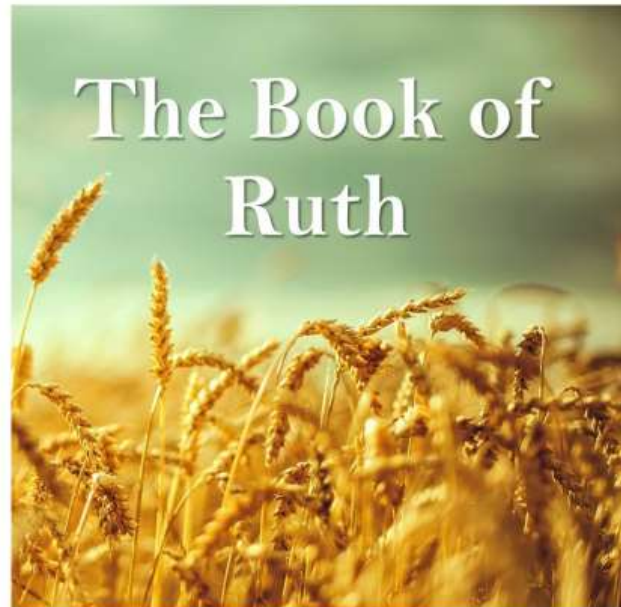


A Story that Speaks to Us Today!

West Epping Uniting Church
Sunday 11th November 2018

Ruth 3:1-13; 4:13-17

Rev John Barr



Last week I referred to “unbreakable, unstoppable, extravagant love” as the story of Ruth and her close bond with Naomi was shared. This bond of absolute loyalty, devotion and commitment made by Ruth to her mother-in-law models for us the very character of God as a loving, caring parent who is always there for us.

This week we move on. Naomi returns to her home town of Bethlehem. Ruth, the Moabite accompanies her.

For Ruth, this is a rather dangerous thing to do. A foreign widow travels to an unknown land. Here Ruth is guaranteed no security what-so-ever. Moreover, she is forced to glean to rake in enough food for Naomi and her to survive. Hired hands would reap the harvest. However, any grain they missed was left for the poor to gather. Here Ruth had to join the scramble with many desperate others, venturing into the rough and tumble of an unknown place where she was at risk of being pushed aside, rejected or abused.

But something good happens. Ruth meets Boaz the owner of the field. A well-respected, kind and generous person, Boaz graciously offers Ruth protection, especially after he hears about Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi. They eat together and Ruth is offered the opportunity to glean a favourable crop.

This impresses Naomi and things really start to happen. For, you see, Boaz is actually a close relative of Naomi. This means Boaz carries certain responsibilities towards Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Males were required to act on the behalf of extended family members who were in trouble, danger or need. This ensured the well-being of such a family.

Requirements could involve the retrieval of lost property, the repurchasing of land that was sold off or marriage to a female family member who was left widowed and therefore vulnerable and with no family heir.

With this in mind Naomi encourages Ruth to make her presence known to Boaz. But not much more happens. So, Naomi hatches a plot to stir the nest.

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Ruth is to do herself up and put on her best attire and, in a provocative, quite controversial move, approach Boaz as he sleeps on the threshing floor. Here Ruth is to “uncover his feet” and lie with him.

Ruth makes her move and Boaz is startled from his sleep. “Who are you?” Boaz asks. Ruth replies, “I am Ruth, your servant, spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next of kin.” Some suggest the word “servant” here is better translated from the Hebrew as “companion”. This seems to make sense. Whatever is going on, the audacious Ruth effectively takes on Boaz by what amounts to a marriage proposal!



Boaz is moved to exercise his responsibility according to local custom. And he does so as Boaz and Ruth are married. All is well. The vulnerable, alien Ruth is secure. Her family line is re-established. It's a rags to riches story with a good outcome.

Friends, what are to we really make of this story?

There are a few things. Firstly, this story is about some determined, courageous women who are not prepared to allow themselves become victims of circumstance. The plot hatched by Naomi and then carried out by Ruth to grab Boaz's attention is a bold, presumptuous and somewhat cheeky one. We don't fully understand what happens on that threshing floor but it works!

And friends this story helps us to shatter the presumption that women in the Bible are passive, docile, acquiescent individuals who live under the thumb of their menfolk. There are plenty of other examples as we see in Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Hannah, Priscilla, Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene - just to name a few.

