



## *Texts in Context*

# A New Look at Sermon Series: Preaching through Ruth

MARY E. ALBING

*with sermons by Frederick J. Gaiser, Karoline M. Lewis, Dirk G. Lange,  
Rolf A. Jacobson, and Kathryn Schifferdecker*

A sermon series can address at least two of the problems contemporary preachers face. The first is that people now tend toward disengagement. The second is related. In the past few decades, biblical and theological literacy has declined significantly.

Not long ago, an issue of *Christian Century* was devoted to the discussion of a phenomenon many of us in the parish are experiencing in a variety of ways, the “dismembered” church. People have loose connections in all their social groups and are not so easily tied to institutions in general.<sup>1</sup> Our consumer society has produced unrepentant shoppers for a spiritual home. People in the pews have many options on a Sunday morning and they choose whether to sit in front of us. They come with the expectation that something will happen,<sup>2</sup> whether they anticipate exactly what that might be or not. Like it or not, preachers must engage them in some way or they will not come back. Even longtime members walk away more easily.

<sup>1</sup>Amy Frykholm, “Loose Connections,” *The Christian Century*, May 31, 2011, 20–23.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (New York: T&T Clark, 2011) 108.

*One way to help hearers overcome the widespread biblical illiteracy of our day is to draw them more deeply into the biblical story by preaching a sermon series on a broader text or even a book. If narrative creates faith, a fuller narrative can have rich reward. Toward that end, we hear in this article five Luther Seminary faculty members preaching through the book of Ruth.*

Aside from other considerations, preachers must speak to the human experience in such a way that listeners find some part of their lives reflected there. “This is the key to the era we are entering, said sociologist Wade Clark Roof. ‘Local congregations have to take into account the fact that they may only have a one-time shot. Churches will need to put new emphasis on touching people’s lives.’”<sup>3</sup>

The second problem relates to the first. Pastors used to be able to assume a certain level of biblical competence and cultural reinforcement. But now, because of multicultural sensitivity, mobility, less loyalty to congregations, and little consistent religious training, many listeners have almost no biblical pegs on which to hang the references they hear from the pulpit. They dread being discovered as impostors. So on a typical Sunday morning, many in the pews do not know “our story,” or at least do not know it well. Moreover, for a variety of reasons, some might resist calling it “our story.” It can be difficult to connect with a sermon if you know nothing about the narrative surrounding the texts for the day.

### THE PROMISE OF A SERMON SERIES

A sermon series focused on the story of a single character or book of the Bible can teach a portion of our shared story and simultaneously be engaging. As often happens alongside these kinds of series, creativity can blossom within the liturgy, in the way the texts are presented, in hymns and other musical themes, in the environment, and with the participation of the assembly. If we are fortunate enough to have paid staff or strong volunteers, a sermon series, with adequate planning, can provide a welcome challenge.<sup>4</sup>

The great stories of the Bible also touch listeners’ lives. The characters that populate the stories of the Bible are compelling. They have problems, hopes, and dreams. They fight with their families and long for children. They are victims or perpetrators. They are passionate and make mistakes. They meet our listeners as we speak of what is truly human and how God enters the arenas where we live and study and work. These are fine reasons in and of themselves to go “off-line” and try a story series. But the most compelling reason to tell these very human stories about how God interacts and intercedes in human life is that narrative creates meaning—and, therefore, faith.

Narrative is the way human beings construct meaning. “Human beings are storytellers by nature...[and] the human mind is first and foremost a vehicle for storytelling.”<sup>5</sup> Random events, small scripts, are arranged, retrieved, and correlated in trying to understand others or to predict the future. So intelligence consists of

<sup>3</sup>Frykholm, “Loose Connections,” 21.

<sup>4</sup>Bear in mind that most denominational music resources are paired with the lectionary, as are liturgical elements for printed worship materials. In many places Sunday School materials are also lectionary-based. With a sermon series, our church musicians and educators, who in any case often work six months in advance, may have to start from scratch.

