



November 3, 2013 Messages from the Wilderness

Scripture: Psalm 23: 4

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil: for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.

MONDAY 11.4.13 Ruth 1:1-5 Overwhelming loss

A severe famine in Israel sent Naomi and her family to live in the foreign land of Moab. In Moab, her husband and both sons died. That left Naomi and her daughters-in-law alone. That would be an overwhelming kind of loss today. But in a male-dominated Middle Eastern culture, it was even worse. Women with no male relative to give them a “family” identity also lost all legal rights and standing.

- The *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* notes, “Naomi was a widow, and after the deaths of her two sons, we may infer that she is stripped of all male protection except reliance on Yahweh ... Her plight, then, was similar to that of the orphan and sojourner (e.g., Mal. 3:5) and the poor (e.g., Isa. 10:2).” A widow in Bible times had, in our modern phrase, “hit bottom.” When was the time when you felt closest to having hit bottom? How did that time affect your trust in God?
- On a map, Moab looks close to Bethlehem. People on Holy Land tours cover that much distance in a couple of hours in an air-conditioned bus. But in Bible times, Moab was several days journey on foot for ordinary people. Moving meant cutting ties with home. Have you ever moved far from “home”? How did you deal with the losses and changes a move like that brings?

Prayer: Lord God, the details are different, but today as in ancient times, life keeps bringing changes my way. Thank you for being the one constant on whom I can always depend. Amen.

TUESDAY 11.5.13 Ruth 1:6-18 Amazing commitment

After the famine in Israel ended, Naomi decided to return home. Though her daughters-in-law set out with her, she argued that they would be better off, and more likely to find new husbands, in Moab. She convinced one of them, but Ruth insisted that she was going to stay with Naomi no matter what. (Interestingly, although we often hear her words in verses 16-17 at weddings, they were originally from a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law.)

- Ruth’s choice grew from her love and loyalty to Naomi, but also had a larger meaning. “Naomi said, ‘Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and TO HER GODS. Turn back’ ... Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my

people, and YOUR GOD WILL BE MY GOD" (verses 15, 16). Were there "Naomis" in your life—people who influenced you to make their God your God?

- Ruth did something else that most of us struggle with: she chose the unfamiliar over the familiar. Like Abraham (cf. Genesis 12:1-3), she left all that she had known behind, and stepped into an unknown future. Have you ever had to leave something familiar behind in order to follow God's leading? How did taking that step affect your relationship with God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, no distance I travel, physical, mental or emotional, is as great as the distance you traveled to be my Redeemer. So draw me to you, whatever roads you may call me to travel with you. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 11.6.13 Ruth 1:19-2:23, Deuteronomy 24:17-22

After bitterness, hopeful possibilities

Naomi's awful losses left her outwardly vulnerable, with few practical or legal resources. They also left her spiritually vulnerable. In Ruth 1:13 she said "the Lord's will has come out against me." In Bethlehem, she told those who knew her, "Don't call me Naomi ('pleasant'), but call me Mara ('bitter')" (Ruth 1:20). When Boaz, a kinsman, was kind to Ruth (as Hebrew law in Deuteronomy 24 directed), hope began to revive in both women.

- In verse 12, the pivot point of chapter 2, we find Boaz's words to Ruth: "May the Lord reward you for your deed [everything you did for your mother-in-law after your husband's death]. May you receive a rich reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you've come to seek refuge." What life experiences have helped you learn to trust God the way a baby bird trusts in the shelter of its mother's wings?
- Ruth asked Boaz, "How is it that I've found favor in your eyes, that you notice me? I'm an immigrant" (verse 10). She might not have known it, but she was an immigrant from a people Israel often despised (cf. Deuteronomy 23:3). Yet she was welcomed, cared for, and was to play a key role in Israel's history. Do you believe the way Boaz (and God) treated Ruth is relevant to the debates in our country about the proper attitude toward immigrants? Why or why not?

Prayer: Lord God, this day (and every day) I come to you to seek refuge under your wings. Free me from the inner urge to prove that I can handle life on my own without your sheltering presence with me. Amen.

THURSDAY 11.7.13 Ruth 3:1-18 Carefully planned activity

The culture and customs of early Israel sound strange and puzzling to us. But the gist of this story was that Ruth and Naomi knew they needed God to provide for their future (cf. Ruth 2:20). Yet, while trusting God, they didn't just wait passively for their luck to change, but actively pursued Boaz's favor. And as things turned out, God used Boaz's favor and love to provide for Ruth and Naomi's future.

