

Ruth 4:1-6, 13-18  
Matthew 1:6b-16

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
November 19, 2023

## **Ancestors of Kings**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

Today we conclude our four-part series of sermons based on each of the four chapters in the Book of Ruth. Our sermon completes the story of how Boaz, the local landowner, came to marry Ruth, the widow from Moab. And it concludes with a genealogy of their lineage leading to David, who would become the most famous king of Israel. David's name is the final word in the Book of Ruth. Listen to these words from Ruth 4:1-6 and 13-18 . . .

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

The Gospel of Matthew links the Old and New Testaments. Our Gospel Lesson from the first chapter of Matthew carries the genealogy of Ruth and Boaz forward, all the way to the birth of Jesus, who is called the Messiah. Faithful Jews had been waiting many years for the Messiah. Matthew declares that he has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to verses 6b-16 . . .

### *Sermon*

The story of Ruth is about two women from different countries who find themselves in dire circumstances, but remain loyal to each other and find happiness through the love and generosity of a wealthy landowner.

Set in the time of the judges, there was a famine in the land, even in Bethlehem—the “House of Bread.” But in Moab, east of the Dead Sea, there was plenty of food. So Elimelech with his wife Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Chilion move to Moab. There the boys grow up

and marry young Moabite women. However, Elimelech dies in Moab, and later the sons also die there, leaving Naomi alone, far away from home, with only her two daughters-in-law—Ruth and Orpah.

By now travelers were saying that there was food again in the country around Bethlehem. So Naomi decides to go back home. She and the two young women start out on the journey to Bethlehem in Israel. Naomi urges the young widows to go back to their home in Moab. Finally, Orpah assents. But Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi:

‘Entreat me not to leave you;  
for where you go, I will go;  
and where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—  
and there will I be buried. (1:16)

So Naomi gives in and the two of them travel on together and complete the 40 to 60 mile journey to Bethlehem in some 7 to 10 days. At first Naomi’s old friends can hardly recognize her. “Can this be Naomi, the Happy One?” they ask. “Call me Mara, the Sad One,” despondent Naomi tells them.

There was no food or money. But there was a way that even Ruth the foreigner might get something for them to eat. It was early summer and all the farmers and their workers were out in the fields harvesting the barley crop. There was an established law in the land that would allow for gleaning a portion of a field to provide food for the poor and the foreigner.

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband Elimelech. This older man named Boaz was a man of standing in the community. So the girl from Moab went to work with the girls of Bethlehem, and she happened to go to the field of Boaz to glean after the reapers. Boaz is not only kind to his workers, he is also kind to the foreigner Ruth.

Naomi was thinking as a matchmaker. If plans worked out, Ruth would have a home of her own and a husband. But it must be done according to the custom of the people.

Now since Boaz was a cousin, he could buy the parcel of land that belonged to Naomi and Elimelech. With that he would acquire the right to marry Ruth, so that a family might stay with its land. Naomi plotted carefully.

Her plans did bring Ruth and Boaz together. Then Ruth informed Boaz of the right to buy the land. But there was one problem—another man was even closer kin than Boaz. So first thing, Boaz went to the gate in the wall around Bethlehem; this was the place where all the townspeople came and went. Boaz asked ten of the wise old men of the town to stop and be his witnesses. Soon the man Boaz needed to see would come, and in fact he did. When the man learned that the redemption of the land that belonged to Elimelech's and Naomi's household, meant also acquiring Ruth, he declined the option, lest it impair his own estate. So Boaz said to the elders and all the people:

You are all witnesses this day that I am buying all that belonged to Elimelech and to Chilion and to Mahlon, and with it I am buying the right to marry Ruth.

We are witnesses, they said. And may the Lord bless your home. May the Lord make this woman who is coming into your house, to be like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel.

So it was that Ruth came to marry Boaz. And the Lord gave Ruth conception and she bore a son. And the sad and lonely days were forgotten, and 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.’

And Naomi held her grandson close in her arms.

And so the story of Ruth which began in trial and tragedy, ends with joy. Not only is the welfare of Naomi and Ruth secure, but also there is a future for a family that seemed doomed.

Interestingly, the child is given his name by the women of the neighborhood:

They named him Obed; He became the father of Jesse, the father of David. (4:17b)

And then the book closes in 4:18-22 with a longer genealogy of David that begins with Perez and ends with David.

According to Katherine Sakenfield, this closing genealogy

...serves as the literary connecting link to the following book of I Samuel, where the story of David's rise to kingship is told. For Christian readers, of course, the link extends still further: with its specific mention of Ruth...the Gospel of Matthew extends this concluding genealogy through many more generations to Jesus Christ, true heir to the house of David, who sends his disciples forth to bring to all nations the good news of their inclusion in God's steadfast love.

Thus it was that these ordinary people in the Book of Ruth, being loyal and faithful and going beyond what the law requires to act with compassion for others—they become the ancestors of kings. And to make the story even more striking—Ruth is a Moabitess, a foreign woman of unusual courage and loyalty.

But as the story of Ruth concludes, it points us beyond these ordinary people to the providential role of God in the story. Recall that the scripture says:

*The Lord* gave Ruth conception and she bore a son.

Thus does the love and faithfulness of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz become the vehicle by which God does wonderful things—not just for these individuals, but for all Israel—indeed, for all humankind. Though God seems offstage, in the background in the Book of Ruth, his hand was at work in the lives of ordinary people.

Ben Lacy Rose was an army chaplain, a pastor, and a professor at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. He served as Moderator of our General Assembly from 1971 – 1972. I recall his speaking at the Central Presbyterian in Jackson, Mississippi—the church in which I grew up. Dr. Rose believed that God works over, under, around, and through all things, to bring about his good and perfect will.

It is fitting that we conclude this sermon by pointing out the significance of the *sovereignty of God* or *divine providence* to John Calvin, the theological father of the Presbyterian Church. The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1509 was celebrated fourteen years ago. Note his words in the first book of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

By his Power God cherishes and guards the World which  
he made and by his Providence rules its individual Parts.

For our second hymn we will sing “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art,” a hymn that first appeared in the French Psalter, published in Strasburg in 1545 under the leadership of John Calvin. The hymn has been traditionally ascribed to him.

What we are left with from the Book of Ruth is that ordinary people, like you and me—being courageous and loyal and loving in our daily lives—ordinary people can be instruments of God in doing wonderful things in the fulfillment of his will.

For example, “The Way We Get By,” is a documentary film about a group of senior citizens in Maine who would greet soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen going to and from Iraq and Afghanistan—all of whom would pass through Maine’s Bangor International airport. Ordinary older people showing gratitude for those who serve our country—some at great risk to themselves.

I love that line in John Milton’s poem “On His Blindness”:

They also serve who only stand and wait.

The great poet's eyesight had begun to fail in 1644 and by 1652 he was totally blind. In the poem Milton expresses his frustration at not being able to serve God as well as he desires. But "Patience" reminds him that:

They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton, though blind, went on to write the epic poem, "Paradise Lost."

Even the elderly and blind can be servants of our almighty and loving God. Even those in hospitals and nursing homes. Even lonely widows like Naomi. Even you and me.

And God's providence brings, in Calvin's own words:

Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things,  
patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom  
from worry about the future.... (Institutes 1.17.7)

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21)