<sup>5</sup>Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Guilford, 1997) 27–28.

understanding our experiences well enough to make predictions, to tell the right story at the right time. Understanding is connecting stories, and knowledge puts together experience and stories.<sup>6</sup> This process of “storying” our lives begins in infancy and continues throughout our lives.<sup>7</sup> Though we have other ways of understanding, such as logic, proof, and analysis, it is this “narrative mode” that influences what we believe and do. Narrative helps us decide “who we are, who we were, and who we may become.”<sup>8</sup>

---

*Narrative is the way human beings construct meaning. Though we have other ways of understanding, such as logic, proof, and analysis, it is this “narrative mode” that influences what we believe and do.*

---

Narrative is also the way God operates and the way we think about God. God speaks the world into existence. Jesus is the word made flesh, the way God reaches out to the world and saves it. Our liturgy, creeds, and sacraments are constructs of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Our theology originates in story. Incarnation is the story of God coming into the world. Soteriology is an augmented form of the story of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Eschatology is possible only through the lens of the narrative of the past. Theologians have shifted from the idea that there is a final correct meaning in the interpretation of Scripture to the conviction that God is described in story and that God still meets people in stories.<sup>11</sup> Preaching invites listeners to enter the divine story, to be transformed and enlivened by the gospel. We look for what God makes possible in the future and expects in the present. We understand all of this—our faith—through story.<sup>12</sup>

Narrative is the way we know God and God’s character and intentions for us and for the world. It is narrative that creates faith. Faith is not born out of a series of suppositions that can be proven or disproven. Faith begins with a story—the story of God’s interactions with humankind and the world. As Gerard Loughlin notes, “For Christian faith God is known only as that which happens: not as a being

<sup>6</sup>Roger C. Schank, *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995) 1–28, 112.

<sup>7</sup>Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990) 10–12.

<sup>8</sup>Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 88.

<sup>9</sup>Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 50.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 267.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 38–53.

<sup>12</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 34–35.

or a thing, but as an event.”<sup>13</sup> God and God’s community narrate faith into existence. So a story series can be creative and surprisingly effective in forming faith.

Do people care to hear the broader biblical story? I think they do. In my own congregation I preached an Old Testament series for an entire summer on the great stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs of Genesis and the events of the exodus. I was on vacation one Sunday. I came home to complaints because the supply pastor preached on the Gospel.

#### PREACHING THROUGH RUTH

The remainder of this essay is comprised of a series of sermons, each followed by my reflections on these concerns. Last spring, five Luther Seminary faculty members presented a sermon series in the seminary chapel. The preachers set aside the Revised Common Lectionary and on five consecutive days simply preached through the book of Ruth. Those sermons are included here.

The story of Ruth is perfect for a series, with its earthy setting, wonderful characters (particularly female characters), its pathos and tenderness, and its assurance of God’s faithfulness and love overflowing in and through the lives and love of ordinary human beings.

Of course, the Old Testament is filled with many other great stories that would also serve well—Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rebekah, Joseph, David, or even Esther. There is something satisfying about preaching through the whole of a story, so that the congregation gets to hear the beginning, the middle, and the end, the way it was meant to be heard. It’s difficult to tell these larger stories without veering from the common lectionary for a few Sundays. A series can be a delightful way to do so.

<sup>13</sup>Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story*, 179.

## RUMORS OF FOOD, RUMORS OF GOD

Frederick J. Gaiser, April 23, 2012

Ruth 1:1–5; 4:13–22

**Y**ou've come to hear the story of Ruth, and I've come to ruin it for you. I'm going to start this sermon and this week of preaching on Ruth by beginning not where the story begins but where it ends. It's a lovely little story, but a plain one, a story of a day in the life of ancient Israel: famine and death, widows and refugees, marriage and birth, pious farmers and contriving mothers-in-law, family loyalty and budding romance, conventional rules and risky plans—and a story in which not once does the narrator tell us that God is doing anything at all.

So, what do we have here? A morality tale? An early soap opera? A pastoral idyll? A happily-ever-after fairy tale? It's a beautiful piece of early human literature—that's not bad—but is it going anywhere? And is it a God story?

Well, here it comes: Spoiler alert—the end of the story:

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 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 borne him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. (Ruth 4:13–22)

David?! Apparently the story is going somewhere. At this point, the windows were opened for the ancient hearers, though no doubt they still remained puzzled to learn that their king of legend, their messianic ruler, had come from such homely beginnings. Or maybe not. Every culture has its rags-to-riches stories, and everybody sort of likes them, since they help us gain solidarity with the hero and hope for our children. They're nice little stories, and we have our own: Abraham Lincoln's log cabin and all that. But, nice as they are, are these God stories?

Let's go back to the beginning. Where did this thing start?

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left

with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:1–5)

Not much promise there. Famine in the land and three bereft widows. No mention of God. No transcendence that I can see. Or do I hear a tiny bell ringing? Our story begins with “a certain man of Bethlehem” whose name was Elimelech, and it ends with a certain man of Bethlehem whose name was David. A nice literary inclusio at least, but is it more? We latter-day hearers are going to remember another “certain man of Bethlehem” and wonder whether God had all of that in mind from the beginning—not just Israel’s David, but our “son of David” as well.

