

Returning from Death to Life

For the Children:

We are so excited today to make a special presentation of *The Peace Table*. We have one for each of the families with children in our church. It is a unique Bible that presents the scripture in a format designed for children. Not only are the stories edited there are delightful pictures to accompany them.

I'm not sure you can see very well but let me flip through to show you a couple of examples. (*I will try to show at least four different pages.*) It also includes a simplified timeline and a good outline of the various types of literature found in the Bible.

We will give one to each family with the hope that it will be read it together – as a family. To use as a tool to tell the children the stories of our faith and give them a hunger for more, so that when they are able to read on their own, they will want to read the stories again and again, each time with new understandings of what God has been saying to God's people in the past, and continues to say in the present.

Rather than invite children forward, I will invite families with children to come forward.
I will present the Bibles to each family.

Let's pray.

Loving God, bless each of these families as they read The Peace Table. May they grow in knowledge and wisdom. May they find comfort and hope in times of struggle. May the teachings and example of Jesus guide their lives and help them choose your way of peace and love. Amen.

There are many ways to read your bibles, just as there are many ways to read any book. One way is to read just the words. Another way is to listen to the meaning as you're reading. Some of us read and ponder what we've read, some of us simply read with the purpose of getting to the end, to see how the story ends. And, of course, there are some books that are not meant to be read, but to be referred to, such as a dictionary. (Do they still print those?)

As I said, any book you might read can be read in various ways. That is even more true when it comes to the Bible, since there are so many different types of literature in the Bible. Some of it is history. Some of it is poetry. Some of it is legal language.

Today's scripture, for example, is really part of a short story. It's almost like a miniature novel. Those are read differently than a letter might be read. In fact, some people say we shouldn't read just one portion of Ruth unless we read the whole story.¹ (We won't do that in worship today. I'll simply encourage everyone to read the rest of the story on their own.)

I have invited Kloie and Hailey to read just the introduction to the story. But before we do that, let me them up here to receive their own Bibles. I encourage you to read your Bibles, not just today, but every day. Read it as if it were written for you, to you, because in many ways it has been.

I will present them their Bibles.

¹ Roop, p. 24

Receive the Word of God.
Learn its stories and study its words.
Its stories belong to us all,
and these words speak to us all.
They tell us who we are.
They tell us that we belong to one another,
for we are the people of God.

Let's pray.

Loving God, bless Kloie and Hailey as they read their Bibles. May they grow in knowledge and wisdom. May they find comfort and hope in times of struggle. May the teachings and example of Jesus guide their lives and help them choose your way of peace and love. Amen.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 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. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you,
to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
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.
May the Lord do thus to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

Ruth 1:1-7, 8-17 (NRSV)²

For the Adults:

² This is the translation of the Bibles we presented to Kloie and Hailey today. I divided the text fairly evenly, allowing them to each read half of the text.

Before I begin, I have two pictures is for the people here in the room. 😊

The second is primarily for those Zoom. These are the bierock socks I was yesterday and again today. (I suspect I'll since I like them!)



to show you. The first who are joining us on given to wear wear them again,

As I suggested earlier, we only heard the introduction to a longer story, a story that I encourage you to read (or read again if it's been a while since you've read it). It won't take very long; it is a short story, after all. It probably takes less than half an hour to read it aloud – and even less time if you read it in silence.

The story is primarily about two women, Ruth and Naomi. And while Ruth is the title of the book, a good argument can be made for naming it Naomi. Let me know what you think about that suggestion after you read it.

As I read it, I found myself drawn to and noticing two significant points where the story takes a turn, a plot twist, if you will. The first comes shortly after our reading for today; the other is near the end of the book. Those hinges are more noticeable when you read it in Hebrew or pay attention to the footnotes of most English translations. It has to do with the meaning of names.

