

⁷ When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet.

⁹ "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."

¹⁰ "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character.

-- Ruth 3:7-11

Where is God when the lights go out? Where is God when all our best-laid plans go awry? Where is God when our children die, when our women are trampled, and our sons are sold into slavery? Where is God when all the dark waters of chaos threaten to sweep over us?

Those of us who have had to deal with tragedy or depression of different kinds will often tell ourselves the theologically correct answer in order to keep madness at bay: God is there, somewhere I don't know, doing stuff I can't see. Yet you need not be in the throes of darkness in order to question God's presence—all of us do it from time to time even if everything in our lives is going splendidly.

On its surface, Ruth is the rather placid story of a widow who gets remarried. But when put in its proper context, the story of Ruth is a story of desolation, of wandering, of faithfulness, and of restoration. It is the story of emptiness being made full, for that is what Ruth's name means—fullness—an ironic name for a woman who has no children

and therefore by Ancient Near Eastern reckoning, no hope. In this way, Ruth is our *heilsgeschichte*. Our salvation history.

During the time the Judges were judging, there was a famine, and Elimelech takes his wife, Naomi, away from Bethlehem (“the House of Bread”) to stay a while in the eastern hill country of Moab. However, a quiet life in the country eludes Elimelech’s family. Not only does he die, but his two sons, the husbands of Moabite women, also die. Naomi, now a widow and a mother-in-law to two other widows, makes the decision to return to her husband’s hometown. Naomi the childless, husbandless, dried up old crone wanders home, hoping that somehow returning to the House of Bread will mean that she will be refilled.

These were not kind times for anyone in Israel, let alone its most vulnerable people, women. Israel’s unfaithfulness to their covenant with Yahweh has resulted in the periodic takeover of the land by marauding tribes, resulting in a deeply destabilized society that soon forgets they are the people chosen by God to be a light for all the nations. Yet, in their forgetfulness, they became a scourge. We do not need to go far into Scripture to recall how women were viewed as inconsequential chattel. The closing chapters of Judges remind us how dire these times were when they detail the gang rape and dismemberment of an innocent woman—a story so horrifying that our minds shudder to think of it. It is with heavy hearts that we admit that those events are a part of the Word of God as well.

Yet what Ruth tells us is that these events in Judges are not the *whole* Word of God. Indeed, when I first asked the question of “where is God when the lights go out?”,

we were tempted to say “*not here, and definitely not when the judges were judging.*” But from what we have just read, God is still present in Israel, even if His name has been dragged through the mud. There *is* still a faithful remnant of people who are open and willing to follow God, even though everyone else around them had forsaken Him. Without love of God as the foundation of their society, Israel is set adrift in its own moral relativism—whatever anyone feels is right is what they do. Everyone, of course, except for the principal characters in this story. Naomi selflessly tries to tell her daughters-in-law to leave her and find other husbands while they can, but Ruth selflessly clings to Naomi, not willing to abandon her mother-in-law for an easier life. Ruth appears at a critical moment in the text as an antidote to the long toilet flush of Judges. Ruth is a reversal of events that as a whole can be summarized in two words: But God.

Israel was unfaithful to God, *but God* was still more faithful.

Naomi had no more sons to continue her legacy, *but God* provided a new son.

Ruth was vulnerable, *but God* protected her.

Things should have gone straight down the crapper, *but God* set in motion the events that would bring His Kingdom to bear upon this world.

The text makes little of Boaz’s actual feelings for Ruth when he sees her picking up the grain left behind by his harvesters. He simply asks his foreman “*who does she belong to?*” When he finds out that Ruth is a widow, he shows Ruth kindness. We may not think much of what Boaz did—after all, doesn’t religion that God accepts as pure and faultless take care of widows and orphans? However, given the world in which Boaz lived, there was no cultural onus upon him to protect Ruth—a foreigner, a

woman— like he did. Boaz was not some gentlemanly throwback, he honoured Ruth because of Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi. The text seems to say from Boaz' point of view "*here now is a woman of exceedingly good character, of great faithfulness. One who does not do what is right in her own eyes, but clings to love.*" This love is not just for Naomi, but for God, who presses into His people the idea that loving others as ourselves is a very large part of his Kingdom rule. So Boaz welcomes a stranger, a foreigner, an alien without hope into his protective circle. "*Don't go working in other fields, because they'll take advantage of you. Stay here, and I'll protect you. Stay here, and you'll be safe.*"

Good things happen when we welcome strangers into our tight-fisted circles, for when we welcome others in the name of God, we help create safe places for others to be vulnerable and to truly *be* themselves. Yet is a Spirit-filled community always a safe place? Not by the world's standards. When we speak Christianese, we often thoughtlessly pass on words like "brokenness" and "humility", as though such things are no more painless than getting a flu shot. Yet what is baptism into the Kingdom of God if it is not experiencing a crushing death in Christ to be raised again with him? The Body of Christ is the stone on which we all stumble, the anvil on which we are broken and recast into Christlikeness together.

