

Title: A Son is born in Bethlehem
Text: Ruth 4
Theme: the beautiful redeeming providences of God
Series: Ruth #4
Prop Stmtnt: The redemption of God is glorious in scope and in depth.

Read Text:

In the final chapters of the book of Judges, Bethlehem is not the quaint little town of shepherds and an inn that takes in weary travelers with a stable out back where the stars shine bright and a peaceful stillness lies over the homes at night. It is a town associated with idolatry, syncretism, corrupt priests and eventually a woman whose story and dreadful experience of abuse and violence unites the country in a revenge war that almost destroys the tribe of Benjamin. Somewhere between 140,000 and 165,000 people are killed in the civil war. In the last 5 chapters of Judges Bethlehem is a town stained and disdained. And that seems to continue into the book of Ruth. In chapter 1 a man from Bethlehem decides to leave the town, his home, and his farm because of a famine and take his family to Moab, where outside of the commonwealth of the people of God, away from the tabernacle and the sacrificial system designed by God for his good, perhaps he can at least find work as an itinerate farmer and not starve.

We do not know the particulars, but it doesn't work out. We shouldn't be surprised. Running from the pressure that God intends to drive us to him does not bring relief, but only more ruin. The man dies. His two sons who by this time each married a woman from Moab, also died and now Naomi, the man's wife is not only a widow, she is no longer a mother, at least it appears that way. A woman had no social standing without a husband. He was her name and identity and she had no one to protect her or provide for her without children. No standing, no identity, no income and no future. What on earth was Naomi going to do? She decides to return to Bethlehem and against all common sense and all odds, Ruth, the widow of one of Naomi's sons returns with her. Chapter 1 concludes with the arrival of these two women bound by grief, loss, poverty and widowhood, and separated by a generation. What would happen to them? Would God take notice? Would God provide? The events of chapter 1 take place over years. The events of chapter 2 take place in a day and what a day it is. It is fascinating to see the unbelievable weight of grief compounded over years now, almost taken away in a matter of hours. In one day, one day, the story changes, life changes, the hinge of history is turned!

Ruth, to the degree she can, takes on the role of the husband and son. She is going to provide for her mother-in-law. She is going to keep her promise, no matter what the cost. We've already seen how dangerous life can be for a woman who has no one to defend her in that region of Israel. And Ruth, at the mercy of the field hands needs to find a place to work where she will not be molested. She finds such a field. The owner of the field, named Boaz, happens to come to that field on that day. He notices her! He has heard of her care for Naomi and since he is kin in some way, he is particularly grateful for all that Ruth has done for Naomi. He makes sure that Naomi is provided for, by providing protection and provision for Ruth not only for that day, but for the harvest season. Ruth returns home to Naomi with a bountiful harvest for one day but also with the words of Boaz repeating themselves in her head. "Don't even think about going to another

field.” a fact that is not lost on Naomi. God has indeed provided. Chapter 2 ends with Naomi, the woman of bitterness, bitter no more. She is smiling once again. But she does more than smile.

Unlike the famine years of chapter 1, the harvest in chapter 3 is bountiful. But, the real drama is in the outrageous and risky plan that Naomi comes up with for Ruth to ask Boaz to marry her. With so much at stake and so many things that could go wrong, we could have hardly hoped for a greater result, except for one thing. We found out in chapter 3 that Boaz does not have the right to remarry Ruth. There is a redeemer who is a closer relative who has that right and by law, he has to be given the opportunity. Boaz gives Ruth his word that he will address the matter first thing in the morning. He sends her home from the threshing floor back to Naomi with a generous amount of barley and with a promise. He will address this immediately. Naomi and Ruth know that he will act. It all comes down to this.

Return is the theme of chapter 1 and it is used repeatedly by the author. Glean is the theme of chapter 2 and know is the theme of chapter 3. In chapter 4, the word redeem, both a verb and a noun (redemption) command our attention. This story of love and marriage we hope, goes way beyond boy meets girl, boy likes girl, etc. There is a lot riding on this, that no one could have foreseen. There is a lot that is at stake. Chapter 4 begins in the morning at the city gate. Boaz is on a mission, but he has to play this right. He needs to make a deal, but this is not merely a personal deal or a business deal. Like all real estate transactions, this is a legal matter, and herein is the dilemma.

