

We have come to the last two paragraphs of the book of Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite woman who accompanied her mother-in-law Naomi when she returned to Bethlehem from Moab. They were both widows. As a widow from Moab living among Israelites, it was unlikely that Ruth would find a husband in Israel. But God is working behind the scenes and Ruth meets Boaz who is a relative of Naomi's dead husband and he ends up marrying her as her and Naomi's redeemer. Our text for this morning informs us of the marriage and the conception and birth of a son. This son will be the grandfather of David and an ancestor of Jesus, the son of David.

Verse 13 stresses that the conception of this child was from the LORD. It says that "the LORD gave her conception." There is a sense in which every conception is from the Lord, but the fact that the author especially mentions it here is significant. Ruth had been married to Mahlon for 10 years before he died and there had been no children. That raises the question of whether Ruth would be able to have children with Boaz. By mentioning the LORD's involvement in the conception of this child, the author wants us to think of this conception in the light of other conceptions that were clearly miraculous - particularly the conception of Isaac.

The story of the conception of Isaac occupies a large place in story of the promise that God made to Abraham that he was going to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham's offspring. This is one of the key promises that drives the biblical story. God makes this promise to Abraham that his offspring will become a great nation and through that nation he is going to bless all the nations. But Abraham and Sarah have no children. They age beyond the natural years of bearing children and there are still no children. And then God gives a son to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. God's point in fulfilling his promise to Abraham and Sarah in that way was to make it very clear that he is the one behind the history of salvation. He wants to make it clear that he will fulfill his promises to bless his people and bring salvation through them, no matter how impossible it looks from a human perspective.

And there is something of that going on here in the way that the conception of Obed is described. Humanly speaking there is a good chance that Ruth will not be able to have children. When she does become pregnant, the author explicitly mentions that "the LORD gave her conception." And we are meant to think of the miraculous conception of other key people in the history of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation. The point of this for later generations of God's people who read these stories is that things are never hopeless for God's kingdom even when they seem to be.

The story told in the book of Ruth is set in dark times in Israel – the time of judges. Most of the people of Israel were living wicked lives and when that happens it always raises the question of the fulfillment of God's promises. God's plan of salvation always involves the people of God living in obedience to God. It is not based on the faithfulness of his people, but it involves the faithfulness of his people. The blessedness that God promises through saving his people is always a blessedness that involves following God's laws. And so when the number of true followers of God is very small, the question that arises is "how is God's plan of salvation

going to be fulfilled.” And events like the conception of Obed through God’s direct intervention, makes the point that God’s work of saving the world from sin is a divine work. God uses human beings, but he is not limited the way that human beings are.

And that means that things are never hopeless as far as God’s kingdom is concerned. There can be dark times. There can be times when things look hopeless. But stories like this remind us that God is at work in these dark times. Obed was king David’s grandfather. King David was God’s answer to the wickedness of the time of judges. And God would promise David that one of his sons would reign over his people forever. That promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. From this text, God wants to assure us that no matter how hopeless things may seem, he is at work – bringing his kingdom and building his church. The point is that what is impossible for humans is possible for God.

Next the focus shifts to Naomi. Verse 14-17, “Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.’ Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

These verses are to be read in the light of what Naomi said to the women of Bethlehem upon her return to Bethlehem from Moab. 1:20-21, “She said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 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?’”

Naomi’s story is a story that moves from bitterness to contentment, from emptiness to fullness. And the point of the story is that this was the LORD’s doing through his guidance of her circumstances and through the *hesed* or steadfast love of Ruth and of Boaz. She had experienced great hardship in her life and no doubt she took the pain of her lost husband and sons to her grave. But the picture that is painted in the closing verses of the book, of Naomi with Boaz’ and Ruth’s baby on her lap, is a picture of security and contentment. She is no longer empty. The Lord has given her fullness.

But what does this part of the story mean for us? Well one thing that it does not mean is that if we experience sorrow and hardship like Naomi did at the beginning of the story, God will always bring us to fullness like Naomi experienced at the end of the story – at least as far as this life is concerned. That is clearly not so. Sometime God’s people experience tremendous losses and their lives remain difficult right to the end. Think of Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is a lament which continues right to the end. The last verse of Psalm 88 is “You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.”

And yet there is only one Psalm like Psalm 88 in the Bible. All the other Psalm of lament, end on a more hopeful note. For instance in Psalm 22, after asking why the Lord had forsaken him, the Psalmist, towards the end of the Psalm, says, “For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.”

So a story like the story of Naomi in the book of Ruth, does not teach that God will always treat his people the way that he treated Naomi, but it is still intended to give us hope and encouragement in suffering. We see in Naomi’s story how the LORD provided for her and brought joy and fulfillment into her life and while the specifics will look different in every case, there are many, many cases where God’s people are in great distress and the Lord does work through time and circumstances to bring them to a place of joy and fulfillment again. And we can hope and pray for that when we are overwhelmed with sorrow or care. God often does for his people what he did to Naomi – through guiding the circumstances in their lives, through the faithfulness of other people and through time, God often brings his people, even in this life, from a place of despair and bitterness to a place of contentment and hope.