The name Naomi means “pleasant.” Her life was pleasant until she experiences the losses we heard in our text today; so she asks people to call her Mara, a name that means “bitter” (Ruth 1:20). Later, she experiences joy again when her friends proclaim her blessed, restoring her name to Naomi (Ruth 4:14).

As I said, the source of her bitterness is clearly outlined in the text we heard this morning. She has lost everything of value in her life, including her home, her husband, her two sons, and the possibility of grandchildren. In a society where widows have very little means of supporting themselves, her future looks bleak.

As her story unfolds, however, she experiences blessings that come from unexpected sources, blessings that restore her hope. It is as if her life goes from death to life once again. It really is a foretelling of the Easter story within the context of this story tucked away in the early part of the Old Testament.

Naomi's story reminded me of an article I read just a few weeks ago that gave brief vignettes of women who fled Ukraine and ended up in Russia.³ They, too, found very little hope. What hope they did find also came from unusual places. There were sympathetic families who took them in, fed them, and helped them find shelter. Others helped them find ways to make safe border crossings. Still others used their connections to help these refugees find family members.

Some did so within the limits of Russian law; others worked in clandestine ways to avoid detection. All were doing heroic acts with the intent of bringing hope to desperate people. In many ways, these agents of hope are not just heroes, they are saints. They are angels of mercy, without whom the stories would be very different.

Each story is a story of people who returned from death to life through the actions of others.

And as I said, a similar thing happens to Naomi.

³ “Another Country” by Masha Gessen, *The New Yorker* (August 21, 2023).

One of the saints in her life, one of the angels of mercy who brings life in the midst of death is her daughter-in-law. Ruth is a foreigner, who makes a commitment to her mother-in-law, a commitment we heard in the opening scene that Kloie and Hailey read for us earlier (Ruth 1:16).

Now, it's easy to read this story and gloss over the fact that Ruth leaves behind everything and everyone she knows as an expression of love. We might also forget that like the conflict in Ukraine and Gaza, there has been historic tensions between Moab and Judah. Ruth leaves her home in Moab, knowing she may not be welcome in Judah; she goes because she knows Naomi needs an ally, an advocate.

Because women were often viewed as property, and because it was hard for a woman to survive without a man in her life, there were laws and customs designed to protect the widow and the orphan. If a man dies before he has children, for example, it is up to the dead man's brother to care for and about the widow (Dt. 25:5-6). The most common means was to help her bear children, children who carry the deceased brother's name, inheriting what would have been their father's estate, rather than letting it go to the surviving brother.

It was designed to give financial security to the widow. We're not sure it always worked as it should, though, especially since there is financial incentive to ignore the law. And I suspect far too many women fell prey to abuse, becoming household servants rather than beloved family members. Tragically, that story continues to be a common story – even though our culture approaches the plight of widows and orphans differently.

That may be why Ruth decides to stay with Naomi. Naomi is too old to have any more children, maybe too old to be much help around the house (Ruth 1:11). Her husband's family may see her as a burden rather than an asset. She could easily become a victim of abuse. So, Ruth opts to stay with her (Ruth 1:16). To care for her. To protect her. Even though it means leaving everything she knows behind.

When they arrive in the land of her mother-in-law, a place Ruth has likely never seen before, Ruth goes to work finding food (Ruth 2:2). She takes advantage of another law, one written for those living in poverty. You see, farmers were not allowed to go over the ground twice when gathering grain (Lev. 19:9-10). Anything they missed was to be left for the poor to gather.

Ruth wins the favor of a landowner who instructs his work crew to intentionally leave more behind than they might otherwise do (Ruth 2:15).

It turns out the landowner is Boaz, a man who is related to the family of Naomi's husband. Boaz approaches the next of kin and asks if he will do what the law requires and take care of Naomi. The next of kin knows Naomi has very little to offer, but he may see the importance of saving face among his peers by doing the right thing. But he hesitates. That's when Boaz reminds him that a foreigner is part of Naomi's household, not just any foreigner, but a Moabite (Ruth 4:5). It cinches the deal. The man does not want to take on the economic burden of two women, especially since one is from the land of their historic enemy. When the man refuses, Boaz publicly offers to provide for Naomi – and Ruth (Ruth 4:9-10).