I. **The dilemma** (1-5)

Everyone in Israel (except the Levites) was to have his own land. If you fell onto hard times, you could sell the use of your land, but you could never sell your actual land. If you sold the use of your land, then someone could come along and buy it back for you or you could buy it back. Every 50 years was the year of Jubilee when all of the land would go back to the family. Therefore, if you were paying for the use of the land that someone else was “selling” you would pay based upon how long it was before the year of Jubilee. I am assuming that Elimelech sold the use of his land to someone, outside of the family. And then after he used up that money, he took his family to Moab. Now, Naomi is back. She does not have use of the land that belonged to her husband. Someone else, outside of the family does. It is no benefit to her at this point. Someone in the family needs to redeem the land from the outsider so that the land gets back into the family. But, who can do this? Obviously, there is a pecking order and this is the dilemma for Boaz. He wants to marry Ruth. Here is where it gets a bit complicated.

A. **For Boaz**

But in order for Boaz to marry Ruth, he has to buy her land (land that is Naomi’s from Elimelech’s line). Ruth is a widow without children now in the nation of Israel who is to be taken care of by being taken into the home of a near relative who will father children through her so that the line of her deceased husband’s name will be carried on and so that someone will be able to stay on that land and take care of it. The dilemma for Boaz is that while he wants to marry Ruth, he is not first in line for the land, so he is not first in line for Ruth.

Now, obviously, when land is available, people want to buy it, especially when there is money to be made in farming and in the time of harvest, and in the time of a good harvest, the land would be very attractive and farmers would have the means to be able to buy it. Historically, land tends to be a good investment. If, 50 years ago your family knew how Macomb county would expand, and they would have bought up farmland or empty fields along 1-94, you could have made a mint on that. My grandfather always thought land was a good investment. He would say, "God isn't making any more land." Of course, he did not live near a volcano in Hawaii, but his point is valid. Land is a fixed commodity. Cities are expanding. The price of farmland tends to go up. Population grows and everyone has to eat. Therefore, farmland is generally a good buy.

When Ruth proposes to Boaz, she is informing him that Naomi is ready to bless the purchase of the land that belonged to her husband so that it would go back to the family and so that the name of her husband's line would be carried on. The land is not Naomi's to sell. She only has the right of "usufruct." That is a legal term that means, "the right of using the property of another and drawing profit from it, without destroying it." Boaz, is now trying to get the property back into the family because that is how he can marry Ruth. All of this legal and personal stuff is here. And for us, the reader, we just met Boaz in chapter 2. He is the stuff that dreams are made of, right ladies? And yet, by the end of chapter 2, we're wondering why he hasn't put a ring on her finger. Come on man! But now, we know. His waiting is not reluctance, it is legal. But, with Ruth's encouragement this man takes the initiative and in these opening verses, Boaz is decisive and strategic.

He goes up to the gate of the city. This is like going into the court house. A city gate was a complex, not just a hole in the wall. The city gate had a lookout tower and a series of rooms so those defending the city and this gate had a place to be stationed. During the day, these rooms had a civic function. City business was conducted there. For a man like Boaz to go to the city gate and to sit down, was his way of signaling to others, that he was there to conduct some official business.

Now, here is another example of the skill of the storywriter. Do you remember the beginning of chapter 2? Ruth just happened to go into the field of Boaz and in v.4, the writer says, "And behold Boaz came from Bethlehem." Well, here it is again, only just as Boaz sits down..."And behold the redeemer (the man who has the first rights to redeem the land and marry Ruth) comes by. It only adds momentum to what we already want to see happen. We want Boaz to marry Ruth. We already know that this is good and this should happen. And sure enough, Boaz is being the man and now, here is the other man who just happens to be there as well. This is going along just fine. We assume this little legal technicality will be addressed and by the end of the day, flowers will be chosen for a wedding.

The writer makes it very clear that he is not going to tell us the other man's name. He's repeatedly called the redeemer, but Boaz calls him, "friend" (v.1). And we don't know why not. But, now, with these two men seated, Boaz is able to call upon 10 of the elders to come so that official business could be conducted. The court, as they say, is now in session. Boaz stays on center stage. Like a skilled attorney he lays out the case, carefully explaining the situation as it relates to the land. Naomi wants the land back in the family. Therefore, it is up to a redeemer in the family to do it. Boaz would like to do it and will do it, but legally this other man has first

dibs. Of course, we know that the man will say no, because we want Boaz to marry Ruth. The story does not go our way. The man says, “yes, he wants the land. He will redeem the land.”