---

*there are no full-blown epiphanies or “thus says the Lord”  
announcements in the story, none of those things we look  
for to give us some measure of certainty*

---

Did he? Did God have all this in mind? Reading God’s mind is never easy (unless you’re a politician running for office), especially when the story itself gives us God’s name only in the blessings and prayers of God’s people. There are no full-blown epiphanies or “thus says the Lord” announcements in the story, none of those things we look for to give us some measure of certainty.

Well, there might be one thing, but it’s hearsay testimony, so inadmissible in court. And I have to reach down one verse into Karoline’s text for tomorrow to bring it up: “Then [Naomi] started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food” (Ruth 1:6). She had heard—but is that sufficient evidence on which to set out on a dangerous journey with an uncertain end? From whom had she heard? How? When? Where? If God wanted her back in Bethlehem, why didn’t God give her a sign or send an angel to whisper some sure promise into her ear?

Is God doing anything in this story? Is God doing anything in the world anywhere? Things look so bleak, so everyday, so uncertain. But Naomi hears a rumor of God, and she steps forward in faith. That’s probably as good as it gets.

A simple village story. But it’s going somewhere surprising, because God is always going somewhere surprising. Let the reader understand. A simple birth story like countless millions of other birth stories. But if there is no birth, there is no savior. This is a story with a God who is talked about but who never emerges from behind the curtain. Pretty much the way God works in my life—maybe yours as well.

Rumors of God; witnesses who claim God is up to something; faithful believers who sometimes do whisper in our ears; a David whose flagrant foolishness and shameless sin threaten to make a mockery of the biblical claim that he is God’s anointed; a baby in a manger who looks nothing like what gods are supposed to

look like; a Moabite widow risking her reputation to find new life. Is God in all of this, or any of it?

We have been looking on the screen at a painting of Christ in his father's carpentry shop by John Everett Millais.<sup>14</sup> Nineteenth-century critics hated it because it looked like, well, a carpentry shop. Was this any way to portray the Holy Family? Dirt floor and wood shavings? Where are the identifying halos and the appropriate robes? Where are the obligatory angels and the adoring shepherds? Is God in this picture at all?

---

*This is a story with a God who is talked about but who never emerges from behind the curtain. Pretty much the way God works in my life—maybe yours as well.*

---

Well, there is that hint of a cross above Jesus' head, and—do you see it?—there is that tiny blooming rose (or maybe it's a cactus) outside the window. It's everyday life in the carpenter's shop, but Millais gives us hints and rumors of where God will be taking this story. And it was everyday life in Moab when Naomi heard rumors of food in Bethlehem, whose very name, of course, means "house of bread."

Like Naomi, we are invited to follow the aroma of the baking bread; to listen to the rumors that God is up to something; to step out even when the map ends before we know where it is taking us. It's called faith.

For Naomi, it's harvesttime in Bethlehem; for us, it's springtime in Saint Paul. God wants to take us to new places, and "a certain man of Bethlehem" offers to be our guide—and awaits us at journey's end.



This first sermon introduced the creativity employed during the series. An image of a painting was projected in the Luther Seminary chapel. Fred Gaiser pointed out the "rumors of God" in it: a cross, a rose, and in the story of Ruth, bread. Since the readings were a bit longer, the pattern of worship for these services was spare. A reader's theater element was introduced, with the readings divided between characters in a particular sermon. Luther Seminary faculty member Gracia Grindal's hymn on the Ruth story lifted up the theme of the day.

Visually the chapel moved from emptiness to fullness. At the beginning of the week, empty bowls and baskets were set on and around the table. Throughout the week, the vessels were slowly filled with grain (oats) until at the end of the final sermon, the preacher, Kathryn Schifferdecker, poured grain into a bowl on the altar until it overflowed. Later, Fred Gaiser took the grain, threshed it, ground it, and made it into the communion bread that was used in the final communion service of the academic year.

<sup>14</sup>Available online at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ\\_in\\_the\\_House\\_of\\_His\\_Parents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_in_the_House_of_His_Parents) (accessed January 31, 2013).

## ON BEING NAOMI

Karoline M. Lewis, April 24, 2012  
Ruth 1:6–22

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

**A** week of preaching Ruth. This is the second sermon of five. And, what do I want to do? Not preach on Ruth. I really don’t.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m fine with Ruth. I really like her. There’s a book named for her, after all. It’s a great story. And in my preparations for today, I remembered that one of the favorite sermons I ever preached was a wedding sermon based on Ruth, talking about Ruth’s steadfast love, *hesed*, like God’s. So I know that, right now, I should talk about *hesed*: Steadfast love. God’s love. What Ruth



embodies. What Ruth expresses to Naomi. What Ruth reveals about God and God's love for us. But then, I had this sort of, well, for lack of a better term, reaction. I started thinking of WWJD bracelets, only they would say, WWRD. What would Ruth do? Be like Ruth.