But ultimately the hope of God’s people in suffering is salvation in Jesus Christ. When we are suffering we can have hope that God will give us healing and joy in this life again, but NT makes it clear that we can rejoice in suffering even if God does not take away our suffering in this life. God promises that nothing shall separate the people of God from the love of Christ. God promises to work everything together for our good. And he promises that the time is coming beyond this life when he will wipe away all the tears from our eyes. Naomi’s experience reminds us that many times God brings his people from despair to joy even in this life and we can hope and pray for that in our struggles. But even if those prayers are not answered, God’s comforts his people with his love and with the hope of the end to all our sorrows when he calls us home.

Now, these verses, in which the women of Bethlehem speak of how the Lord has blessed Naomi, mention Obed as Naomi’s redeemer. “Blessed be the LORD who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is worth more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” These words make it clear that, in this instance, they are referring to Obed as Naomi’s redeemer.

That seems odd because it would be a long time before Obed would be able to take care of Naomi and until that time it would be Boaz who would be her redeemer. Why then do the women of Bethlehem refer to Obed as Naomi’s redeemer? The answer comes from verse 15 where we read, “He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age.” The phrase “restorer of life” means literally “restorer of the soul.” This same language is used in Psalm 23:3 where David says that the Lord as his shepherd restores his soul. Having Obed in her life would restore Naomi’s soul. And this is in contrast with the bitterness and emptiness that Naomi was feeling when she first came back from Moab.

So this child fills the emptiness of Naomi's life. Obed was Naomi's redeemer by giving her hope and purpose. Daniel Block writes, The women, "recognize the boy's significance for Naomi's disposition in the present and her well-being in the future.... They hereby express confidence that with the birth of this lad Naomi will find new hope for life – all is not lost – and her spirit will revive." (p. 728).

Now this idea of redeemer is related to the Lord as the ultimate redeemer of his people. The idea of a human redeemer is important for the story told in the book of Ruth. And the main idea is that of a close family member rescuing a relative from desperate circumstances at significant cost to himself. Ruth and Naomi were widows in a world where widows had a hard time surviving. Boaz redeemed Ruth and Naomi by buying Naomi's land and by marrying Ruth and Obed is called Naomi's redeemer because he revived her spirit and would be her security in her old age.

But behind all this "redeemer language" is God as the ultimate redeemer. In the story of Naomi and Ruth, God is the one who was directing all the events to rescue Naomi and Ruth from their helplessness and poverty. And so he is their ultimate redeemer. And this is one of the ways that God reveals himself with respect to his people. He is the redeemer of his people. This language is used in connection with God rescuing his people from their slavery in Egypt. In Exodus 6:6-7, God says to Moses, "Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God....'"

God was Israel's Redeemer. In redeeming Ruth and Naomi, Boaz was reflecting God as the Redeemer of Israel. The idea of redeemer has to do with rescuing loved ones from dire circumstances. It is about rescuing people who are not able to help themselves. It is about rescuing relatives. When God redeemed Israel he was redeeming his beloved covenant people. Inherent in the idea of redemption is an existing relationship between the redeemer and the redeemed.

The language of redemption continues in the NT with respect to Jesus redeeming his people. Referring to the birth of Christ, Zechariah sang, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people...." In Titus 2:14 Paul teaches that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness." And in Colossians 1:14 Paul writes that believers "have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." So Jesus is our redeemer.

Apart from salvation we are in a desperate situation from which we are helpless to save ourselves. We are sinners before a holy God. We cannot change our hearts. We cannot make up for the sins that we have committed. We are hell-worthy. And the only way out of our predicament is a rescue – redemption. The idea of redemption is that we are helpless and need to be rescued. It is that which God through Jesus came to do. He came to do what we could never do ourselves. He came to redeem us. And he did it at significant cost. Remember how the nameless man in the story of Ruth was unwilling to shoulder the burden of marrying Ruth

with the implications of that. Boaz reflects God in that he was willing to sacrifice what was necessary to redeem Ruth and Naomi. God was willing to give his son. Jesus was willing to go to the cross – to redeem us from our helpless condition.

And that is a great comfort. Even after we have been redeemed through trusting in Jesus, there are many times when we feel helpless. Being redeemed does not mean that we sail through life without a worry or a care. And there are times when we experience the reality of how helpless we are on our own. And then it is comforting to think of Jesus as our redeemer. He redeems those who cannot help themselves. He rescues the weak and the needy. So in the redeemer theme in the book of Ruth we get insight into how Jesus Christ is the redeemer of all who put their trust in him.

We look next at what the women of Bethlehem say about Ruth as they bless the LORD for having blessed Naomi. They say of Ruth, “for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons....”