The turn of the story occurs when Naomi hatches a cunning plan for Ruth to be married once more—yet this is not so much a cunning plan as it is an invitation for disaster. Even though Boaz has been kind to Ruth up until this point, there is no guarantee that he might wake up and take advantage of her on the threshing floor.

After all, when Ruth comes to “uncover his feet”, this is a Hebraic euphemism for pulling down his pants—a situation that puts Ruth at Boaz’ mercy all over again.

Even though Ruth tells Boaz to “spread his cloak over her” and protect her as his own, Ruth’s actions are actually a request of Boaz for mercy. Boaz here has a choice—will he do whatever he wants with a vulnerable woman, or will he uphold his good name? Of course, we know the answer. We know how the story turns out when Boaz, pleased with Ruth’s willingness to be defenceless before him, goes out of his way to claim her as his bride.

Does this sound familiar? It should. For Ruth is a microcosm of what God has done for us. Ruth’s story is *our* story, and when we tell it to each other, we recount how God has worked in real time to counteract a world that does what is right in its own eyes. This is how Ruth is the story of God redeeming the world in the confines of history, our *heilsgeschichte*.

When I read Ruth as a boy, it was a closed book for me, since being like most boys are, the drama of the book was beyond my comprehension. Now, as a man, I see further into the text and I marvel at Ruth’s inner simplicity. Yes, she gives herself away. And yes, she works—and she works hard—but hers is not a restless jumping from activity to activity in the name of self-justification or pride. Contrary to the empty religion of ritual and action that is portrayed in Judges, Ruth’s faith is simple—I go where you go, I follow whom you follow, Your God shall be my God, I love because I am loved. Instead of being wrapped up in the rampant narcissism of Judges, there is no thought in Ruth of getting the upper hand for herself. She is not a manipulative woman who

angles and threatens and cajoles Boaz into marrying her, but rather, she simply submits—both to Naomi and to Boaz. She *trusts*. She presents herself to Boaz, saying “*here I am. Remember your goodness to me and your reputation in front of others. Redeem me.*”

It may not sound like it, but Ruth is praying the first line of the Lord’s Prayer. What we read in English as “hallowed be Your name” might also be translated as “Father, keep holy Your name.” This is the prayer of Moses when God threatens to obliterate the Israelites, and this is the prayer of Joshua when they are defeated at Ai— for Your name’s sake, *redeem us*.

The story of Ruth is a story of faith in the good and gracious character of someone else. In Ruth’s case, she took a risk in trusting in Boaz’ character. In our case, in light of our trust in God’s character, we can risk the cessation of our striving to prove ourselves and our self worth. Instead, we replace the idea of being able to approach life on our own terms with the belief that we approach life with God on His terms and at His mercy.

Once we see that Ruth is an invitation to rest, to lay down at God’s feet knowing full well we do not deserve his mercy, the story moves from boring to beautiful. Instead of living according to the plans we make up for ourselves or for the ones we love, we become free as we rest in the love of God. Free not to fret over whether the desires of our heart will come to fruition. Free to love and be loved for who we are, not who we project ourselves to be. Free to give of ourselves as we can and to grow in grace with

the shortcomings of others and our own sin. This is the freedom for which the love of God through the work of Christ and the granting of the Spirit has set us free.

We do not live in a world that knows this freedom. We live in a time and with people who are restless in their striving to make gods of themselves. Our culture screams “you can do it”, but the gracious voice of God replies “no, *I* am doing it.” So what is He doing when the lights go out? He is freeing us from our compulsions, from our anxieties, from our propensity for living in cages of our own making. This freedom granted to us in Christ is not the lawless terror of Judges, but the freedom to trust in the love of God, which then leads us into the freedom to love each other. This is the freedom of God and the freedom of His Kingdom come.

- 1.) How are you learning to trust God?
- 2.) If you could have God redeem something in you or a circumstance you are caught up in, what would it be?