

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 13:

The Book of Ruth: All in the Family, part 2

by Virgil Thompson

In the previous issue we had just come to that part in the story of Ruth where, as Naomi awaits fulfillment of the Lord's promise, her devoted daughter-in-law volunteers to go into the field to glean a living for the two of them.

As It Happens

As the story is told, Ruth “just happens” (2:3) to take up gleaning in the field of Boaz, a prominent rich relative of Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband. Was it chance, or was it the providence of the Lord God that Ruth should glean in the field of Boaz? Who can tell about such things? Particularly on the basis of outward appearances, who can tell about God's providential care of creation?

There certainly are Christians who imagine they have an inside track on discerning the every movement of God's Holy Spirit. Luther had a colleague who was always boasting, in a modestly Christian sort of way, of his capacity for spiritual discernment. He confidently reported what the Spirit of God was up to in the everyday affairs of the human community. Luther was so impressed by the keen eyesight of his colleague that he once observed, “*That's right, Thomas [Müntzer] is so spiritual it is as if he has swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all!*” If it sounds as though Luther was being spiritually sarcastic, it is only because he was! In other words, Luther was highly dubious when it came to seeing with the naked eye the activity of God in the day-to-day rough and tumble of ordinary life.

Luther had no doubt that God creates, sustains and directs the life of creation. In fact, Luther observes, if God should ever turn His back on creation for even one second, the whole blooming creation would crumble back into the shambles of the empty void it was before God brought forth this wonderful world He has given us to enjoy and take care of.

But Luther also had a healthy respect for the hiddenness of God. He never tired of impressing upon the Wittenberg

congregation—as good pastors never tire of impressing upon those whom God has entrusted to their care—if you go looking for God in the hiddenness of His providential care, sooner than you can blink an eye you'll find yourself somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea. You'll be unable to see and know the difference between God's blessings and the devil's harassments.

People of faith, as the Letter to the Hebrews counsels, do not live by naked sight—not by what the eye sees or doesn't see. People of faith live by trust in the promise of what the ear has heard (11:1). The ear, not the eye, is the organ of faith, Luther insisted! God takes us by the ear and makes believers of us, just as He has done in your baptism when He declared to you, no ifs, ands, or buts: “You are mine and I will guard and protect you from all danger and evil. I will provide for you all the necessities of life, right down to the shoes on your feet and the feather in your cap!” It may not always be evident to the naked eye how, when and where God works actively to bless our lives. In fact, frequently the outward circumstances of our lives may appear to be just the opposite; however, we are justified to trust that—contrary to appearances—God will keep His promise to us.

By the Certainty of Faith

For her part, Ruth seems to know with the certainty of faith by whose hand her destiny is determined. As she told Naomi when they had first set off from Moab to Bethlehem, “*Your God shall be my God.*” Ruth may not have been born into the Christian faith by virtue of Norwegian-German heritage. Ruth may have married into the faith, as, in fact, my own father married into the Lutheran faith of my mother. Still, there is nothing automatic about it. Believers are made through the proclamation of God's promise for us and not against us! One spouse proclaiming to the other. Parents proclaiming to their children. Ruth heard and believed the promise. “*Yes, by that promise,*” she declared to Naomi, “*your God shall be*

my God.” And in such faith she goes into the field of Boaz to glean a living. By such faith, she confides to her mother-in-law, “You never know, I may find favor.”

Ruth is absolutely right about it: you never do know. And as it happened, Ruth did find favor with the wealthy old farmer, Boaz, in whose field she happened to be gleaning. From the moment that Boaz first notices Ruth, he takes her into protective care. And when she asks why she has found such favor in his eyes, he explains that he has heard through the grapevine how she has with such devotion been looking out for Naomi, and he seeks merely to smooth out the rough road a bit for her and for Naomi (2:10-13). Boaz seems to know that he, too, is a child of God’s promise. And because of it, he knows exactly what to do with the blessing by which God has blessed him. He employs his blessing, his wealth, to smooth out the bumpy road for neighbors in need.

At the end of the work day Ruth returns home with the bounty of her gleaning and confides in her mother-in-law all the kindness Boaz has extended to her (2:17-19). It does not take Naomi long to notice the promise of the situation. She seizes the opportunity to “seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you,” as she explains to her daughter-in-law (2:20-3:1).

