

When we are reading a book of the Bible sometimes, we find some important clues right at the beginning of a story that give us a glimpse of what's coming next.

I want to share with you what I found when I opened up Chapter 9 and read the very first two sentences:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

Did any words jump out at you in those first two sentences?

How about the word Bethlehem?

Did anything important happen in Bethlehem?

So here's a clue, that the story of Ruth is connected to the story of Jesus.

And we'll come back to that later in this sermon.

Any other clues?

How about the phrase: "in the day of the judges"?

Why was that time period significant?

Last week we talked about something I called, the sin cycle.

And so when you hear the phrase, "in the day of the judges"

that should trigger for us this period of history:

when the people of Israel: "did whatever they thought was right, in their own eyes."

And what happened every time the people walked away from God?

When the people sinned, they lost God's blessing.

And God allowed them to be overpowered by neighboring armies.

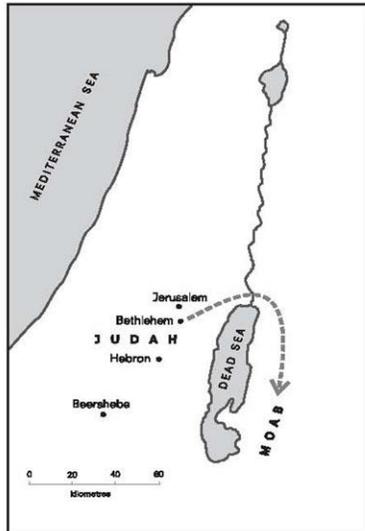
And they experienced a time of Judgment, and they either became slave

or what did God allow to happen in this story, in the time of Naomi and Ruth?

He allowed a famine, right?

So here, was Israel...

- the people God had rescued from Egypt
 - and brought safely out of the wilderness into the Promised Land
- Now being, forced to leave the Promised Land and go to all places Moab.



That word Moab is also a clue to something very important in this story.
 Naomi's husband was named Elimelek, whose name means: "my king is God."
 But he has to leave his hometown of Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means "house of bread"

Just think about that: they have to leave a place called, "house of bread" because of a famine
 To any Hebrew speaker the message was clear:
 God was bringing judgment on Israel for breaking the covenant, by worshipping false idols
 And to amplify that judgment, they are have to go to Moab.

The people of Moab, had descended from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter. And so Moab represented a people who were far from God, and they were constant threat to the Israelites. In every way they symbolized the dangers and the temptations God wanted his people to avoid.

So why, in this story is God bringing his people to Moab? Yes, it was a sign of God's judgment, but could there be another reason?

Could it be that God can transcend all circumstances to accomplish His will?
 Could it be that even though Moab was far away from God,
 could it be that God's saving purpose was not for Israel alone?

When people who are not Christians, read the Bible,
 one of the things to which they commonly object, is this idea of God's chosen people.
 It strikes them as being exclusive and unfair that God should choose one nation, one people, to bless and favor.

And certainly, God did choose a one people, a particular nation.
 And He made a covenant promise to them, and gave them His Commandments to follow and govern life and worship.

But God's purposes, ultimately, are not for just one people or just one nation. God has chosen this particular people, to be the messengers of His universal offer of salvation. We saw this back in the story of Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho, who recognized that the God of Israel, was real.

She caught a glimpse of who God is, and she was saved, along with her family and honored to be included in as an ancestor of Jesus.

We see the same thing happening in the story of Ruth. With the death of their husbands, in that culture and in that time, Naomi and Ruth were left with nothing. They had no means of making a living, no social safety net, no future. In fact we hear in The Story that Naomi's pain was so great that she had lost hope! In her pain, she believed that God's hand had turned against her.

This week, one of our members sent me an email with this interesting observation.

"Can you even imagine changing your name from Naomi which in Hebrew means "pleasant" to Mara which means "bitter"?"

When I read this email, it made me think of my Grandma Sylvia. When my dad was 12 years old, his younger brother Denny, came down with Rheumatic Fever. And my Grandma Sylvia, held her 10 year old boy, as he died in her arms.

Then when while my dad was in college, my Grandma watched as young husband, began to suffer from a disease, that took away his ability to work. A slow disease that destroyed the communication between his nervous system and his muscles, until he couldn't even feed himself. We know that disease today as A.L.S. or Lou Gehrig's disease.