This is interesting from a number of perspectives. Earlier in the story Naomi and Ruth were in desperate circumstances because their men had died. The social background was one in which women needed men to take care of them and to provide for them. The story is about Ruth finding a husband and producing a son who would, among other things, take care of her in her old age. And yet the women of Bethlehem say that Ruth was more to Naomi than seven sons.

That is high praise. And certainly it is intended to convey something about the significance of women. Certainly the Bible teaches male headship and that means that most leadership roles are filled by men. But here Ruth is being held up as being more to Naomi than seven sons. That reflects a perspective in which women’s contributions are valued. There is no question that throughout history women have often not been treated well. But the Bible teaches the value of women and their contribution. The book of Ruth holds Ruth up as an example of a worthy woman. She is an outstanding example of love and loyalty and diligence. As one commentator puts it, “[T]he reference to Ruth being worth more than seven sons is a testimony against any society that values women less highly than men.”

Ruth is often discussed as an example of the excellent wife of Proverbs 31 even though she is not a wife in most of the story. But she is an example of a woman who is praised for her piety and faithful service. Much of the description of the woman of Proverbs 31 can be said of Ruth. Proverbs 31:10, “She is far more precious than jewels.” Verse 15, “She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household.” Verse 27, “She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.” And she is praised for it. Verse 30, “[A] woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”

Ruth is a wonderful example of *hesed*, of faithfulness and love for all of us. She was willing to stay with Naomi and work hard to provide for her. She is an example of putting another before herself. She is an example of loving God and loving her neighbor. As such she reflected God’s steadfast love and the steadfast love of Jesus.

Examples like Ruth are in the Bible to inspire us – to convict us of our own weakness and to stir us up to show more love and faithfulness in our lives. We must always understand them in the light of the gospel. The call for us to grow in faithfulness and love is never given as a way to earn God’s favor, but always as a way to love and serve and reflect the God who has loved us and saved us.

Verse 16 gives us a picture of Naomi’s fullness. “Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse.” This is a contrast with Naomi’s former emptiness and bitterness. She had experienced the death of her husband and two sons. And no doubt she would continue to grieve. But she also has joy in the grandson and hope for the future.

And that hope for the future is at the heart of the biblical story. This is what God does for his people. They may have to go through dark times, but God is always guiding his people to a glorious future. There may be the beginning of that in the here and now as we enjoy God’s blessings in this life, but the ultimate hope is always towards the new heavens and the new earth where we will dwell with God forever.

The book ends with a genealogy. It begins with Perez and ends with David. The genealogy is meant to be understood in the light of the story. The story is about Naomi and Ruth and their survival. It is about actions they took to find a husband for Ruth who would be the redeemer of both of them. It is about Boaz and his kindness and willingness to shoulder his family obligations. For most of the story God is invisible. Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are living their lives, making decisions, responding to situations as they emerge. That part of the story is much like our experience of life. We make decisions. We do things. We live our lives. But behind it all God is at work – guiding things – directing things – towards the goals that he has ordained.

And the genealogy at the end of the story makes this point in a powerful way. God’s goal was David. The genealogy shows how God was working through history to get to David. The story told in the book of Ruth expands on one part of that history showing how God worked in the lives of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz to bring about the birth of Obed, the grandfather of David.

It is significant that the story could stand on its own without the genealogy at the very end. The story could stand on its own if it ended with Ruth giving birth to a son and Naomi taking the child on her lap and becoming his nurse. It is a story of how God directs ordinary events to provide for Naomi in her old age. We could still learn from the examples of Ruth and Boaz. It is a story of how God works in ordinary life.

But the addition of the genealogy shows how God works through ordinary life to pursue his saving purposes. Naomi, Ruth and Boaz did not know the full significance of their story. They did not know that Obed would be the grandfather of David and an ancestor of Jesus Christ. We know that because we have the genealogy that shows us the greater significance of Naomi’s and Ruth’s and Boaz’ lives. But they did not have the whole genealogy in their lifetime. They would not have known about the great significance of king David and his role as the ancestor of Jesus Christ.

And that shows us something very important about our experience of living and how God works through the ordinary events of our lives to fulfill his purposes. We have no idea how the events of our lives and the decisions we make will impact our offspring 4 or 5 generations from now. In general terms we know the multigenerational significance of raising our children in the fear of the Lord, but we do not know how God is directing our lives laying the groundwork for a goal that he has 4 or 5 or ten generations from now.

But that is what we see happening in the book of Ruth. The participants in the story told in the book of Ruth are living their lives, concerned about having food to eat and security for their future. It's a story that can stand all on its own. And because of the genealogy at the end we are given to see how God was guiding these ordinary lives so that Obed would be born of Ruth and Boaz and he would be the grandfather of David.

And that is an encouragement for us. It gives us a glimpse of how God directs his plan through the everyday lives of his people. It is reason for us to stand in awe of God who is unfolding his plan using the ordinary lives and everyday decisions of people – all towards a goal – the fullness of the kingdom of God – the salvation of his people – all for the glory of his name.