

2020: The Global Year of the Bible
The Fourth Sunday of Lent: Judges & Ruth
March 22, 2020

A Lamp and a Light, Part 12
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Let us pray: Almighty God, Father, Son, & Holy Spirit, you have called us to be a distinct people, a people set aside to bear your peace, your hope, and your love by bearing your message of salvation to a waiting world. Fill us anew with your Holy Spirit as we share in your Word today, as we share in your Sacrament, as we share in your Presence – for you are everywhere! Where can we go from your Spirit? Nowhere! Nowhere! Guide us, lest we stumble in fear or in anxiety in these days. Prevent us from listening more closely to our own ways and our own desires than your ways and your desires for us. May all that we do be done for the reconciling of the world, the healing of the nations, the upbuilding of your church, the salvation of souls, all for the greater glory of Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen.

I hope you are all still reading your Bibles. Many of us who are laid off or who are teleworking certainly have more time to do so right now minus all our travel hours. In this past week we have been through 12 chapters of the book of Judges and through the whole 4-chapter book of Ruth. I really like the chronological structure of this Bible as it helps us think about the story of Naomi, Ruth, & Boaz in the context of the unrest going on for the Israelites. So halfway through the book of Judges – here’s the story of Ruth! We go from people fighting each other for supremacy over portions of land to this beautiful story of loyalty and redemption in a family’s history. But not just any family! This story of Ruth is the story of the earthly lineage of our Savior, Jesus Christ. It’s going to be quite a while before we get to the New Testament in this 2020 Global Year of the Bible – October 18^a in fact! But for right now, if you turn to the first page of the New Testament, to Matthew 1 we read the genealogy from Abraham to Jesus. I just love this because as we journey through the Old Testament and see these names, it reminds us that this is OUR faith history. This is OUR story as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are part of this lineage now as brothers and sisters of Christ. Listen to your family history, church:

This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham:

¹Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

²Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (whose mother was Tamar).

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Ram.

⁴Ram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

⁵Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab).

Boaz was the father of Obed (whose mother was Ruth).

Obed was the father of Jesse.

⁶Jesse was the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon (whose mother was Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah).

⁷Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.

Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.... go read them all up to the Babylonia exile and after, and finally...

¹⁶Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary.

Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷All those listed above include fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile, and fourteen from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah.

Do you think that's a coincidence – 14, 14, and 14 generations? God's timing, God's plan, God's purposes, God's ways are perfect, friends. Perfect. This time in our houses, this time having to hunker down and use what we already have, this time to read more, pray more, listen more, talk more intentionally to our family members in person, over the phone, over facetime, zoom, whatever you are able to use – this time is not outside of God's knowledge or reach. God knows. God KNEW. Let's settle into what we can learn here, to how we can grow in our faith, turn off the news some, and learn how we can become more like Jesus in this time of trial and separation that will help us make a greater impact for Him now and once this pandemic has passed. Instead of trying to fill in all the 'extra' time right now, settle down. Settle in. Listen. Learn. Grow as a follower of Jesus.

So, as I was reading our texts for this week the thing that really jumped out at me, and maybe for you too, were the names of several individuals I don't remember paying attention to before. For instance, in Judges 3:9-11 we read, *"But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, the LORD raised up a rescuer to save them. His name was Othniel, the son of Caleb's younger brother, Kenaz. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he became Israel's judge. He went to war...and the LORD gave him victory. So there was peace in the land for 40 years. Then Othniel Son of Kenaz died."* Right after that we read about Ehud – the left handed guy Laurie mentioned in her facetime live devotion time on Wednesday. *"But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, the LORD again raised up a rescuer to save them. His name was Ehud."* The time of Ehud resulted in peace in the land for 80 years.

These two men, not names that easily come to mind when you think about Bible heroes, Othniel and Ehud's leadership resulted in a total of 120 years of peace in the land. People who were born early in that first 40 years of Othniel would never have known anything but peace in their entire lifetime (after Noah & the flood, people didn't live beyond approximately 120 years like they did before the flood). These two men Othniel and Ehud were significant leaders, in fact, they were called RESCUERS, and yet we have hardly heard their names.

What does it mean to be a rescuer? It means to save someone from something difficult or dangerous. As I thought over the years of my life I was trying to think of a time I needed to be rescued. Gratefully I couldn't think of any life-threatening circumstances. But I did think about several times, when we lived in the house we built on Walker Road in the middle of a field, that mice would send me to the top of the counter with a portable phone begging John to come home from work and get the mouse. I know that is ridiculous, but I'm telling you I really, really don't like mice. I don't like snakes either, and quite frankly if there would have been a snake slithering through my kitchen I would have probably passed out before I could have grabbed a phone to call for a rescuer. So from the trivial and ridiculous – back to Israel...