And, to be honest, I wasn't feeling very Ruth-like, Ruth-ish. I didn't want to be Ruth. I can't be Ruth. Don't make me be Ruth. Of course, I'd like to think that this has little to do with my feelings for my own mother-in-law, and I think that's true. I just started thinking: What if I don't have it in me? What if I can't get to that kind of love? What if I can't stand by you, or with you, or for you, whoever "you" is, as much as I am supposed to, am expected to, or feel obligated to?

---

***I didn't want to be Ruth. I can't be Ruth. Don't make me be Ruth.  
And so, I found myself siding with Naomi this time around.***

---

And so, I found myself siding with Naomi this time around. I imagined Naomi looking at Ruth and saying, "Really? Are you crazy, girlfriend? You can't be hanging out with me. Seriously. You need to get a life. You need to find a husband. You need to have children. You need to have a family. And living with your mother-in-law is going to make all of those things difficult, to say the least." I heard Naomi saying to Ruth, "Don't you know where your worth lies? Not with where we are. Not with what we had. And certainly, not with me."

I know this book is called Ruth. I know that her loyalty gives us a glimpse into the heart of God, that her love lets us see and name where we have felt, experienced, and perhaps, even been able to *express* this kind of love. But this time around, just for a moment, for a few minutes, for one sermon, what if it could be about Naomi? What if you are Naomi—what would that be like? When you just need to say, "I really got the short end of the stick. This is not how I had planned my life. Things can't be any more desperate. Look at what has happened to me. I have lost my husband, my sons. Why would you want to be with me? Who would want to be with me? I am not meant to receive love and grace and blessing. What am I worth? Certainly not worthy of loyalty—or of love." Maybe it's the only place she can be at this point, when your reality is defined by another (for Naomi, by her husband) or your self-worth is determined by an ability to have children. Maybe the only thing she knows is "playing small...shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around [her]."<sup>15</sup> Maybe she was never given an opportunity to imagine more.

Naomi helps us see that so much of where we locate our worth is in expectation. So much of where we allocate dedication is only in obedience. So much of where we find acceptance is when *others* determine that we are acceptable. How often we go there, defining ourselves through the lens of another. Constructing our identity on the basis of what is expected of us. Believing that our worth can be decided by those who think they know us.

<sup>15</sup>Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) 165.

Naomi puts us face to face with those moments when any sort of living out of your heart is immediately shut down by those who have told you how to feel. Those times when your truth has been determined by a so-called truth from the outside. Those times when emptiness is the only thing you feel and when you are really and truly convinced that you are not enough. Naomi gives us a voice: To name when we have lost everything that mattered, or everything we thought mattered, and can't figure out how to make the switch. To name the unbearable minutes and seconds when you sense that who you are and who you could be is slipping through your fingers. To name when you are being pulled apart and when you can see pieces of you drifting away.<sup>16</sup>

So today, it's about Naomi, who is able to name her emptiness, her bitterness, her abandonment. At the very least, she calls it what it is. This is no pathetic figure. No "woe is me, that's too bad" kind of character. No foil for Ruth. She has the courage to say, "This really... [you know what]! I'm in a new land. My husband has died. My sons have died. Now what? What do you expect me to do? Rally? Make it all better? Pontificate on the silver lining? Perpetuate the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? How dare you ask that of me?"

And as much as Ruth loves Naomi, as much as Ruth shows her dedication to Naomi, as much as Ruth gives up what her life could be and should be for Naomi, that does not make it any easier, any more possible, for Naomi to see herself as worthy of that kind of *hesed*.

What if today—and if it's not today, the day will come—is that place and time when the only thing you can say about love is how you are not worthy of it? So, today—and for the sake of your tomorrow—just for a few minutes, just for now, maybe you can hear God saying, every so softly and maybe just barely, "Do not push me away. Do not deem yourself unworthy. Do not think that I do not want to be with you. Wherever you go, I *will* go; where you lodge, I will lodge; you are mine. Who you are, who you have been, and who you will and can be, I love, with my whole heart, forever and always." Then maybe today, even if it's only for a moment, maybe all of us Naomis out there might hear, know, and feel *hesed*.



Stories form us. They touch what is closest to us. So they are dangerous. One person is encouraged to stand alongside others as Ruth walked with Naomi, while another sitting next to her is disheartened and thinks, as Karoline Lewis puts it, "I can't be Ruth. Don't make me be Ruth."

