

“Where’s Jesus In This?”

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The stories in the Bible are not ultimately about people; they are about Jesus.

Ruth 1:9-17

October 29, 2023

Relentless intensity

Transitions are hard.

Do this. Undo that. Sort this. Sell that. Buy this. Return that. Go here. Call there. Assemble this. Take apart that. Read this. Sign that. Move this. Decide this. Wait on that. Say goodbye here. Say hello there. For the six weeks since the retirement party, my task list has been on paper instead of an Excel spreadsheet. Very weird for me, but there’s been no time for the laptop. No matter how many things I accomplished the previous day, the next day’s list was longer. As Linda often said, “It’s three steps forward, two steps back.”

We did take time for a sunset drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway, knowing those kinds of date nights will become more rare. There was also the formality of transferring the authority of Pastor to Paul Cummings for the Interim. At the Consistory meeting I borrowed from the story of Elijah and Elisha to talk about the “mantle of leadership,” the burdens I was transferring to him – burdens of decision, loneliness, secrets. One of the burdens of leadership is inadequacy. You never feel like you’re up to the responsibility at the top. I wanted to symbolize the “mantle” in some way, but most of my stuff is in Leland. So he got a tie.

Transitions are hard because the intensity is relentless. It never lets up. As I complain about that intensity out loud or in my head, I am very aware that the kind of transition we are experiencing is very much a first world experience. We keep using the word “bittersweet,” but in places like Palestine and Israel, Ukraine, and Central America, there is no “sweet” – just bitter. For us transition has a timeline, and what lies ahead looks very promising. That’s not true for others around the world, maybe for you either.

For those of us who frame all of life around our faith, transitions are also hard because it's often more difficult to connect with God. "Where's Jesus in this?" For humans, God is almost always an invisible and silent partner on the journey. Walking with Jesus requires attention. I have to pay attention, take notice, let him surprise me. When I make that choice, I find that he's not being elusive; he's very much present and active. But when life is intense, who has time and energy to look for Jesus? I'm busy, or tired, or distracted. Jesus is #2 on my heart's priority list, but I have too many #1s.

The Pleasant Family

This fall at Corinth we're looking for Jesus in the Old Testament. The book where we'll focus attention today is titled Ruth, even though the way the narrator tells the story, she's not the main character. Speaking of characters, what's fascinating about this book is that every name has a meaning. It's like telling a story about Snow White, Grumpy, Sleepy, Dopey, Bashful, and the rest. The names describe the characters.

So it is in the book of Ruth. In Hebrew, you immediately notice the names. Our story begins with a man named God-is-my-King (Elimelech), who lives in Bethlehem. That was how God wanted people to see him during this time of decentralized government (1 Samuel 8:7). God-is-my-King married a girl named Pleasant (Naomi). If they married for better or worse, things got worse rather quickly.

God-is-my-King and Pleasant had two boys, but neither was healthy. They named one son Sick (Mahlon) and the other Weak (Kilion). On top of their misfortune with two unhealthy sons, the economy in Judea turned south on them. After several years with no rain and no crops, there was a famine in Israel. So God-is-my-King and Pleasant took Sick and Weak, now young men, and moved to Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea (modern day Jordan) to start a new life.

It was a risky move because they were now foreigners. The people there were descendants of Abraham's brother, Lot, so there was a common ancestry – but they did not serve the same God, Yahweh. The relationship between Moab and Israel had been mixed through the years, allies at times, and other times enemies. This was apparently during a time of peace, but I'm sure the Pleasant family experienced much uncertainty.

No sooner did the family get to Moab than tragedy struck. God-is-my-King died. That would have been economically devastating, except that Pleasant's sons had gained in strength and they were able to work the land and care for their mother. Soon, in fact, the boys both found brides among the Moabite girls. Sick married a girl named Gazelle (Orpah) – beautiful and graceful. Weak married a girl named Friendly (Ruth) – warm and kind. Pleasant had begun to recover, and the future looked bright.