A Saucy Chapter In the Greatest Story Ever Told

Now at this point I had better quote the story to you, word for word, directly from the Holy Bible, because otherwise you might accuse me of saucily embellishing the telling. But this is one Bible story that needs no saucy embellishment to give it life! Like all Bible stories, this one speaks God’s living Word, which promises to raise sinners, dead in their sin, to new life! Sometimes new life comes to us in surprising ways. Ruth’s story is a case in point.

At the outset of its telling, we should perhaps acknowledge that readers may find the sauciness of the story somewhat discomfoting. That, however, may not be a bad thing. As Luther was always emphasizing: never put it beyond the Lord God to lead us deeper down into the life of faith, hope, and love precisely by the means of discomfoting us, questioning and being questioned.

“Now,” Naomi reasons to Ruth,

...here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known

to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do. — Ruth 3:2-5

“Got it,” Ruth replied.

I am not recommending Naomi’s plan of action to anyone; I am just telling, as faithfully as I can, how it once happened in the Greatest Story Ever Told. Ruth goes down to the threshing floor as instructed, and round about midnight she slips under the blankets with Boaz (3:6-11). The story is somewhat evasive about just exactly what happened next. And perhaps we may leave it at that.

Upon returning home to her mother-in-law, Naomi asks Ruth, “So, [last night,] *how did things go with you, my daughter?*” (3:16).

Ruth reports everything that happened, not leaving out any detail of it (3:17). Naomi, for her part, hears in Ruth’s story the promise of wedding bells ringing before day is done for her daughter-in-law, Ruth, and her kinsman, Boaz (3:18). She was not wrong about it.

As the story concludes:

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women of Bethlehem declared to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! This grandson 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 borne him.”

— Ruth 4:13-15

Consoling Words From the Naomi Circle of Friends

As we draw to the close of Ruth’s story, I can’t resist a personal reflection on the consolation that the women of

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Naomi's circle offer to their sister in faith. At the birth of her grandson, the women comfort Naomi by pointing out, "*This child shall be to you a restorer of life and nourisher of your old age.*" Somehow those words of the Naomi circle remind me of lines from W. B. Yeats:

*When a man grows old his joy
Grows more deep day after day.
His empty heart is full at length
But he has need of all that strength
Because of the increasing Night
That opens her mystery and fright.*

The friends of Naomi are absolutely correct, at least in part: the joy of grandchildren fills an empty old heart.

I'd give strong odds I'm not the only grandparent who cherishes his grandchildren as "*the restorer of life and the nourisher of old age.*" We see how the Lord treats old sinners like Naomi, like us.

The story might well conclude with the blessing of grandchildren to an old, undeserving sinner—and that would be enough. But there is more. That son born to Boaz and Ruth eventually became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, greatest of all the kings of Israel. God promised David that from his line He'd raise up a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And God did not fail to fulfill that promise—otherwise, we'd not be here reading this story for the sake of faith.

Looking Ahead: The Word of the Lord Was Rare In Those Days

The next chapter in the Biblical story begins with a rather ominous observation: "*The Word of the Lord was rare in those days*" (1 Samuel 3:1). Whether then, in the days of Samuel, or now, in our day, the community of faith lives exclusively from the proclamation of God's Word. Thus, that the proclamation should become a rarity threatens the community of faith at the very heart of its life together. But just you wait and see what God has in store for such a time, whether then or now! 1 and 2 Samuel tell the tale.

reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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Bible Study

1. Many themes, which promise to nourish and refresh faith, run through the story of Ruth. As you have read or listened to the story, which theme have you found yourself thinking about most? Below are a list of themes, which might serve to prime the pump of your thinking or provoke thought and discussion.

- a. God's Providential Care of Creation.
- b. God's Hiddenness.
- c. The Place of Sexual Attraction in Human Life.
- d. The Consolation of Friends in Faith.
- e. Employing Our Blessings to Bless Others.
- f. The Blessing of Grandchildren.
- g. Extending A Helping Hand to Those in Need.

2. As you think about Ruth's story consider the questions below:

- a. What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the story?
- b. What background knowledge would help me understand the story more clearly? How does my experience help to understand the story?
- c. What does this story promise to faith? What does this story demand of faith?

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