Lewis's approach reflects sensitivity to the ways people hear stories even as she brings themes to the hearers in ways that resonate with their daily lives. What is difficult is not avoided. Alienation, love, loyalty, and hope are here along with all the ways God meets them.

<sup>16</sup>Emilie Townes, "We Are Not Raising the Dead," Women in Leadership Seminar: Emerging Leadership Development Institute, The Association of Theological Schools, October 22–24, 2010, Pittsburgh, PA.

## AS IT HAPPENED

Dirk Lange, April 25, 2012

Ruth 2:1–23

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The LORD be with you." They answered, "The LORD bless you." Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "To whom does this young woman belong?" The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, 'Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment."

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants."

At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man

with whom I worked today is Boaz.” Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.” Then Ruth the Moabite said, “He even said to me, ‘Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.’” Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.” So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

“**A**s it happened,” Ruth stumbled on the field of Boaz, without knowing it belonged to Boaz.

We’ve heard over the past couple of days how this story does not mention God, does not portray God as the primary acting character. Where is God’s presence? Or as Professor Gaiser asked, where is transcendence? There is only earthiness here—almost an exaltation of a purely human drama. A widow clinging to another widow, her mother-in-law, defying all cultural norms, and through her choice saying, “Children don’t define me. I will stay with you, Naomi.”

Is there something of God in that relationship? In that deep embrace of these two women? In that long journey, that restless journey back to another dwelling, a foreign dwelling?

---

*As it happened. Is this not God’s moment in Ruth? Here God slips in, unnoticed, from the side, by way of a simple “as it happened”—God prepares a way.*

---

As it happened, they arrived back in Bethlehem, back to the house of bread, but they had none. And it happened that Ruth went out to look for food and, unknowingly, gleaned in the field of Boaz, her mother-in-law’s relative.

Not so long ago, not as long ago as the book of Ruth, a young man was traveling in then-Communist Czechoslovakia. He was traveling with Maria, one of the leaders of the underground church, and they were going to Pilsen—yes, the beer city—to meet with another family, leaders in that city of the resistance. Once in Pilsen, they got off the train, and Maria whispered to the young man, “I don’t have their address.”

“But how will we ever find them in this great city?” he asked, totally befuddled and confused.

She said, “All I know is that we take the streetcar number 7.”

They got on that streetcar. As it happened, he saw a young person—a child—and said to himself (for they could not sit together in the streetcar), “I’ll get out when she gets out.” And when the young person stood up to get off, so did he and, to his amazement, so did Maria. Once in the street, he said to her, “Why did you get out here?” And she said, “I saw that young person and said when she gets out, I’ll get out.”

They quickly followed the young girl and Maria very cautiously went up to her and asked, “Do you know so-and-so?” And the girl responded, “They are my parents.”

As it happened. Is this not God’s moment in Ruth? Here God slips in, unnoticed, from the side, by way of a simple “as it happened”—God prepares a way. Faithfulness, *hesed*, springs up from the earth, a widow embracing a widow. It springs up out of what we might write off as just a nice story or just chance. God, though, uses this earthiness to accomplish what God wishes to accomplish.

O come, O God, and fulfill our deepest longings, our human embraces, our endless journeys. O come, Branch of Jesse, you who never deny, never reject, never suppress human emotion or need or despair; you who come in the depth of human living, human relationships, in a friendship stronger than despair, barrenness, emptiness. As it happened, even in death you open doors, doors of faith; you embrace us, invite to a table, to Bethlehem, to your house, to your table of bread for all.



When we hear this story of Ruth, “God slips in, unnoticed” and prepares a way—a way to “fulfill our deepest longings, our human embraces, our endless journeys” (Dirk Lange).

Andrew Root says, “It is into suffering (the suffering of death, nothingness, separation), the suffering of the world, taken on in the suffering of God, that the church is called.”<sup>17</sup> We are called into this way. A dangerous path, but the way into people’s lives.

<sup>17</sup>Andrew Root, *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010) xxvii.

## AN EARTHY STORY

Rolf Jacobson, April 26, 2012

Ruth 3:1–18

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 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.” She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” He said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the LORD lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” Then he said, “Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city. She came to her mother-in-law, who said, “How did things go with you, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, ‘Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’” She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.”

**T**his morning, we continue our series on the book of Ruth. As our brother Dirk said yesterday, this is an earthy story. It is earthy in about every way a story can be earthy. It is also a theological story—one about how God proves loving and faithful through the simplest of everyday, earthen vessels.