Then more tragedy struck. In rapid succession, both Sick and Weak died. The loss of her husband and sons was too much for Pleasant to take. She was both sad and mad at God. She felt she had no choice but to go back home to Israel, where she had

heard the famine had passed and things were better. She would try to reclaim her family land.

As Pleasant gathered her things to head home, she was surprised that Gazelle and Friendly wanted to come with her. She didn't have the emotional strength to argue, so the three of them set out together. Along the way, Pleasant turned to her daughters-in-law and said, "You really shouldn't be coming with me. Go home. I pray the best for you, because you have been so good to me." They had a group hug and as they held each other they cried a bucket of tears together over their loss and their parting.

The emotion of that moment reminded Gazelle and Friendly that Pleasant really had become their family. "No," they said, "We're coming with you."

Pleasant rose above her own pain and argued back: "This is not about me. I'm a used-up, God-forsaken old woman. I know that our custom is for young widows to marry their husbands' brothers, but I don't have any other sons for you to marry. If I got married tomorrow and had a son next year, would you wait for him to grow up and marry you? Go back home. You've got a better shot at a new life in Moab."

As a beautiful, graceful young woman, Gazelle really did have a better chance in Moab. She kissed Pleasant good-bye and returned to Moab. At that moment, Friendly spoke these unforgettable words: "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."

Pleasant knew Friendly's mind was made up, so the two of them went home to Bethlehem. It had been such a long time. Her old friends saw her and cried with delight, "Could this really be Pleasant?"

Pleasant could only offer a bleak smile, and answered, "Don't call me Pleasant. From now on call me Bitter. God has not been good to me. I am mad and sad."

It's easy to understand why. Widowed women in those days didn't have much choice to make a living. Fortunately, the law allowed the poor to go into harvest fields and gather grain left by the harvesters, often intentionally at the edges of the fields. Pleasant (her new name, Bitter, never took) asked Friendly to tend to this task, and sent her to the field of a male relative named Quick (Boaz).

Quick was quick with his kindness to Friendly. He offered protection and provision. He gave her extra grain and fresh water. He inquired and learned her story. He knew how good she had been to Pleasant. He knew her name, Friendly, truly did represent a good heart. He was strangely drawn to her. And at the end of the day, Pleasant was surprised at how much grain Friendly brought home.

Pleasant said to Friendly, I think there's something going on here. Pleasant said to Friendly, "You should ask him to marry you." She did, and Quick said, "Yes!" I don't think he'd had a family before.

Then followed the inevitable Hallmark movie crisis, a problem developed. By law, God-is-my-King's closest relative had the right to buy the field. We'll call him Cousin-No-Name, because we don't know his name. Cousin No-Name said, "I'm the closest relative to God-Is-My King." I have the right to buy the property.

Quick quickly answered back. "OK," he said in front of a whole town of witnesses, "You can have the land." But the law says if you get the land, you also get Friendly. Any children she has can be raised on that land, but the children won't be your heirs. They will belong to God-Is-My-King and his son, Weak."

Cousin-No-Name said, "I can't do that. (I think he already had a family, and raising another one was too much cost.) Quick, you get the field and the girl." Cousin No-Name then did what everybody did in those days when they made a deal. He sent a DocuSign contract by email. No, he took off his shoe and gave it to Quick. If you're wondering what either one of them did with only one shoe, I have no idea. But I guess as long as Quick had Cousin-No-Name's shoe, he had evidence the deal was done.

The best part of the story is that Quick (Boaz) and Friendly (Ruth) became the great grandparents of King David, and thus the ancestors of Jesus.

Jesus in the Old Testament

So who's this story about? The book is called "Ruth," but the way the narrator tells the story, Ruth (Friendly) is a minor character. It's not that she's unimportant, but the story doesn't really focus on her. It's often told as a romance, but it's not a romance. The words, "Your people will be my people and your God" my God are not spoken between Boaz and Ruth, but between Ruth and Naomi. The story is about Naomi's transformation, her redemption, her path from Pleasant to Bitter and back to Pleasant again. The human agency of that redemption is surprisingly a Moabite woman. She's the one who has the baby, but the title of the last section of the story in my Bible is, "Naomi gains a son." (Not "Ruth...")

