would rather die than abandon her faith. The note in the Lutheran Study Bible puts it so well, *"Ruth was willing to face a life of poverty, lack of marriage, childlessness, and prejudice in Israel. She could not live without Naomi and the God of Israel, even if she was to be treated as a second-class citizen."* We also see here that even in the Old Testament Gentiles can be admitted to the kingdom of God if they receive the promises of the covenant by faith. Ruth had true faith in the true God, in this she is redeemed from her sins and will live eternally.

So, Ruth went with Naomi to Judah, Bethlehem specifically. And life was not easy for her at first. But God would greatly bless this woman of faith. Chapters 2-3 record what happened with Ruth as she struggled to survive, but eventually met a man named Boaz. The Old Testament Laws can be interesting things to study. Many of them sound harsh to our modern ears, but in them God is providing provision for those in need. One of the laws was that when grain was harvested, the poor had an opportunity to gather the "leftovers" or gleanings. The threshers would come through and cut down the wheat, then other workers would come and bundle it. And then the poor, including the widows and orphans,

could come through and gather what remained. It is while Ruth is doing this that she catches the eye of Boaz. Boaz is an interesting man in that he was a descendant of Rahab, remember that she was the prostitute that helped the Israelites and when Jericho fell her life was spared. She, this Canaanite prostitute ends up in the ancestry of Jesus as Boaz is descended from her. Long story short, Ruth and Boaz met, and Boaz will marry her.

And actually, Boaz is a relative of Naomi and the Old Testament Law was that a family member of a deceased husband would marry the widow so that she would be cared for. In this situation, the man who marries the widow is called a “kinsman redeemer.” This also had implications for property that would be inherited and passed down. Boaz would be Ruth’s kinsman redeemer. It is also clear from the Book of Ruth that this was not only a legal obligation for Boaz, but that he and Ruth truly cared for each other. Boaz has many characteristics that a Christian man can emulate: God-given strength, honor, graciousness, courtesy and compassion. And most importantly, as we Lutherans understand, all of the Scripture points us to Christ. Boaz is seen as a “type” or picture of Jesus and His work. Because Boaz redeems his long-lost relative and brings her back into the family. He takes her from a life of poverty, hardship, and people looking down on her and restores her to one of love, peace, and blessing. Thus, we have now seen the second interaction Ruth had with a redeemer. She is restored by her kinsman-redeemer, Boaz, who is a picture of the greater redeemer to come, Jesus Christ. Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ (groom) and the Church (bride). Here Ruth represents the Church and Boaz Christ.

In the portion of Chapter 4 that we heard in the second lesson, we see that Boaz and Ruth marry. Ruth would become pregnant and bear a son named

“Obed”, meaning “one who serves.” Naomi is overjoyed at the birth of this grandson and helps raise him. The people of Bethlehem are also happy, even to the point of seeing the child as type of “son” to Naomi as well as to Ruth and Boaz. And where does this Obed fit into the chain of events of the Bible? We are told in the last verses of the Book of Ruth as well as in the first chapter of Matthew. Obed would have a son named Jesse and Jesse would have a son named David. And we know that Jesus Christ is from the line of David. As Matthew 1 traces the genealogy of Jesus, it tells us there were 14 generations from Abraham to David and then 14 generations to the deportation to Babylon, and then 14 generations from Babylon to Christ. All the way to Joseph and Mary, and thus the Messiah Jesus.

The third and final interaction between Ruth and the Redeemer is that Ruth would be part of the direct line of ancestry of Jesus. God always fulfills His promises. He would deliver on the Messiah and the Messiah would descend from the patriarchs and King David. And along the way, some interesting insertions to the family tree would be made, including a harlot named Rahab and a Moabite woman named Ruth. This means that Jesus had both Canaanite and Moabite blood in His veins, not only Jewish lineage. Why? What does this tell us? It points us to the fact that Jesus is the Savior of all. Yes, Jesus was Jewish and came to the sheep of His own household first. At the same time, we must never forget that Jesus came as the Savior for all people, including gentiles like you and me. Even His family tree points us to that. God would use Ruth to keep the line of Christ just the way it needed to be according to God’s plan. The Father would fulfill His plan, just as He intended with Jesus Christ dying for the sins of the world. And just like Ruth, we are saved by faith in the one true God.

Today we remember and honor Ruth and we thank God for the Book of the Bible that bears her name. Ruth was a strong woman, her life was not always easy. But she had faith, trust in the true God of Israel, the God that was not only for the geographical area of Israel on a map-but for God's true Israel of believers everywhere from every nation, tribe, and tongue. Ruth and The Redeemer: She was redeemed out of paganism through the work of the Lord, she was redeemed out a widowed poverty in a foreign land by Boaz, and ultimately, she gave birth to Obed, the grandfather of David from whose family would come the world's redeemer. Jesus is *our* "kinsman redeemer" and all praise to Him, now and forever.

Amen.