It's like someone just kicked us in the gut. By this time a crowd has gathered. This is a public matter and Boaz is a big deal. It is also possible that Naomi is there. She tells Ruth (end of chapter 3) to wait for the matter will be settled today. Does Ruth wait at the house while her fate is being determined in a court of law? She may have, or she may have slipped into the crowd. Bethlehem was a little town. Word would have spread that Boaz and the other man were meeting and the city officials were gathering as well. If so, if Ruth or Naomi or both were there, I have no doubt that their hearts just about stopped when the other man said, “I will redeem it.”

No! We're like the grandson in the movie Princess Bride when he finds out that Princess Buttercup gets “married” to Prince Humperdink. The little guy is distraught. She is supposed to marry Westley. That's how the story is supposed to go. Ruth is supposed to marry Boaz, not this schmoe! But now, it's the other guys turn to be in a dilemma.

B. For the Redeemer

Boaz realizes that the other man would be very interested in the land, and yet, the man may not be interested in Ruth. So, up until this point he has made no mention of Ruth. You see, while it was legal, the idea of buying more land along with a wife, with whom you would be expected to father a child (and a male child at that), and then split the inheritance with, may not go over real well at home. If the man already has a wife and already has two or three sons with whom he will have to divide the inheritance up with, the idea of getting another wife and another son or two or three, just may be a responsibility and burden that he is not willing to take on. Then Boaz, in a “oh yea, did I forget to mention?” sort of way tells the other guy that Ruth is part of the deal (v.5). This means that the land would not truly be his, but would belong to the son or sons that Ruth would mother. And if he marries Ruth, then he would be taking on the responsibility of taking care of Naomi (and she chose Boaz). So, obviously, we cannot read all there is in between the lines. If the man already had a wife (which it appears he does) and at least one son (which it appears he does) he may have already had a mother and perhaps a mother-in-law living with him and they may not have been too keen on a woman from Moab moving in. So, while the land was attractive, adding Ruth and Naomi to the deal just made that a deal breaker.

Then the man says the words we've all been waiting for, “I cannot redeem it for myself.” And he tells us why. It would mess up his inheritance for his own family. And by the way, since there was a redeemer (Boaz) who was willing to redeem the land and take care of Ruth and Naomi, this was an honorable decision on the part of this man. Ruth and Naomi would be well taken care of. The dilemma has been solved. It is time to seal the deal.

II. The deal (7-10)

The matter is now legally settled. The unnamed redeemer takes off his sandal and gives it to Boaz. One sandal is hardly practical, right? That is the point. It was a proof of purchase that went along with the public transaction that this man was giving up his right to redeem this land and was transferring the right to Boaz. At this point, Boaz receives the sandal and then announces to

the court and to the crowd that had gathered, what has just taken place. You are witnesses. I have just been granted the rights to redeem the land of Elimelech and with it the right to marry Ruth and the responsibility to raise up an heir so that the name of Elimelech and his line would not be lost to history. Which is rather ironic, isn't it? Boaz is such an honorable man. He is committed to doing what is right even if that means to raise up an heir who will perpetuate the name of Ruth's now deceased husband rather than his own. But, here we are over 3,000 years later and we talk about Ruth and Boaz and not Elimelech or Mahlon. In fact, it isn't until verse 9 that we find out that Ruth had been married to Mahlon. We knew she and Oprah were married to the brothers but now we know who was married to whom.

Boaz has the sandal. Should anyone in the future, question the legality of his owning this land, he only has to provide the sandal. But, he can also count on a ton of witnesses to attest to the legality of this transaction.

III. **The desire** (11-12)

And the fans went crazy! The crowd went wild! That is the tone of verses 11 and 12. I think Boaz probably lifted the sandal into the air! The town saw what we've seen. This is good. This is the way it should be. Israel and Bethlehem need a good story like this. They need a good couple like this. People like this should have children and they should have a busload of them. So, the people praise them and bless Boaz and express their desire that the Lord provides children for them like he did for Joseph and like he did for Judah (their ancestors). The language of their desire is powerful. Please do not miss this. They, the people of Bethlehem are blessing Ruth, the woman from Moab and asking God to help her conceive for the good of Israel. Here is an outsider being welcomed, viewed and prayed for as one of their own. They are asking God to elevate her to the status of some of the great mothers in the history of Israel!