The nation of Israel needed to be rescued – AGAIN. They had turned away from God – AGAIN. Remember they are in the land God gave to them after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. God has shown (proven) his faithfulness to them in miraculous ways. But in Judges 2:10-13 we read, *"After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the LORD or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel. The Israelites did evil in the LORD's sight and served the images of Baal. They abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They went after other gods, worshiping the gods of the people around them. And they angered the LORD. They abandoned the LORD to serve Baal and the images of Ashtoreth."* (Baal and Ashtoreth were man-made pagan gods.)

The Israelites needed to be rescued from their own sin. They needed to be rescued from their attitude of nonchalance towards the One True God. They needed to be rescued from idolatry and everything that comes along with it. Idolatry is worshipping anything other than God. Let's think about this. In this pandemic, what is rising up inside of you? What is making you miserable, or terribly afraid? The loss of freedom, sports, money, regular medical care? Whatever it may be, pay attention. It may be an indication of something you have raised up as an idol in your life.

We are living in a unique time in history, and God is using this time to reveal what's in us. In one of the video series I use for premarital counseling, the teacher says this about a time of stress in the relationship. Your spouse is not making you the way you are, God is using your spouse to reveal the way you are. We are so quick to blame people or circumstances like pandemics, being laid off, loss of income, loss of the ability to go wherever we want to go whenever we want to go there – we are so quick to blame others for the way we are acting. Parents if your fuse is shorter than usual and things are coming out of your mouth that aren't normal for you right now, remember this: It's not your kids' fault what is coming out of you. Kids, it's not your parents' fault what's coming out of you right now. The pressure this situation is putting on us is pushing what's inside of us to the outside. This circumstance is revealing what's already inside you.

If you are one of those people who has to have more toilet paper than anyone else on your street, or who bought 4 bottles of children's ibuprofen so you won't run out, or your freezer is so stocked with meat you can't get another freeze pop in there, let me say as clearly as I can, this pandemic is bringing out the greedy, hoarding, entitled side of us that's already in there. As I said to my dear husband, there are people all over the world who have nothing. Nothing! They are drinking water right now full of bacteria, they are waiting for a glob of mush that will be their only meal for two days. They have no toilet paper, they have no walls to define their home. They have grass, or dirt, or a tent, or nothing.

Something needs to change? You bet. Let's pay attention to what's coming out of us in this time, and not blame anyone for it, but be alert to it – and submit ourselves once again to Jesus, strong and kind. Like the Israelites, we need to be rescued. We need peace. And who would have ever guessed that something called COVID19 would be a way that God could help us become more like Jesus?

Now, let's turn to the story of Ruth. It's the story of a rescuer, isn't it? Boaz becomes the rescuer of Ruth and her mother in law, Naomi. But it begins with incredible loss – the loss of Naomi's husband and two sons, one of whom is the husband to Ruth, the other the husband of Orpah. After the men died, Naomi heard that the LORD had blessed the people in Judah by giving them good crops, so she decides to travel back to her homeland after having left it years ago because of a famine. Both Ruth and Orpah decide to go with their mother in law, but only Ruth sticks it out. Ruth says these words to her mother in law, *"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God."*

Let's be clear: Life without a male in the family was very difficult for a woman at that time. Typically, there was scorn and shame, and she was doomed to poverty since it was only males who could make any money or own property. But what were Naomi and Ruth supposed to do in a land of famine? They had to try to make it on their own.

So when Naomi and Ruth get to Judah – and more specifically to Bethlehem, (that's not a coincidence, is it?) God puts them geographically near a forgotten relative of Naomi's deceased husband whose name was Boaz. Ruth ended up gathering grain in Boaz's field all day coming home with a whole lot more than Naomi thought she would come home with. Ruth told her about the kindness of Boaz, and Naomi said this, *"May the LORD bless him! He is showing his kindness to us as well as to your dead husband. That man is one of our closest relatives, one of our family redeemers."* The phrase 'family redeemer' is translated as kinsman redeemer in many other biblical translations. Let's learn a little about this uncommon phrase.

A kinsman-redeemer in the time of the Bible is someone, usually the nearest relative, who is charged with the duty of restoring or recovering the rights of another and avenging any wrongs in exchange for something. By law, the kinsman-redeemer had two main responsibilities: (1) to redeem family property that had changed ownership, and (2) to marry a childless widow and raise children in her dead husband's name. Ruth was not related to Boaz in any way, but Naomi was. Let me just say that one thing led to another and Boaz went to the city gates to do legal business on behalf of Naomi and Ruth.