- The Bible called God's people to wait and trust in the Lord (Proverbs 3:5-7), but also to "work out your own salvation" (Philippians 2:12-13). At times, we need to wait and trust God; at others to be proactive and accountable, doing what we can. How did Naomi and

Ruth's actions open doors for God to work on their behalf? In what parts of your life do you do you need to embrace the call to wait and trust in the Lord? What are the areas in which you can actively take initiatives through which God may work?

- Pastor Adam Hamilton often reminds us that God usually works through human instruments. In today's passage, we see how God provided through the laws and customs of Ruth's culture. To keep family lines intact when a husband died childless, the law required a kinsman to act as "redeemer," marrying the widow to have a family heir (cf. Deuteronomy 25:5-10). How has God worked through human instruments in your life? Where can you be God's hands and feet in someone's life today?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the hands and voices of your servants that daily encourage and help me. Show me the ways you want to work through me to bless someone else today. Amen.

FRIDAY 11.8.13 Ruth 4:1-12 Hope becomes reality

Again, the book of Ruth assumed readers knew the customs and laws, but we aren't likely to. For example, we don't close car deals or home sale contracts by removing a shoe (cf. verses 7-8)! According to Israel's laws, Boaz was second in line to be Ruth's "redeemer" (which also helped Naomi, because her son had been Ruth's husband). Boaz shrewdly negotiated with the relative who was first in line, and happily won the right to marry Ruth.

- The kinsman first in line was eager to buy Naomi's property when he thought he would profit from doing so. When Boaz told him that the purpose was to marry Ruth and create a new heir, he quickly backed away. But Boaz wasn't in this for financial profit—he wanted to bless Ruth and Naomi (and seems to have genuinely loved Ruth, too). Have you ever been willing to give up your own comfort or enrichment in order to bless someone else? Has anyone else ever done that for you?
- Pastor David Jackman wrote that what Boaz did was "a reflection of the covenant-love (*hesed*) of Yahweh for His people, and at the same time a very practical illustration of how the quality could be worked out in interpersonal human relationships." In what ways have you learned to understand and value God's steadfast love for you? How has that love shaped the ways you act in your human relationships?

Prayer: Lord God, far beyond anything I could deserve or earn, you have offered me your steadfast, never-changing love. I open my heart to that love, asking that it will shape all the rest of my relationships. Amen.

SATURDAY 11.9.13 Ruth 4:13-22, Matthew 1:5-6 Naomi, Ruth, David—and Jesus

Boaz and Ruth married, and had a son named Obed. Naomi's friends joyously celebrated her new grandson with her. No doubt for most of the people of Bethlehem, that seemed like "happy ending" enough. It's unlikely that any of them suspected that Obed would one day have a grandson named David, who would become Israel's greatest king. And who could have imagined what Matthew knew and recorded—that the faithfulness of Ruth from Moab had made her one of the Messiah's ancestors?

- What Naomi could see was that God had watched over her even when her life hit bottom, and through Ruth and Boaz given her a grandson to carry on the family line. What the writer of the book of Ruth could see in that story of human love and divine faithfulness was that God had provided for Israel's greatest king. Matthew, with a longer view, could trace how the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz led all the way to the birth of Jesus, Israel's long-awaited Messiah and the world's redeemer. Are there moments in your life in which, looking back, you can see that God was up to more than you could perceive at the time? How do stories like Naomi and Ruth's encourage you at the moments when you cannot see what God is up to?

Prayer: Lord God, loss comes to all of us. When I face losses in my life, I ask you to remind me that losses never mean you have left me alone. Give me the vision and patience to trust you, even in the hardest times. Amen.

Family Activity: The book of Ruth is a story of great loss and great hope. As the people in Ruth (Boaz, Naomi, Ruth) moved from loss to hope, they each displayed the quality of kindness to others. Share a few stories about when a family member has experienced great loss. Discuss ways you move from loss to hope. If your family is in the midst of loss, talk about how you can reach out to others with kindness. Can you send a note, say a prayer, offer a hug or listening ear, or share a meal? Choose one way you can share kindness and ask God to bless it, bringing hope to the hearts of both you and the ones you serve.