

## *In Nomine Jesu*

**Prayer Upon Entering Church:** O Lord, absolve Your People from their offenses that from the bonds of our sins, which by reason of our weakness we have brought upon us, we may be delivered by Your bountiful goodness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### The Text

#### **Ruth 3:1-5**

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? <sup>2</sup>Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. <sup>3</sup>Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. <sup>4</sup>But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." <sup>5</sup>And she replied, "All that you say I will do."

#### **Ruth 4:13-17**

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup>Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup>He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." <sup>16</sup>Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup>And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

### The Sermon

Here are the bare bones of the story. Naomi and her husband Elimelech – who are Hebrews from the village of Bethlehem – are driven from their home by a severe famine. The mass media have taught us a lot about

famines these days. All of us today have seen images of starving populations on the move in search of food – fighting desperately over a handful of rice to soothe the hunger pangs of their distended bellies. Understanding this – will help us enter the world of this text.

Naomi and her husband escaped the famine by fleeing to foreign territory – the plateau of Moab east of the Dead Sea. During their years in Moab, the sons of Elimelech and Naomi did something absolutely forbidden to the People of God in the Old Testament: they married foreign women – Orpah and Ruth. But then came a series of catastrophes. All the men – one after another – were struck down – a common occurrence in those days – because until the end of the twentieth century – death at a young age was the rule rather than the exception.

Naomi is therefore left in the most vulnerable position possible: she is a childless widow with no grandchildren. And in that ancient culture, nothing could have been worse. Naomi, in fact, says a terrible thing to her daughters-in-law: *“My bitterness is much worse than yours – because the Lord has sent me so much trouble. **The Lord** has tormented me – and **the Almighty** has done evil to me.”* (1:13, 21)

Here then at the beginning of the story, we see the greatest of all theological problems put before us. Naomi feels that she has been abandoned by the Savior God. No. No, it’s even worse than that! She feels that the Savior-God is actively **against** her. She believes that she is worse than worthless – not only to herself – but also to her widowed daughters-in-law – because without husbands – they are utterly unprotected in that ancient world.

So we need to realize that the beautiful – even idyllic story of Ruth – begins in the dark – with famine – death – and sexual menace. Poor women alone in the world – were then – and still are – easy prey for unscrupulous men. So Naomi urges her two daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and remarry. Orpah somewhat reluctantly agrees and turns back to the land – and the gods – of Moab. But Ruth – we are told – refuses to leave.

It is at this point in the story that Ruth utters those famous words: *“Wherever you go – I will go – and wherever you stay – I will stay. Your people will be my people – and your God will be my God. Wherever you die – I will die – and I will be buried there with you. May the Lord strike me*

*down if anything but death separates you and me.”* (1:16-17) The human soul is stirred by such devotion and loyalty. And from this point in the story we and all the readers though the thousands of years are hooked.

The two women arrive back in Judah after who knows what arduous traveling on foot. It is the time of the barley harvest when they return – when all Israel would be eating and sleeping out in the fields in order to bring in the grain. For the Lord has lifted the famine – we are told- but Naomi and Ruth have no access to this new abundance –because they have no males left in their family.

Here for the second time we discover what an unusual person Ruth is. She proposes – fearlessly – to go out into the fields to glean barley. In doing this – she is embracing the status of a beggar – one who comes behind and picks up what has been discarded the reapers. This was a humiliating activity. It would be like publicly standing in line to collect welfare. It was also dangerous for a single woman. Here she is – obviously a gentle and virtuous lady – out in the fields with the rough laborers and with no protection of any kind.

Here then we meet Boaz, who is a gracious and humane employer. And Boaz has noticed Ruth. His men tell him that she is a Moabite woman and that she has been gleaning since early dawn – bending over to the ground without resting. Boaz goes to her and says welcome words: *“I have ordered my young men not to touch you.”* (v. 9) And in a most charming manner – Ruth bows down respectfully and says: *“Why are you so helpful? Why are you paying attention to me? I’m only a foreigner.”* (v. 10)

Now, if this were a Hollywood movie – we would all know the answer to that question: Boaz has noticed Ruth because she is a looker. She is a dish – as my father would say. Well, to be sure, there is no reason to think that Ruth isn’t attractive. But this isn’t what the text emphasizes. Instead, we are told that Boaz is impressed by Ruth’s bravery and devotion. That is the kind of man he is. He recognizes the kindness of God Himself at work in Ruth the foreigner.