In Ruth 4:9, 10 we read this, *“Today, you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Killion, and Mahlon (Naomi’s husband and sons). I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today, you are witnesses!”*

Boaz, the kinsman, redeemed his relative’s wife, Naomi, and restored her dead husband’s property and good name in exchange for Ruth’s hand in marriage. Neither woman now will be alone, and neither has to pick the fields to survive.

In God’s providence Ruth ended up giving birth to a son named Obed, who eventually became the grandfather of King David. And, as we know, David’s lineage led the way for Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, the city of David. From Luke 2, *“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.”*

Hmmm. In the year 2020, a census year, a year in which many of you have made the commitment to read through the Bible, we land at the start of a pandemic in Judges and in Ruth where a rescuer is needed and supplied – both for a whole nation and for an individual family. Othneil and Ehud were national rescuers, Boaz a kinsman redeemer rescuer.

Does anyone want to preach the rest of this message? Anyone know where I’m going? I hope you all do. We as a nation need a rescuer! We as individuals, we as families, we need a rescuer! We need a redeemer!!! We need someone to cash in a coupon for us! We need someone to buy us out of the mess we’re in! We need someone to take over the ship we’re on and turn this baby around. We need a Redeemer! And we HAVE A REDEEMER in Jesus Christ! He’s not just a Redeemer of all the nations, he’s a kinsman redeemer, he’s a family redeemer for us as we read in Hebrews 2:11, *“Both the One who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.”*

If you look all over Scripture, you will find the word ‘redeem’ or the word ‘redeemer.’ Of particular note is Psalm 103 – the Psalm we use when we share together in our Service for the New Year to remember what has passed and look forward to what is to come. Allow me to read it for us:

¹Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

²Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—

³who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,

⁴who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,

⁵who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

⁶The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.

⁷He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:

⁸The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

⁹He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;

¹⁰he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Jesus has redeemed our lives from the pit. The pit of sin, the pit of darkness, the pit of despair, the pit of greed, the pit of complaining, the pit of anger, the pit of apathy, the pit of addiction, the pit of jealousy, the pit of fear, the pit of deception, the pit of pride, the pit of hell – On the cross of Calvary, Jesus took our sin and our shame upon himself. He took everything in every pit upon himself as the perfect sacrificial lamb, by God’s gracious design, the ONLY sinless human ever, he said, “Go ahead. Pile it on. Pile it on. That’s it. Keeping piling. Don’t forget that shame over there. Don’t forget that bitterness over there. That’s it. Pile it on. All of it. All. Of. It. Let ME rescue you. I am the bridge from death to life. I am the bridge from darkness to light. I am the bridge from shame to valued regard. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I am your Kinsman Redeemer. Come to me and I will save your soul from empty pursuits. Come to me and I will give you rest in God’s holy house for the rest of your life.”

Do you want me to go there? You want me to go all the way there? Ok. Here I go. Once we belong to God through the redemptive work of the Redeemer, we are in a God authorized, Jesus prepared, Holy Spirit guarded quarantine. Because the truth is, we are ALWAYS in the middle of a pandemic - A pandemic of sin and shame and sorrow all the time. Everywhere. Just look around when you can get back ‘out there.’ We are always in a pandemic. But once we give our lives to Jesus and invite him to come to us and save our souls, we are in a God-authorized, Jesus prepared, Holy Spirit guarded quarantine from being slaves to our sin forever and ever. In other words, that’s where we are and we aren’t going anywhere. Anything we need, God supplies. Anything we need, God supplies. Anything we need, God supplies. Once we belong to him, no one can snatch us out of his hand, John 10:28. We are safely tucked away in quarantine from the evil that seeks to steal our salvation, kill our hope, and destroy our peace. NOPE. Not happening! We are safe in Christ, with Christ, and for Christ. **What we are acting out physically right now in our homes is our spiritual reality in Christ.** This is no time to be in a panic. The time to be in a panic is if we were facing a future without Jesus in it. And if you’ve given your life to Jesus, no panic necessary. We are safe in him. We are safe in Him no matter what is happening around us. Our souls are safe because of Jesus. Our citizenship is already secure in Heaven.

Pass on his peace. Pass on his truth. Pass on his love. Pass on his compassion. Let’s see who else God might rescue and redeem in these days of uncertainty using you and me. Oh, how I pray that this is not like what happened after 9/11. Churches were packed for about 4 weeks and then went right back to the ‘regular’ attenders. Oh, how I pray that during this time more and more people will recognize their need for a rescuer, for a Redeemer. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, and through our example and testimony, may they come to know that Jesus is that Rescuer. Jesus is that Redeemer. And may they run to him, and run to become part of his beautiful Body, the Church for the rest of their lives. Amen? Amen!