Secondly, Boaz's responsibility to marry Ruth needs to be understood in terms of the act of “redemption”. “Redemption” refers to being “rescued”, “retrieved” or “reclaimed”. It concerns the restoration of that which has gone wrong. It's like having someone come and put the wheels back on after a terrible mishap.

In the story of Ruth, Boaz becomes her rescuer. Boaz acts, (in the Hebrew) as “go el” or “kinsmen redeemer”.

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Here Boaz's actions, by marrying Ruth, reconcile Ruth back into the family. Boaz's actions offer Ruth both security and a decent life. "Redemption" in this case means transformation from famine to fortune, from sadness to joy, from hopelessness to a future.

Thirdly, here we learn something profound about the nature of community. In the story of Ruth we encounter the formation of family across ethnic lines and traditional hostilities. Moabites were foreigners. They were to be feared and avoided. But, as a Moabite and as a vulnerable immigrant woman, Ruth accompanies Naomi on her return to Bethlehem in Judah. Ruth is committed to this even if it involves her entering hostile territory as an alien.

Moreover, Ruth's commitment to Naomi breaks down differences between insiders and outsiders. It challenges us to be more open to difference, to be more accepting of the foreigner and to accept relationships that may be new and challenging.

Fourthly, the story of Ruth highlights the importance of a Moabite connection in bringing together past hostilities. In this case it's the division between Abraham and Lot. Boaz is a descendant of Abraham. Ruth is a descendant of Lot whose son, the product of an incestuous relationship, was the first ancestor of Moab.

The marriage of Boaz and Ruth restores this divided family. Reconciliation takes place. This opens the way for the descendant, King David, to establish a united monarchy. Ironically, this is achieved, not through force or military victory. It is achieved through the faithfulness, the devotion and determination of two humble women together with the generosity and decency of a gracious man.

I love this story of Ruth. It's a simple yet very profound story involving relatively ordinary people who make a real impact. Significantly, this story is a foil to the enduring narrative of patriarchy that sadly occurs in the church where women are still often seen to be subservient to men, where, in some cases, woman cannot be ordained or even take up-front leadership roles.

I love this story of Ruth because it speaks so eloquently about restoration and the opportunity to build a new life out of the old. Boaz, as Ruth's "redeemer" points to Israel's God who offers oneself as a defender, deliverer and restorer of God's people. This point is most completely revealed in the person of Jesus. For, Jesus comes as our "kinsmen-redeemer" restoring us to a living relationship with God and offering us real hope for the future.



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I love this story of Ruth because it offers us a vision of what it means to live in community. A Moabite woman, a woman from foreign territory, crosses the lines of hostility and division to heal the wounds of the past and establish a way forward. This creates a lineage to the great King David and ultimately it leads to the birth of Jesus Christ. This is the kind of community that doesn't look back to the mistakes and sins of the past. Rather, it's a community that looks forward, securing an ongoing, enduring witness to the steadfast faithfulness and grace of God.

I love this story of Ruth because it speaks volumes about the goodness and the love of God as demonstrated in the devotion, loyalty, commitment and faithfulness of those women who are such key people in this story. And we can be assured here that God demonstrates that same devotion, that same loyalty, commitment and faithfulness towards us.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in a world where a yearning for power and influence motivates so many people, where a focus on self-interest appears to consume those around us, and where pragmatic outcomes fuelled by the kind of talk that amounts to pure spin tries to drive us, the story of Ruth has a lot to say.

For you see, our future does not lie in such things. Our future is not shaped by brute power or the kind of influence that manipulates or exploits others. Our future is not bound up in the fulfilment of self-interest and or the massaging of our own egos. Our future is not harnessed to the need for pragmatic outcomes or to a voice that spins the truth in an attempt to assert our own importance to the cost of others.

Rather in the manner of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, our future is one that involves devotion and trust. This calls for a loyalty to God. This calls for a commitment to one another. And this calls for an utter trust in the God who is faithful – and always will be.

Today, let us say thank you to Ruth, to Naomi and to Boaz. For their story can be our story. Their loyalty, faithfulness, love and devotion can be the very things that nurture and drive us - right now. For such things open us to a better way.

Friends, these things open us to a way that leads to Jesus. They open us to life as it is meant to be.

Thanks be to God. Amen!