The earthiness of the story involves the soil and the matter of bringing in the harvest. In ancient Israel, the fall barley and wheat harvest was a big deal. If the rains fell right and the soil produced right and the harvest came in, the people

would have food enough to survive the winter and live well into the next year. Agricultural historians have estimated that this only happened about 70% of the time. In three years out of ten, rainfall would not be enough for a bountiful harvest.<sup>18</sup> In one year out of ten, lack of rain would approach drought conditions. And two or more years of drought in a row would mean famine. But not in the year of this story. In that year, the soil provided big. The harvest of the earth's bounty was seen as a sign of God's loving faithfulness. The harvesters might even have recited Ps 65:

You visit the earth and water it,  
    you greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
    you provide the people with grain,  
    for so you have prepared it.  
You water its furrows abundantly,  
    settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers,  
    and blessing its growth.  
You crown the year with your bounty;  
    your wagon tracks overflow with richness.  
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
    the hills gird themselves with joy,  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
    the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
    they shout and sing together for joy. (vv. 9–13)

The earthiness of the story also involves celebration. The Israelite high festival of Booths was associated with the barley harvest. After you get the harvest in, you party—for a whole week. At least that is what God commanded: “Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. Seven days...you shall surely celebrate” (Deut 16:13–15). And lest you imagine some sort of chaste, sober party, God commanded the people to consume “whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, [beer],<sup>19</sup> or whatever you desire” (Deut 14:26).

Apparently that is just what Boaz did. We read that Boaz had a good time, “eating and drinking” “until he was in a contented mood.” Boaz felt great. In the words of Mark 13:14, “Let the reader understand”! And the celebration was seen as a sign of God's loving faithfulness. The revelers might even have recited Ps 104:

[You] bring forth food from the earth,  
    and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine,  
    and bread to strengthen the human heart. (vv. 14–15)

<sup>18</sup>See Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 55.

<sup>19</sup>My translation. NRSV has “strong drink,” NIV has “fermented drink,” and NJPS has “intoxicant.” The Hebrew *שֵׁכָר* is related to the Akkadian term for “beer.”

The earthiness of the story also involves God’s law—and this should not be missed. One of the ways that God’s *hesed* is reaching out in faithful love is through the law. God had given Israel laws such as these:

- “When you reap the harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.” (Deut 24:19)
- “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. . . . you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev 19:9–10)
- “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut 10:19)

---

***The earthiness of the story also involves God’s law—and this should not be missed. One of the ways that God’s hesed is reaching out in faithful love is through the law.***

---

In the book of Ruth, Boaz and other of the Bethlehemites are found obeying the law—allowing Ruth and others of the poor to glean in safety. Through the law and through their obedience, God’s loving faithfulness was reaching out to Ruth—and through Ruth, to Naomi.

Finally, the earthy plot line of the story climaxes in what Proverbs calls “the way of a man with a maiden” (Prov 30:19 RSV). Naomi tells Ruth to shower up, put on her most fetching dress, do up her hair just so, put on her most alluring perfume, and go to Boaz and—I quote now from the NRSV—“uncover his feet and lie down.” Uncover his feet. *Let the reader understand.* And just as Naomi instructed, so Ruth did. When Boaz was startled out of his sleep, Ruth took it a step further and proposed marriage: “Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” The reference to a man spreading his cloak over a woman is a reference to the marriage ceremony—symbolically bringing her both into his bed and under the protection of his wings. And Boaz said yes. There, on the threshing floor, under the cover of darkness and of his cloak, they exchanged the equivalent of marriage promises, and as they did, God was at work. Through Boaz, God was at work rescuing Ruth from a marginal life of gleaning as a foreigner. But equally so, through Ruth, God was at work rescuing Boaz, who was apparently alone, and love moved into his home. And through Ruth, God was at work rescuing Naomi.

Naomi had sent off Ruth with instructions as to how Ruth could secure her own future, but Ruth accomplished not only that—she also secured a future for Naomi. When Boaz said to Ruth that “this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first,” he was referring to Ruth’s loyalty both to himself—she had picked him, even though more appealing, younger men were available—but also and especially her loyalty to Naomi. By choosing the older, less attractive, but more loyal



Boaz, that night Ruth was also securing a future for Naomi. All of this God accomplished through the earthy, earthen vessels named Ruth and Boaz and the promises they exchanged. Then, early in the morning, while it was still dark, Ruth stole away home.

That is where we will leave off with the story for today—with promises exchanged, but not yet fulfilled. In the morning, when she rose, Ruth must have wondered, would the promises exchanged at the dark of midnight stand up to the brightness of the day? In the morning, would Boaz keep his promise? In the morning, would the legal processes of the village function as God intended? In the morning, would God still prove faithful?