He doesn’t simply commend Ruth to the Lord. He speaks of a reward for Ruth from God. But as we shall see – the reward from God comes through the agency of Boaz himself. So Ruth has a wonderful afternoon out in Boaz’s field. Instead of being leered at and taunted and threatened – or

worse – she is given choice refreshments by Boaz himself. And Boaz orders the reapers even to drop extra grain for Ruth to pick up.

At the end of the day, Ruth has gathered up this huge amount of barley to bring home to Naomi. Naomi is dumbfounded by this unlooked for bounty. Do you remember how Naomi had said at the beginning of the story that God was against her – that God had afflicted her – and even brought calamity upon her? Well, now she says: “*May the Lord bless him. For the Lord hasn’t stopped being kind to people – living or dead.*” (2:20)

But I ask you, what has the Lord really done? Nothing directly. There hasn’t been any parting of the waters or any manna from heaven. No angel has appeared. Fire hasn’t come down from heaven. God’s lovingkindness has been shown forth – humbly – simply – one human being reaching out to another.

Now remember- in the ancient world – the extinction of the family name and bloodline was a fate worse than death. Naomi discerns that in the person of her relative Boaz there is a hope for redemption – for herself – and for her dead husband’s legacy. The Hebrew word for “next of kin” – *go’el* – is the same as the word translated “redeemer.” Naomi readily sees that Boaz just might be the one to play the role of this redeemer.

She proposes a most daring plan – one that even after all these thousands of years – still takes the breath away. She advises Ruth - to bathe – dress in her best clothes – and go down to the threshing floor where Boaz and his men are not only winnowing barley – but also – in the age-old harvest custom – eating and drinking and making merry.

Ruth is to go and observe where Boaz lies down to sleep. There she is to uncover his feet – which is often a Hebrew euphemism for the genitals. So she is to uncover his private parts and lie down beside him. Can you imagine a more reckless thing to urge a young widowed woman to do? But the point is this: by performing these dramatic actions, Ruth is placing herself under the protection of Boaz – for better or for worse. It is an enormously bold and risky plan that Naomi cooks up for her daughter-in-law Ruth.

So our valorous heroine sets out for the threshing floor. The men are indeed feasting and drinking. At last Boaz – *drunk to his heart’s content* –

as the Hebrew says – lies down to sleep. Ruth uncovers him and lies down beside him. At midnight he wakes up suddenly. Probably he was cold! He gropes around in the dark for the covers and discovers – the lovely Ruth – lying near him. What a set-up! Young men only can dream of this happening to them!

Well, Boaz does become Ruth's protector – he does become her champion – he does become her redeemer. And he doesn't allow her reputation to be compromised or tarnished in any way. Indeed, his behavior toward her is that of God's agent. And once again, we see the love of the Savior-God made known through the simple, human actions or ordinary people showing kindness to one another.

You see, all through this story people have faced alternatives and choices. Ruth didn't have to go with Naomi. Boaz didn't have to come to Ruth's rescue – let alone protect her and then marry her. But these people become the agents of God's mercy and love. This world is an evil place. Even though the hymns we've sung this morning have plainly said that, we don't always believe it. But it is true. The world is full of famine and death and sexual menace and a host of other evils. And sometimes it seems that our God is absent – or even hostile. But in Ruth – we learn that the blessings of the Savior-God come to us through simple human means.

So when you reach out your hand to help another – your hand becomes the hand of God! When an employer cares for his workers and offers them a good package and good benefits - it is the care of the Savior-God at work in this evil world. When comfort and protection are offered to a stranger – it is the Savior-God Himself at work – in the flesh.

And so it was that Ruth the foreigner became the great-grandmother of the great King David. And so Ruth is listed on the first page of your New Testament – because she is an ancestor of Jesus. And that Jesus came to be – the next of kin for the entire human race – the Redeemer – of this whole world. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds + in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*