But there is another angle not to be missed. Genesis 38 tells the sordid story, but the point is this. If God would overrule the mess of Tamar and Judah in order to perpetuate the line of his people, then surely he would bless the godly union of Boaz and Ruth. We don't have to wait long. To our eternal delight the story finishes out with 10 very profound verses.

IV. **The delight** (13-22)

Boaz and Ruth marry and Ruth conceives and bears a son. A son is born in Bethlehem. But look at these verses. The entire community was involved in this. Wow! Talk about people knowing your business, this was clearly one of the most anticipated and celebrated conceptions, pregnancies and births in the history of Israel, as it should have been. But, the emphasis is all on Naomi, and we have to smile. Wow!

A. For Naomi

The story begins with Naomi coming back to Bethlehem with empty arms, a bitter and broken heart and with biting words to the other women not even to call her by her name Naomi. She is not blessed, she is cursed. The LORD is against her. But now, oh my! Now! Her arms are full

and her heart is mended. She has a son (grandson). Ruth has given her a grandson, and she gets to be his nurse. Naomi believed again and her story delights us and it delighted Bethlehem.

B. For Bethlehem

v.14, the women of the city praise God because of Naomi. She is now seen as a means of blessing, not as a means of curse. They are genuinely excited for her and rejoice with her. They see the hand of God in this. And when you consider the fact that Ruth was married to Mahlon for ten years and had no children, you can understand the concern of the women and why they would pray to God for her to become pregnant. All of this is a community celebration. God has visited his people. They not only have food, they have children. The fields are producing again and the Lord has opened the womb that had been closed. These women were so excited that the women of the town name the boy!

C. For the Nation

But this wasn't a joy just for Bethlehem. This baby Obed, would have a son named Jesse and Jesse would have a son named David. If David had such a God-ordained history, then surely he must be a leader that the people should follow. And they should but for more reasons than they would know. From David, would come a savior and this would be a savior who would not only save his people from their sins, but whose death would pay for and accomplish the redemption of every person from every tribe, language and nation around the world, who would believe on him.

D. For the World

But, in telling us the history of where the ultimate Redeemer would come from, the book of Ruth gives us a hint as to what kind of redemption the Redeemer would accomplish. And in fact, the end of Ruth leaves us with a little "ah" moment that is just as fascinating as it is sweet.

When you read the final genealogy you are told that Boaz had a father (could be grandfather) named Salmon. That means that Boaz's mom was Rahab. Rahab was the prostitute from Jericho whose life was spared because she hid the spies. Rahab was not only permitted to live, she became part of the royal line from which the incredible king David would come and from which the eternal King Jesus would come as well. No wonder Boaz had such empathy for Ruth! His own mom had been an outsider who was now in Israel. But, this is more than a personal story of how someone from the outside is made to feel like an insider. Rahab and Ruth become insiders. They become card-carrying members of God's people and their names are listed in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1. Now do you understand redemption?

When you repent of your sins and you trust in Christ, you are bought with a price and the price is paid in full by the life and death of Jesus. You need to believe that. Because of Christ, you and I who were outsiders have been brought into the family, and given a seat at the table and an inheritance that can never be taken away. While you may be tempted to believe that the promises of God work better for others than for you, you need to take God at his Word. You belong! You are in the family – forever! Your claim to insider status is not based on your family or ethnic origin – ask Ruth, or threatened by your past life – ask Rahab, but based upon God's sovereign

and gracious choice to adopt you into his family. Believe it! And secondly, recognize that this is true, fully true about every single person who comes to faith in Christ. The person who comes to faith in Christ today, is just as much as an insider in the people of God as is the person who has been walking with Jesus for 60 years. You are here by grace. They are here by grace. You are kept by grace. They are kept by grace. Ruth, had no standing, until Boaz paid for her to be his bride and she ended up in the royal life. When God says you are redeemed. You are bought and paid for by my Son. You are mine forever and you belong to me. Who are you to say that it isn't true? And, who are you to say that it isn't true for someone else? Christ paid for us to be his bride and when your husband is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, then, that means something. That means something really big, not to give you big head, but to give you a really big heart.

What do you think Boaz did with that sandal? If he hung it on the wall, it would be a pretty neat story to tell Obed, and years later, tell Jesse. But, it would also be a kindness to Ruth. Ruth, you belong to a man who loves you and redeemed you. Once you were a stranger, an outcast, a vulnerable person with no standing. Now, you belong to royalty! Beloved, we don't have a sandal. We have something better. We have a cross. Don't forget that you have been redeemed. Live free! Enjoy grace!