Leaving off with promises exchanged, but not yet fulfilled, seems appropriate for today, because the life of faith is like that. We, the spiritual descendants of Ruth, walk by faith in the wake of promises made, but not yet kept. We have received the promise in our baptisms, we are strengthened by the sustaining promise in the Lord's Supper, and in this Easter season we celebrate the promise that Christ is risen indeed. But the promises are not yet fully kept. And so, we cling tightly to the promise, and, with the psalmist, we confess that "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Ps 30:5b).



Narrative preaching has changed. There is recognition that storytelling in itself is not enough. Tom Long says, "If we tell stories in sermons—biblical and otherwise—we will need also to step away from those stories and think them through in nonnarrative ways...preachers today may need to model in the sermon itself the internal processing of narratives that a previous generation of preachers could entrust fully to the hearers."<sup>20</sup> Simply telling the biblical story is not enough.

In this series on Ruth, even someone unfamiliar with the story would be able to enter it because the preachers provide accessibility. A good example is Rolf Jacobson's descriptions of the earthiness of harvest, celebration, law, and love, alongside connections to the rest of Scripture, promise, and hope.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 15.

## MORNING IN BETHLEHEM

Kathryn Schifferdecker, April 27, 2012

Ruth 4:1–22

No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, “Come over, friend; sit down here.” And he went over and sat down. Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, “Sit down here”; so they sat down. He then said to the next-of-kin, “Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.” So he said, “I will redeem it.” Then Boaz said, “The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.” At this, the next-of-kin said, “I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.”

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, “Acquire it for yourself,” he took off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.” Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 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 borne him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of

Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

**W**ell, here we are. We've been sojourning in the book of Ruth this week, moving from the plains of Moab to the fields of Bethlehem, and now I'm here to talk about the end of the story. I'm the clean-up batter, as it were (by which I do not mean to imply that I'm the best hitter, simply that I'm last in the line-up this week).

Fred introduced us to this book and pointed us to where it was going, and Karoline spoke of the lament of Naomi and the loyalty of Ruth. Dirk talked about the evidence of God's hand working in the happenstance of everyday life, and Rolf took us to the threshing floor, where promises were made and faithful love (*hesed*) displayed.

And so, here we are. It's morning in Bethlehem, and a late night of celebrating at the threshing floor has not made Boaz forget his promises to the bold woman who proposed to him the night before. It's true, he is a *goel*, a kinsman-redeemer, to Ruth and Naomi, but there is one man who is more closely related, who has both the right and the responsibility (according to Israelite law) to redeem these two widows from their poverty, the right and the responsibility to marry Ruth and to raise up children to perpetuate her dead husband's name.

And so the scene shifts from the threshing floor to the village gate. And we get this exchange between Boaz and the nameless *goel*, the erstwhile redeemer who won't redeem. It involves property rights, family duty, and the exchange of footwear. And while it is tempting to poke fun at this nameless so-and-so, this so-called redeemer who chooses not to redeem (in contrast to the good and faithful Boaz), I'd like to spend my time instead on what happens next and particularly on the women in the story.

After the men have conducted their business at the city gate, after the elders and everyone else pronounce blessing on the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, there comes in the course of time a child, a bouncing baby boy, and it is the women of the village who speak now, at the end of the story. They call the child, "Naomi's baby," and it is they who name him Obed.

Now, this isn't the first time the women of the village have shown up. Remember back in chapter one, when Naomi comes back from Moab, with Ruth beside her? It's the women of Bethlehem who ask, "Can this be Naomi?" And it's to the women Naomi pours out her bitterness: "Call me no longer Naomi (*pleasant*). Call me Mara (*bitter*), for the Almighty has made my life bitter. I went away full, and he has brought me back empty."

Remember, Naomi and family had left Bethlehem at the beginning of the book because of famine. The house of bread (*beth lehem*) was empty of bread. Naomi's life now is empty of what had filled it before: the love of her husband and her two sons. Now she is old and bitter and who can blame her? She is a widow, all

alone in the world, in a time and place when being a widow was a very tenuous existence, indeed. Her life and her heart are empty, or so it seems.

And yet—and yet—even as she complains bitterly to the women of Bethlehem, there standing beside her is Ruth, her loyal and loving daughter-in-law, and there is another whisper of promise, a whisper of hope, for, the narrator notes, they come to Bethlehem, they come to the house of bread, “at the beginning of the barley harvest.”

