

# High River Christian Reformed Church

Sunday, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## Scripture Reading: Ruth 1: 1 – 22 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

<sup>6</sup> Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>10</sup> And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” <sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, <sup>13</sup> would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” <sup>14</sup> Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup> And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” <sup>16</sup> But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following 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. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” <sup>18</sup> And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

<sup>19</sup> So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” <sup>20</sup> She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup> I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

<sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

## Providence and Repentance

### The Gospel According to Ruth (Part 2):

Ruth 1: 3 – 22

You may never have stopped to think about it (even those of you who routinely read them), but most of the world's best romances can be reduced to stories about love finding a way in the most unlikely places,

Shakespeare's **Romeo and Juliet**, tells the story of two young people whose families would have them despise one another but whose hearts are drawn together like a compass toward magnetic north.

Or there's the tale of Gabriel Oak, the simple shepherd in Thomas Hardy's **Far from the Madding Crowd**, who falls for a young woman whose desire is to marry someone far more interesting than he.

Of course, in Austen's **Pride and Prejudice**, that tale is nearly reversed as young Mr. Darcy struggles against an inbred pride that would keep him from the one his heart desires.

(Not that I've read any of these great romances...)

In truth, I have, and the theme recurs again and again. I think the reason for this is that in one way and another, all of the great romances have their roots in the greatest romance of all—the story that God has been telling to his people from the beginning—the story of his love for the people he created and called, and of how he goes out of the way to demonstrate that love.

The book of the prophet Ezekiel gives us this summary in chapter 16 (The PG version goes like this):

<sup>3</sup> ... "Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. <sup>4</sup> And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. <sup>5</sup> No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. <sup>6</sup> "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' <sup>7</sup> I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your [body was] formed, and your hair had grown... <sup>8</sup> "When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered [you]... I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine. Ezekiel 16:3–8 (ESV)

This is the story told to us on the pages of Scripture. It's the story of Adam and Eve, Jacob and Rachel, David and Bathsheba, Solomon and the Shulamite. It's the divine romance between God and his people—Christ and the church. It's the reason why at one time or another, young men want to be heroes, and young women, princesses. As John Eldrege has written,

In all of our hearts lies a longing for a Sacred Romance. It will not go away in spite of our efforts over the years to anesthetize or ignore its song, or attach it to a single person or endeavor. It is a Romance couched in mystery and set deeply within us...

And this is The Book of Ruth, a story of romance—the story of romance—blossoming in the midst of bitterness and bigotry. The story of love and acceptance springing up out of parched ground. It's the romance of grace and redemption overcoming all obstacles and, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, giving

<sup>3</sup> ...beauty for ashes...the oil of joy for mourning...the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness... Isaiah 61:3 (NKJV)

So it's a familiar story, at least to those who have read through the scriptures of the Old Covenant or attended Sunday School for any length of time, but as we saw last Sunday, a story that we often fail to keep in context, missing both the passion and the point. But for this morning, all we really need to see is that this book is really two parallel stories. There is, of course, the story of Ruth, "the Moabitess" as she is designated in chapter one; the foreigner, the enemy as she would have been perceived by the people of Bethlehem at the time. Remember the setting. The story takes place during or near the time when the Israelites had done evil in the eyes of the Lord, and Eglon, king of Moab,

<sup>13</sup> ...gathered to himself the people of Ammon and Amalek, went and defeated Israel, and took possession of the City of Palms. Judges 3:13 (NKJV)

At that time, Israel had been oppressed by the Moabites for 18 years. So when the author highlights the fact that Ruth was "a Moabitess," he's not just including an irrelevant detail. Israel felt about Moab the way that many Americans today feel about Iraq and El-quaida, and Ruth's Moabite ethnicity would not have scored any points for her or her mother-in-law.

But the book of Ruth might also have been called The Book of Naomi, because it is her story as much as the story of her daughter-in-law. It is the "prodigal son" story of the Old Covenant—the story of a woman who finds herself by sin and circumstance taken to a place where she is cut off from the blessing of living in covenant with God and his people. There had been food in Moab—it had seemed like the thing to do at the time—but there had been disaster there too. Elimelech, whose name means "the Lord is King" had left behind Bethlehem, "the house of bread", and taken his wife and sons to a pagan land where the people worshipped false gods, for the sake of food and prosperity only to find death in that "far country" and Naomi is taken along for the ride.

But, here the story really begins, because as with the prodigal son in Jesus' story, Naomi will come to recognize that ultimately, even though it may appear otherwise, the place of blessing is the place where God dwells in the midst of his people, so,

<sup>6</sup> ...she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. Ruth 1:6–7 (ESV)

And please understand, this is the very definition of true repentance. Repentance is recognizing that our sin and even our circumstance have drawn us away from the place of God's blessing, and then, by the grace and Spirit of God, determining in our hearts that we want to return, and then returning.