But you know I'm not going to leave it there because no story in the Bible is ultimately about humans. It's about God. Abraham's story is about God. Moses' story is about God. David's story is about God. Paul's story is about God. Jesus' story – well, he is God. So every story in the Bible about Jesus is a story about God.

From a Jewish perspective, this is a story about the line of David. As Christians, we see this as a story about the line of Jesus that passed through David. So where is Jesus in this story? What do Pleasant, Friendly, and Quick teach us about Jesus? In each case they are a preview of Jesus – his life, death, and glory.

Jesus among us. This is the lesson of Ruth, aka Friendly. In a sense it's also a story about every other character in the story, even Cousin-No-Name. The story is about grief and loss, but it's also a story that comes full circle to joy and hope. It's a story about famine and displacement. It's a story that includes the nations. Don't forget that when we speak of Moabites as foreigners (not Jews), you and I are foreigners (not Jews). When we speak of them as enemies, you and I are enemies without Christ. This is a story that allows us to be real, to be authentic, because Jesus is among us. Ruth is described twice in the book as a person of *hesed*, a Hebrew word meaning covenant faithfulness, kindness, mercy. That's a preview of Jesus.

In the story of Ruth, we have a story about the incarnation, the life of Jesus. He comes into world to share our full humanity, and not just the humanity of Jews or Christians or people with first world problems – although people with first world problems are included. Your trials and needs are no lesser to God than anyone else's, because they're really no different than anyone else's. You sin, you grieve, you hurt, you get sick, you suffer defeat and betrayal and misunderstanding. Jesus came to be among us, to experience the full range of our humanity so we can say, "He gets us."

So here's an action step for this week. Notice people who are hurting, outsiders, even enemies, who need to know that Jesus gets us. Pray for them, reach out to them, love them because Jesus came to be among people like you and me.

Jesus for us. This is the lesson of Boaz, aka Quick. He's the redeemer. The idea runs cover to cover in the Bible. It's always connected to a loss, or potential loss. There's always a recovery, "buying back." And there's always a cost. At the first Passover, the Israelites sacrificed one of their most prized possessions, a perfect lamb, to redeem their oldest son. God redeemed Israel repeatedly from the enemies and conquerors, often sacrificing some of them or giving up decades or centuries of his plans for them to bring them back.

In this story, Boaz is Quick not just because he's fast. He's also Quick because he's clever. He faces a problem and creates what one commentator calls a "masterstroke" of a solution. The town gate becomes a stadium of witnesses to the shoe swap that seals the deal. It's all rooted in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, all a preview of Jesus.

Here's another action step for this week. Take some quiet time to write down the ways you can think of that Jesus is for you. Don't forget the Big One, of course – the cross. At great cost to himself, he gave his life for you. But don't stop there. Look into the eyes of those who love you. Linda and I will be remembering you on our lists this week. See the colors of fall and ponder the ways he has been Quick (clever, not fast) in redeeming the most difficult parts of your story. Write them down as reminders.

Jesus ahead of us. This is the lesson of Naomi, aka Pleasant. Ruth is a preview of Jesus something like 1200 years before the incarnation, before the crucifixion. But Jesus

is ahead of us. He's always ahead of us in part because he's not bound by time. He's eternally present with us. But he did step into space and time, and passed through it. He's already been through death, the intermediate state, resurrection, and glorification. He already knows what's far beyond in eternity. And he knows we'll not only be OK, we will experience Pleasant far more than we can imagine.

This is the beauty of blessings in the book of Ruth. A blessing is just words, but words are never just words. The elders and all the people bless Boaz and Ruth, and God enables them to have a child. Ruth and her first husband were infertile, but this blessing changes that. Naomi is blessed by the women of the town who had felt the shared sting of her bitterness. They bless her with the promise of a legacy, and her line will include David and Jesus. This week journal about your transitions. List them, and actively talk to Jesus about them. Remember, he's ahead of you.

Kelly Minter says the book of Ruth "is a bright beacon of light in the middle of darkness and chaos and unrest during the time of the judges. That should give each one of us courage and encouragement in our own dark places that God is still working today." Amen.