He didn't need to do that, by the way, but he welcomes the opportunity to care for them. In doing so, he is acting as a messenger of mercy, a saint who brings hope and promise to both Naomi and Ruth. He is helping them return from death to life once again.

Boaz takes financial responsibility for Naomi and eventually marries Ruth. He is a saint because he meets the needs of two women, one of whom is an immigrant. The story of sadness and grief eventually leads to joy and celebration as her friends tell Naomi that she has been blessed with another son (Ruth 4:17). This son, this child, will become the grandfather of King David, an ancestor of Jesus (Mt. 1:5).

It did not need to end that way. But Ruth and then Boaz served as angels of mercy, as saints who were willing to reach out and help, to offer hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. They helped Naomi return from death to life.

My guess is we have all had similar experiences. Maybe not as dramatic as it was with Naomi, but there have been people in our lives who made a difference, who helped us in times when we felt hopeless, who reached out and helped restore us from difficult times to times of joy and delight.

Maybe you remember a day when the alarm didn't go off. Maybe you forgot to set it, maybe you shut it off while still asleep, maybe the power went off and the alarm didn't work. Whatever happened, you woke up late and found yourself rushing to an appointment. Then you spill coffee and have to change your clothes. Then you need to get gas – because you forgot to stop the day before. You're not sure it could get any worse when you find yourself stuck in traffic because of a major accident. You arrive to your appointment flustered – and when you arrive, you find a gracious welcome anyway. It is a gift of hope you were not expecting.

Or maybe you were recuperating from surgery and didn't have the energy to fix a meal when a neighbor, or someone from church drops by with a casserole, salad, and a dessert.

Or maybe you've reached the limit with the noise and energy of the children when grandma stops by and offers to watch the kids for a while.

It is like finding a breath of fresh air in the midst of turmoil, if not a returning from death to a sense of life.

Later in our service, we will be remembering those saints who have helped us return from death to life. There is no doubt that sometimes those acts were done unintentionally; these people were simply living their life in loving ways. But always we know we have been blessed by our experiences and memories of their love.

We will take time to honor them and remember them and give thanks to God for them by lighting a candle.

But I also want to remind you that sometimes God is calling you to be like Ruth or Boaz. God is inviting us to become the angels of mercy who make a difference in the lives of others. And I know you've done that before, sometimes without realizing it.

As I've said to several people in the past few weeks, you have done that for me as I have worked through my grief in your presence. You have helped bring me from death to life once again.

I also know you do that every time you volunteer at Family Promise, a place where families find hope in the midst of hopelessness. Or maybe you are an angel of mercy who makes sandwiches once a month. Or maybe you have felt the call and worked for and with others at MCC or in the Dominican Republic. Maybe you are one of those who gives blood on a regular basis.

Each time we do those simple acts, we are serving as angels of mercy. Like Ruth and Boaz, we can be – and often are – the saints who help someone else move from death to life.

And so, today we give thanks to God for all the saints.

Amen.

Remembering the Saints:

We take time now to honor and remember those people whose lives have touched ours, people whose faith has enriched ours, people whose memories continue to be a part of our daily lives.

I intentionally call them saints. You don't need to use that word, if it feels too limiting, too formal, maybe too "churchy." I use the name saint as a reminder that these are people who helped me see the holy in life, who brought a sense of sacredness to the world by their mere presence.

I also do so knowing the scriptures never refer to an individual as a saint. It is always said in the plural form, suggesting we cannot be saints without the others who surround us as a "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1).

Lighting candles is more than an act to honor the memories of loved ones, it is also a statement of our belief in the resurrection.

Randy L Quinn
Hope Mennonite Church

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