Well, we’ve heard the rest of the story. It plays out, as we know, against this backdrop of the harvest. Ruth gleans in the fields of Boaz, and he instructs his harvesters not only to allow her to glean, but also to pull out handfuls of barley for her even from the standing sheaves. She comes home that first day with well over half a bushel of barley, an astounding amount for one day’s gleaning. And that life-sustaining harvest prompts the first blessing from Naomi’s lips: “Where did you glean today? Blessed be the man who took notice of you. . . . Blessed be he by the LORD, whose *hesed* (loving-kindness) has not forsaken the living or the dead!”

Naomi’s eyes are opened, and it is when she begins to recognize the *hesed* (loving-kindness) of God in the loving-kindness of those around her that she moves from being Mara (*bitter*) back to being Naomi (*pleasant*). And her empty heart and life begin again to be filled.

---

***It is morning in Bethlehem, and the house of bread is full to overflowing. Into the ordinary lives of two widows and a farmer, the faithful love of God, the hesed of God, has overflowed.***

---

Themes of emptiness and fullness, of famine and harvest, continue to play a role at the threshing floor. It is there, surrounded by heaps of grain, that Boaz and Ruth exchange promises, and when she leaves the threshing floor in the predawn darkness, he heaps six measures of barley into her cloak to take back to Naomi, for, he says, “Do not go back to your mother-in-law with empty hands.”

So here we are. It is morning in Bethlehem. And here at the end of our story the fruit of the earth now gives way to the fruit of the womb. For ten years during her marriage to Mahlon, Naomi’s son, Ruth’s womb had been empty, but now, with Boaz, she conceives a child and bears a son. And it is the women of the village who have eyes to see what has happened, and voices to tell it to Naomi. They say to her:

“Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer (a *goel*); and may his name be renowned in Israel! This child 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 borne him.”

Naomi’s life is full again, with family, with a son, and with a plentiful harvest. The blessings of God overflow, indeed. But the women of the village see and name

what Naomi was not able to see for herself at the beginning of the book. Even when she was Mara, even when bitterness was the only thing that filled her, there beside her was Ruth, her daughter-in-law, more to her than seven sons. There beside her was Ruth, whose love and loyalty for her mother-in-law transcended boundaries of nation and custom. There beside her was Ruth, the embodiment of God's faithful love (God's *hesed*) for her even when Naomi did not yet have eyes to see it.

But the women of the village see it, and they name it: "This child 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 borne him.*" In the end, it is not barley or wheat, but love that fills Naomi's emptiness, and love that did so from the beginning.

Naomi gets it, at the end of the story. The narrator says, "Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and she became his nurse." The rabbis, noticing that the Hebrew word translated here often means "wet nurse," said that a miracle happened, that Naomi's old and withered breasts were suddenly plump and round with milk, and that she nursed the child herself. And the women of the village name him "Naomi's baby."

It is morning in Bethlehem, and the house of bread is full to overflowing. Into the ordinary lives of two widows and a farmer, the faithful love of God, the *hesed* of God, has overflowed. And that love has come not in a burning bush or a voice from heaven, but through the ordinary lives and the extraordinary love of human beings, one for another, called forth and undergirded by God's love for them.

It is morning in Saint Paul, in Minneapolis, in Fargo, in Phoenix. Where will you recognize the *hesed*, the loving-kindness, of God in your life today? Will you have eyes to see and ears to hear, even when that love comes through unexpected people, from unexpected places? Will you have eyes to see and voices to name for others where their lives are being touched by the faithful love of God?

It is morning wherever you are. Where and how will you yourself embody that faithful love of God for the people you meet today? Where will you—through your ordinary and extraordinary life—be a conduit of God's love and blessing for the world?

One last thing: Just as the book of Ruth began with a note of promise, so now it ends with another note of promise: "The women of the village gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse, the father of David."

Here is where the story of Ruth leaves us, with the promise of God's faithful love overflowing not just into the lives of two widows and a farmer, but into the lives of all Israel, and through David's greater Son, *our* Redeemer, into even our own lives as well. Blessing upon blessing. Thanks be to God.



Creativity abounds. The human experience is addressed with a gospel word. The story stays intact with all its power. Faith is created.

Like the women surrounding Naomi, we are called to name what others, in their distress or distraction, cannot always see for themselves—God’s *hesed*. The way we do that is to tell the story—the whole story. ⊕

*MARY E. ALBING is pastor of Lutheran Church of Christ the Redeemer, Minneapolis, Minnesota. The five preachers whose sermons are used (Frederick J. Gaiser, Karoline M. Lewis, Dirk G. Lange, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Kathryn Schifferdecker) are all faculty members at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.*