The prodigal son does not wake up one morning in the far country after breaking the fast on food that was barely fit for pigs, and say to himself, "I sure feel bad about all this. I think I'll

write a letter home to dad and tell him how bad I feel.” He wakes up one day and says to himself,

<sup>17</sup> ... “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father... Luke 15:17–18 (ESV)

And in the very next verse Jesus says,

<sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father... Luke 15: 20 (ESV)

Naomi did too, probably not so much to her father in Israel—he was likely dead long since—but to her Father in heaven, the living God who had promised that if his people would love him and keep his covenant, then he would bless them and be a loving father, the God who sees and the God who provides. Even so, like the prodigal son, Naomi does not see the error of having run to the far country, feel sorry about it, share her feelings with God and then continue to live there, as if repentance were simply saying to the Living God, “I’m doing this thing—I’m living in rebellion against you, and I’m going to keep on doing it, but I promise to feel really bad about it, and I sure am sorry that it bothers you God.” That’s not repentance—it’s not even confession. It’s nothing.

In my childhood home there was a cookie jar. Lynda and I have it somewhere to this day (although we don’t use it because now it’s a collectible so you wouldn’t want to keep cookies in there. But when I was a kid, we did; and I hated it, because you could lift the lid without making a sound, but when you went to put it back on, it always made noise and then mom would know that you were taking a cookie, which wasn’t a problem unless you had been told not to. Now I’m sure that this will come as a surprise to many of you, but there was a time or two when I had been told not to have a cookie, when I thought to have one anyway. And I remember being caught and not feeling particularly bad about the cookie crumbs on my chin, but feeling rather bad about being caught. So after being scolded or whatever (it was the ‘60s), I said I was sorry and then I determined that at the next opportunity, I was actually going to practice putting that lid back on until I was able to do it in silence so that I would never be caught again. And I did it too. And I got pretty good at it. The funny part is, they couldn’t pay me to practice the piano...

But you see the difference. “I’m sorry I got caught. I know that it pains you to punish me so next time I’ll try harder to not get caught.” That’s not repentance. Repentance is, “I’m sorry that I did wrong. I’m sorry that I disobeyed. I’m so sorry, in fact that it’s my intent to never do this again.”

So Naomi repented; not merely in thought or in word, but in deed and in truth...

<sup>6</sup> ...she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab...

And consider her reason:

for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. Ruth 1:6 (ESV)

In other words she hears about the provision of God for his people—that is, the providence of God—and it leads her to repentance. As Paul said in Romans chapter 2,

<sup>4</sup> ...God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance... Romans 2:4 (ESV)

And Ruth? Her story is all the more remarkable because unlike Naomi who is returning to the home and the faith of her childhood, Ruth is called by the grace of God to go home to a place she's never been before (if I can be permitted to plagiarize a line from John Denver). Knowing little if anything of the God of Israel, this young Moabite, driven by a fierce love for one of his people says,

<sup>16</sup> ... "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following 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. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried..." Ruth 1:16–17 (ESV)

And this—this genuine repentance—this is the beginning of the sacred romance. God calls—he loves his people and he longs for us to live in the place where he can bless us. For our part, in the faraway places to which we sometimes run, we must not only hear that call but having heard it, we must determine to return, and then return.

I knew a man once, who told me that he liked to hear the Ten Commandments every Sunday because he thought that we all needed that "weekly dose of guilt." But it's not enough to simply come to church, feel a little guilty, and then go on our way doing the same old things.

If we are yet "without hope and without God in the world," (if we do not yet believe) as Paul said in the book of Ephesians, then we must hear the call of Jesus, "Come and follow" and we must turn and we must follow. This is saving faith. Faith that follows.

And if we are already disciples, but we have wandered away (remember, Naomi was an Israelite—a daughter of the covenant), then we need, once again, to hear the call of Jesus, as he said to his disciples centuries ago,

<sup>24</sup> ... "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24 (ESV)

and we must turn and we must follow.

Naomi did. She heard that God had again visited his people, and even in her bitterness, she packed her bags and turned her feet toward home, and finding her way there even as the barley harvest—the season of blessing—was about to begin. And God was waiting for Naomi in Bethlehem, "the house of bread", waiting to bless in ways that she, in her emptiness and bitterness, could never imagine

Even today, the father waits at the end of the driveway—but we must come. We must return. We must seek for him with all our heart, remembering his promise to his people,

<sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. Jeremiah 29:13 (ESV)

The romance of redemption begins when we turn away from the emptiness of sin and turn, to seek the loving embrace of the living God. Then, step by step as he draws us near, we find in him love, joy, peace—blessing—all that our hearts have longed for—all that we were searching in the far off country. This is true repentance. This is true faith in the Living God and in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Father awaits.

Turn you heart toward home.