And I thought of my Grandma, as I read this story about Naomi losing her husband. And I can imagine her pain and grief, because I saw that grief in my Grandma's face as she told me her story.

But into the middle of Naomi's story of pain and bitterness, comes a surprise. Ruth, from Moab, becomes a messenger of hope.

Into this tragic scene, where Naomi is urging her to turn back to her people and her gods. we see Ruth doing something unimaginable.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

What an amazing glimpse of what the Old Testament calls "Hesed" or God's steadfast loving-kindness.

Right when Naomi was feeling most abandoned by God.
 God came along beside her, through the faithfulness of Ruth.
 Again I connected this story with the story of my Grandma Sylvia,
 because, when her son died, and again when her husband died,
 when she could have felt most abandoned by God, she found out that she was not alone.

In Fairmont, Minnesota, God chose to come along beside her through the people of Grace Lutheran Church.

And then when she moved to Faribault, Minnesota, once again, the women in her circle Bible study, surrounded her with God's loving-kindness.
 And one of those Bible studies was called the Ruth circle.
 Not by accident.

Let me ask you this, "Out of all the books in the Old Testament, why do you think the Book of Ruth, still captures such attention today?"

It's true some people want to dismiss Ruth, or downplay its message, because God is barely mentioned. God is behind the scenes.

But I don't agree.

In her book, *The Gospel of Ruth*, author Carolyn James writes that Ruth's "loyalty to Yahweh ... carries early hints of the teaching of Jesus."

James goes so far as to say that Ruth herself "embodies the utter difference the gospel makes in us and in our relationships with others, generations before Jesus was born."

Here's just one example.

You may remember how Ruth goes one day to glean in the fields of Boaz.

The ancient welfare system of Israel dictated that Israelites were to leave the corners of their land and the edges of their field un-harvested for widows, orphans and aliens.

While many people in the days of the judges had long since abandoned keeping this aspect of the law, Boaz had not.

Now Ruth has sworn herself to care for her mother-in-law, and so she goes to Boaz's field and does something bold: she asks Boaz's foreman if she can glean behind the harvesters as they worked. When informed by his foreman what Ruth was doing, Boaz certainly could have kicked Ruth off of his land. Instead, he talks to Ruth and allows her to gather grain with his own servant girls.

As James writes, "Sometimes newcomers have a way of showing us we've settled into a narrow, precise obedience—a tidy conformity to the law—that falls far short of what God really intends."

James goes on to show us that Jesus, another outsider to the religious establishment, did exactly the same.

“The Sermon on the Mount,” she writes, “knocked down the walls that religious living had constructed around God’s law and pointed to a way of living that goes beyond the letter of the law to the spirit.”

While the letter of the law in Ruth’s day simply permitted the poor to glean, the spirit of the law was that the poor and the vulnerable should have enough to eat.

“God meant for landowners like Boaz to wrestle with such basic questions as, ‘How big is a corner? How wide is an edge? How much will I leave behind for the poor?’ ”

Into the midst of tight-fisted legalism, Boaz explodes on stage and gives Ruth permission not only to glean among the workers, but he offers her the protection of his field hands and the privilege of drinking from his wells.

In fact, he speaks God’s blessing on her. Do you remember that scene? He blesses her in God’s name.

And then finally, towards the end of the story, we see in Boaz a reflection of Christ himself. Boaz risks everything, his good name, his whole estate, **everything** to be Ruth’s guardian-redeemer.

In that society, it was considered a duty to provide for a relative. but Boaz’s generosity went far beyond duty.

Like Jesus, he gave everything.
His generosity knew no bounds.

In Ephesians, chapter 2 we hear:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

My prayer for you today, is that when you go through hard times,

- that you would experience the love of Jesus through people like Ruth
- and that you in turn would come along beside others in their bitterness and grief
- that you would reach out to anyone who feels alone, or outcast and surround them with a love that is so steadfast, so faithful, and so full of loving-kindness that they would see Jesus in you.

And I pray that for anyone who feels far off, separated from God who feels as if God has chosen other people, but not them,

I pray that that if that's you
that you would feel so enfolded and loved
into the presence, and the power, and the truth, who is Christ Jesus
your guardian Redeemer

that you would know that you have already been chosen and
brought near, and made a member of God's family. Amen.