August 27, 2023 Rev. Tricia Gerhard

Well, siblings in faith, we’ve come to the end of the book of Ruth. We’ve journeyed from the plains of Moab to the fields of Bethlehem. We’ve heard the laments of Naomi, witnessed the loyalty of Ruth, seen evidence of God’s presence in the ordinariness of life, experienced Hesed, and gained a new appreciation for “feet”.

And so here we are. It’s morning in Bethlehem, and even a late night of celebration was not enough to cause Boaz to forget promises made to a bold woman who to proposed to him. Proposed, remember, not propositioned. It’s true, Boaz is a GOEL, a kinsman redeemer to Ruth and Naomi, but in a twist of fate, there happens to be one man who is more clearly related, who has the right and responsibility of GOEL as well. This man, according to Israelite law at the time, could redeem these two widows from their poverty, by marrying Ruth and having children with her to carry on her dead husband’s name.

In the passage this morning, we witness an interaction between Boaz and the unnamed man at the village gate. The conversation deals with property rights, family duty and the exchange of footwear. Just as an aside, the exchanging of shoes is the equivalent of shaking hands on a deal. Without the other person’s show, you couldn’t count on them to hold up their part of the bargain. Aside finished, back to the conversation between the two men. It is tempting to poke fun at the nameless one, this so called redeemer who chooses not to help out, in contrast to the good and faithful Boaz. But that’s not where we are going today. To focus our attention today, I want to talk about what happens next, particularly with the women.

After the men have exchanged sandals, after the elders and the community bless the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, there come in the course of time, a child. A beautiful baby boy. And it is the women of the village who speak now, at the end of the story. They call the child “Naomi’s baby”, and it’s this group of women who give him the name Obed.

This isn’t the first time the voices of the village women show up in the story. Way back in Chapter 1, when Naomi returns to Bethlehem with Ruth beside her, the women are the ones to ask: “Can this be Naomi?”. It’s to these same women that Naomi pours out her bitterness: “Don’t call me Naomi (pleasantness) any more. Call me Mara (bitterness) for God has made my life bitter.” Can we really blame her for feeling this way. Her once full life now feels empty, her heart empty…life is a bitter mess. Or so it seems.

And yet, and yet… even as she complains to the Women of Bethlehem with the loyal and loving Ruth by her side, there is the whisper of promise… a whisper of hope. For, as the story teller shares, they have returned to this community at the beginning of a healthy barley harvest. We know how the rest of the story plays out with Boaz’s barley field and harvest as the backdrop. Ruth gleans enough barley to keep both the women full, and Naomi is so thankful for the kindness that Boaz shows that she proclaims: “Blessed be he by God, whose HESED has not forsaken the living or the dead!”

Naomi’s eyes were opened and she begins to bear witness to the HESED of God in the people and world around her. She moves from identifying as Mara to Naomi, and her life and heart begin to fill again.

Themes of emptiness and fullness, of famine and harvest, continue to play out on the threshing room floor where Boaz and Ruth make their promises to one another. It’s from here that Ruth returns home in the early morning, cloak full of grain – a gift to share with Naomi.

And this morning, in Bethlehem, our story moves from harvest to birth. Ruth had been unable to conceive with her first husband Mahon. But with Boaz, she a baby boy is born and the women of Bethlehem have the wisdom to see what has happened, and they are not afraid to tell her.

Naomi’s life is full again – harvest, a grandchild, a family. The blessings of God overflow. But the women of the village see and name what Naomi was not able to see for herself at the beginning of the book. Even when she was Mara, with bitterness filling her, she had Ruth, more to her than seven sons. Ruth gave a love that transcended boundaries of nation and culture. Ruth embodies the holy one’s HESED. It was with her the whole time, she just couldn’t see it.

But the village women name it: “This baby is going to be your blessing, Naomi. For your daughter—in-law who loves you, who is love, gave birth to him.” In the end, it’s not wheat or barley that fills Naomi, but love… a love that was present from the very start.

By the end of the story, Naomi begins to understand this. In fact, Naomi takes that babe and cuddles him to her chest, and according to scripture becomes his nurse. Now the original Hebrew uses the word that means “wet nurse” which might seem strange to us. But mentioning this points to a miracle, for Naomi was not a young woman and it had been many years since she last nursed a child. The miracle lies in the fact that Naomi’s old and withered breasts were suddenly full of milk, and she fed that baby. Whether or not that really happened doesn’t matter. What matters is once she knows and acknowledges God’s love through Ruth, and now this baby, she opens herself up to being filled with it.

It's morning in Bethlehem, and the house of bread if full to overflowing. Into the ordinary lives of two widows and a farmer, HESED has flowed. And that love didn’t come with a burning bush, or a voice from heaven, or with lightening and fog. HESED has come through the ordinary lives and the extraordinary love of human beings, one for another, called forth and set free by God’s love for them.

It's morning here. Where will we recognize the HESED, the loving faithfulness, of God in our lives today? Will we have eyes to see and ears to hear, even when that love comes through unexpected people, from unexpected places? Will we have eyes to see and voices to name for others when the divine presence is touching their lives?

It is morning where we are. Where and how we will embody HESED for the people we meet today? Where will we, through our ordinary, extraordinary lives – be a conduit for God’s love and blessings in the world?

One last thing: Just as the book of Ruth began with a note of promise, so now it ends with one as well. The baby is named Obed. He is the start of a legacy that will ripple into the world. Obed will have a child named Jesse. Jesse will father a child named David. David has children. And years later, a baby will be born, who is named Jesus, and he is of the house of David.

So, this is where the story of Ruth leaves us, with the promise of faithful love overflowing not just into the lives of the widows and farmer, but into the lives of all Israel, and into our own. Blessings upon blessings.

Thanks be to God. Amen